

## Australia's world-class primary schools and the challenges ahead\*

David Gonski, Chair of the *Review of Funding for Schooling* expert panel, said:

*“Every child should have access to the best possible education, regardless of where they live, the income of their family or the school they attend.”*

Australia's primary schools are amongst the best in the world. But read some sections of the media and you'd be hard pressed to believe it. Recently published responses to a poll conducted by the ABC showed an 86% satisfaction rating for local schools. International students come in droves to Australia to experience our education system as well as our culture.

This is not to say that there is not room for improvement. All high functioning systems must be on the path of continuous improvement. In order to achieve this we must continue to engage all sections of our community in rational discussion – to consider the voluminous data we have, check it with our experience, learn from each other and pursue meaningful and supportive relationships between families, community (including business) and the specialised learning environments of our schools.

As Australia's primary schools near the mid-point of first term, teachers will be focussed on providing positive learning experiences as they deliver the curriculum prescribed for their learners. Importantly though, teachers will also be dealing with the happenings of recent times, and their impacts on our children. Bushfires followed by floods (in some areas) and the increasing threat posed by the corona virus, will be at the forefront of lives and thinking. Some areas still remain in drought. The uncertainties provided by the weather and by our global connections may cause many of our younger students concern. What has happened? What may happen? Where to from here?

Such life experiences and the resultant uncertainty can create anxiety in young people. Teachers are on the front line of the interpretation of life experiences for children, because discussions about life events don't simply stop when students leave home each day. We rely on our teachers as guides for our most impressionable – the young. This uncertainty is also often compounded by the expectations that systems place on students under the guise of accountability. As Claire Masters points out, “NAPLAN testing and homework load have beaten out friendship pressures, difficult schoolwork and liking the teacher, as the most nerve-racking things about school for one in three students”.

Despite all of these challenges, our primary school leaders and teachers do a fantastic job in supporting and educating our younger learners. Yet it seems that some parts of the media and some politicians are determined to undermine the standing of our teachers at every opportunity. This is despite the fact that we have very good reason to be proud of them and the calibre of education available in Australia.

In his paper, *Beyond Certainty*, Professor Alan Reid OAM puts the view that changes in the world arising from the fourth industrial revolution are cause for us to reconsider our approaches to education. Reid asks should we revert to what we did before or reboot? Should we reframe our education structures? Or should we replace them? We should consider very closely what the purposes of education are. If they are about the individual,

economic development, democracy and the development of society, how are they influencing what happens in schools and how are we, as a whole society, coming together around these purposes?

Professor Reid also bemoans the increasing focus on standardised testing and suggests it is doing considerable damage to teaching and learning. Rather than just tinkering with what we are doing currently, Reid suggests, “... we need a new narrative for Australian education”. Further to this point, he posits, “*Developing a new educational narrative involves achieving community agreement about the purposes, principles and values which should inform education policy and practice; and to ensure that our policy-makers use such an agreement as a reference point for education policy*”. Perhaps such an approach might help some of those who are currently critical of schools and teaching to see them in a more positive light.

As Professor Alan Reid notes, we have fallen foul of high stakes testing (as has much of the rest of the world). We are challenged now to act with confidence in our teachers in the face of a misleading populist diatribe about NAPLAN scores which, Professor Reid points out, have become the foundation of “measurement” of teachers and school effectiveness. Neither the federal government, the states, nor ACARA, the body overseeing NAPLAN, have ever sought for this to be more than an indicative snapshot to aid processes of continuous improvement. What this testing regime has continually reinforced is the significant effect of disadvantage on learners and learning. It seems such a waste of resources to tell us annually what we already know.

The Gonski review panel indicated that we clearly knew about the effect of disadvantage on learning in 2011. They stated, “*The research and data confirm that there are five factors of disadvantage that have a significant impact on educational outcomes in Australia. At the student level these factors are socioeconomic status, indigeneity, English language proficiency and disability. At the school level, remoteness is demonstrated to have an impact on student outcomes*”. The panel also stated, “*In order to achieve greater equity, schools must be appropriately resourced to cater for the individual and collective needs of disadvantaged students and be empowered and enabled to use these resources effectively*.” Almost ten years after the release of this review, many school communities still have not attained the level of funding recommended and will not get close until 2027. Perhaps our focus needs to be on this performance rather than on testing, which tells us very little new.

