

When will we ever learn?



Malcolm Turnbull and Education Minister Simon Birmingham visit a Canberra preschool. Mr Birmingham hopes the Gonski review will focus on "evidence-based reform".

Whether it's the mind-boggling affront of Australian students being leapfrogged by Kazakhstan or continuing to slide further behind academic powerhouse Singapore, the reception is always the same: an outcry followed by hand-wringing.

Each time international test results are released, the blame is focused on how the system fails disadvantaged students, and how their parents don't care.

While no one should ignore the depth of this problem, one of the most pressing and overlooked challenges weighing down Australia's education system is the dilemma of students who start off above-average but coast academically in "cruising schools" instead of being pushed.

One of Australia's most respected education leaders, University of Melbourne's John Hattie, says the greatest contribution the so-called Gonski 2.0 review into academic performance could make would be to ensure the right problems are on the table, rather than putting forward solutions to the wrong problems.

He says the review could be a chance for the reboot the education system needs, or it could be a chance to do more of the same.

"In fact, I have a cliché: beware of educators with solutions, and my worry is Gonski (review) will come up with solutions and they are not to the problems," he says.

Businessman David Gonski, the father of so-called needs-based funding, has agreed to chair the - review panel for Malcolm Turnbull along with former NSW and South Australian education chief Ken Boston, who was also part of the original 2010 Gonski process.

This time around, Gonski 2.0 — the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools — is not designed to reconsider the calculation of federal or state funding to schools. The government believes it has settled the funding issue with reworked arrangements and an extra \$18.6 billion over a decade, even if it is yet to persuade Labor, the unions, the states, Senate crossbenchers and the Catholic education sector of the merits of its reforms.

A Senate hearing into the government's funding legislation continues today, while the Prime Minister and state leaders are expected to discuss education on Friday at the Council of Australian Governments meeting in Hobart.

But the mission of the Gonski 2.0 review is to examine the best ways to leverage that school funding to reverse the nation's academic decline.

Put bluntly: despite record spending levels, Australian students are going backwards.

In the latest round of the Program for International Student Assessment 2015, released last year, Australian Year 9 science students were on average 11 points below the results of Australian - students three years earlier. In maths, results were down 10 points over the three-year period and nine points in reading.

PISA, the international snapshot conducted every three years by the OECD and accepted as the global academic benchmark, highlights the nation's slide, with Australian 15-year-olds being outgunned by New Zealand, Estonia and Slovenia despite the nation's strong focus on education and record spending.

In the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which assesses Year 4 and 8 students in maths and science every four years, Singapore accelerated its achievements, while nations such as Kazakhstan, Lithuania and Slovenia outperformed Australia.

Domestically, the results of NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy) show Australian students treading academic water since 2008.

The Gonski review is charged with looking at the most effective teaching and learning strategies to improve the performance of all students from disadvantaged to academically advanced.

Hattie, deputy dean of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education and director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute, says: "the biggest problem in Australia by a million miles is those top 40 per cent of our kids going backwards because of the cruising schools."

Every child deserved at least one year's growth for a year at school no matter their starting point. If the system focused on growth, it would result in higher achievement.

Three times more independent schools than government schools, he said, fell in the cruising category and any school with a high intake of above average students risked treading water.

Hattie argues that cruising schools are not adding "significant value" to the educational achievement of these students, and it is a major contributor to Australia's declining education performance.

In one of his ACEL (Australian Council for Educational Leaders) Monograph Series papers, he cites analysis of a deeper look at the nation's PISA decline, which shows "Australia has more cruising schools and students than other countries" and the major source of variance in the decline is among the top 40 per cent of students.

"This decline has occurred during a time when funding has increased to schools by 30 per cent while student numbers have increased by only 13 per cent," he wrote.

Hattie, who chairs the board of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, is calling on Gonski to look at the issue of cruising schools and empower teachers and principals with the resources they need to measure growth and improvement, as well as achievement.

It would reverse a situation where too many students are not being esteemed for being the best learners because they don't start off as the brightest.

Education Minister Simon Birmingham says he hopes the Gonski review will serve as a "unifying basis" for a focus on evidence-based reform in the classroom.

"Importantly, if you look at the terms of reference, they also acknowledge not only do we need to lift those who are failing to achieve their best but we also need to make sure there is a focus rightly on our high achievers who have not been achieving as well or getting the growth we should expect to have," he says.

The Gonski 2.0 review will provide its final report to the government by December, ahead of negotiations of new school reform agreements with states and territories in the first half of next year.

Hattie says: "The second biggest problem for me is 26 per cent of kids start high school and don't finish. The predictor of adult health, wealth and happiness is not achievement at school — it is the number of years of schooling."

This involves examining how to make schools more inviting for students so they want to return.

He also wants to turn around the implication that "if you're dumb you can be a teacher", to ensure expertise is celebrated.

Hattie also argues Australia has so far failed to have a robust discussion about the return on investment in education.

Julie Sonnemann, a school education fellow at the Grattan Institute, said the review provided "a chance to take a step back from the politics and to look at not only what the evidence says works best but also how we can spread the evidence and get teachers changing practices in schools, which is the thing that is really going to drive change".

"We know that up to 40 per cent of Australian students are regularly disengaged in our classrooms and we know that teachers need better support to use the evidence and improve their practice," she said.

Australian Industry Group head Innes Willox said "business is looking to Gonski 2.0 to deliver equitable funding for all students".

“We need to lift overall achievement standards, especially in literacy and numeracy and there needs to be broader and deeper engagement across all STEM (science, technology, engineer and mathematics) disciplines,” he said.

“It is also important that it enables our higher achievers to gain excellence, and prepares young people for the digital age.”

Willox said it was also critical the review examined ways to improve and reward teacher excellence.

Paul Browning, the headmaster of St Paul’s School in Bald Hills, Queensland, said the success of the review would depend on its scope.

“I worry it will focus on ‘more of the same’ — the things that politicians have espoused for years (more funding, smaller class sizes, more testing and more teacher training) — when there’s a huge opportunity to investigate what the Australian education sector should really prioritise,” Browning said.

“Gonski should be reviewing how the education system can be competitive in a world that is rapidly changing. If the research is right and 50 per cent of today’s jobs disappear in the next 10 years, we need to think about how do we help students prepare for jobs that don’t yet exist?”

“The key to this isn’t just smaller classes and more tests, but rather a re-evaluation on how we help students develop an entrepreneurial capacity, more capacity for creative thinking or more resilience.”

Megan O’Connell, acting director at the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University, and her colleague Stacey Fox see the Gonski 2.0 review as an opportunity for the nation to consider what type of education system it wants and how it can best prepare children for the future.

The Mitchell Institute is uniquely placed, looking across the whole education system from preschool to vocational and higher education. O’Connell suggests one area in which the panel could take an interest is the very start of the learning journey.

This includes, she says, “getting children prepared through early education, and ideally through two years of preschool, so they are set up as well as possible for going to school and making sure the right supports are provided during school, particularly for those kids who need it most”.

“With Gonski, we look at targeting resources for the kids that need it most in schools,” she says. “We could have a similar look within the preschool sector about which children do actually need more support: more speech pathologists, social workers and other types of family help as well that would help them thrive during their preschool years and enter school far more prepared.”

O’Connell also recommends the review look beyond just focusing on the traditional academic benchmarks of literacy and numeracy. “We need our young people to be critical thinkers and to be curious and creative,” she says.

“The Gonski panel could have a really good look at what we want out of our education system - because children with literacy and numeracy alone aren’t going to succeed in jobs of the future, they need so many more skills.”

The Gonski panel, she says, must also consider that not all young Australians belong or want to go to university, and the system is about pushing young people through successful pathways including vocational education and training.

The Australian Council of Deans of Education is calling for the critical need for more progress to improve the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher numbers and the depth of indigenous education in Australia.

The ACDE argues the four-year More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative, which ended last year, pointed to what does and doesn't work in attracting and retaining indigenous teacher education students and teachers.

"Real, substantial change requires a genuine, long-term commitment to ensuring there are more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to improve indigenous education and to be role models for future generations of indigenous and non-indigenous students," says Tania Aspland.

Aspland, the ACDE's president, says the problem extends beyond the representation of indigenous teachers.

"We need a whole-of-nation response to diversifying the population to cater for the diversity of children out there," she says. "We want the teacher population, the profession, to reflect that - diversity."

"If universities open up their doors and welcome people of difference into universities, then those people have to perform at university and prove they have the intelligence and the attributes and aspirations they have to succeed; it's a much more successful model."

Matt Deeble, the director of Evidence for Learning, which has summarised the global evidence on improving learning in a "toolkit" for teachers, says it is important to support educators who are making the difference and learn from their experiences because there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Otherwise, if reforms are top-down or become an accountability measure they encourage "tick-the-box behaviour".

You only move beyond that, Deeble says, "when you engage the profession who come to work every day to improve the lives of kids".