While standardised testing remains an area of disagreement, there is however one area of universal agreement – teachers are the key. Professor John Hattie, Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute and Chair of AITSL, agrees, suggesting, “...excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence on achievement”. Of course, this is not a new revelation. In an OECD document produced in 2012, *Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century – Lessons from Around the World*, edited by Andreas Schleicher, a very similar message resonates: “... the quality of teaching is at the heart of student learning outcomes.” This sentiment was again at the fore with the release in 2018 of *Through Growth to Achievement – Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* which said, “To continue to grow student outcomes, we need to attract and retain the best and most effective teachers in the profession. Teaching must become a high-status profession of expert educators.”

In short, research and common sense concur – the presence of quality teachers is critical to effective student learning. To achieve this, we need to reconsider how schools, (and their teachers), are judged and ensure that resourcing levels recommended by the Gonski panel in 2011 are attained. This requires that we interrogate and



understand, (not simply accept) the results of national and international testing regimes. This would lead to a realisation that they are really not much use to us – because the results they provide simply tell us we have not yet addressed the underlying causes of the differences noted.

As a nation, we must come to grips with the realities of our Australian community. Equity of opportunity is patchy in our geographically and socially diverse country. One size simply cannot fit all – and while we can have discussions and make plans for the curriculum, staffing and facilities our schools should have – we must be willing to engage with notions of diversity with positivism and energy, and ensure that different levels of need must be addressed differently.

I visit many primary schools across the nation – Independent, Catholic and Government sectors of education as President of the Australian Primary Principals Association. On these occasions, I see outstanding school principals working to adapt resourcing of all types to support the learning needs and interests of all of the children in their schools. I see excellent teaching, which adapts to those very same needs. I hear discussions and collaboration between principals, teachers, schools, parent associations and bureaucracies about how best to do this complex job of teaching, nurturing of the young and nation building. While literacy and numeracy are the foundations for accessing the curriculum, there are other vital elements. These can be summed up in the phrase ‘education of and for the whole child’. Societies are built on relationships – that’s a cornerstone of education. Business has for many decades been pinpointing the capacity of people to work with others as the single most important attribute for employees in most work situations. Australians have always been and continue to be, highly valued as employees around the world for this attribute. This important quality, along with others like creativity and innovation are not measured by standardised tests, but remain critical for learners of all ages.

In his book *Factfulness*, statistician Hans Rosling demonstrates the dislocation between fact and fiction in the discourse about the state of the world. While equity of opportunity remains a very significant challenge Australia performs amongst the best in the world on many social and economic indicators. This is not achieved on the back of a failing education system. Instead, our society is being built on our capacity to adapt to social and economic change. This is supported by a stable political system and strong international relationships.

Our schools play a huge part in enabling our students for success. Australian teachers are encouraged to adapt – even in the face of a sometimes-dominant polemic about the failure to address ‘the basics’. I haven’t been to one school where ‘the basics’ haven’t been front and centre in the school’s programme. This is really not the big challenge. The big challenge is two-fold. Firstly, we must have the courage to trust our principals and teachers to do what they do best – plan for and meet the needs of the children. The second part of the challenge is about equity. Highly regarded Finnish education researcher and world education figure, Pasi Sahlberg, points to the impact of equity of opportunity in Finland and the central role this had in lifting education standards in that country. Despite the political rhetoric suggesting we are focussed on equity in education in Australia, we still have a long way to go.

The fourth declaration of *Education Goals for Young Australians* represents significant challenges for systems, learners and Australian society. The first goal recognises excellence and equity as pillars of a successful system. This goal’s stated commitment to inclusivity, diversity, encouragement and support is really a call to our society



as well as our schools. A societal attitude of commitment to support and encouragement of learning is essential. This is strongly voiced in this declaration, yet not fully enacted politically. The 'Commitment to Action' is comprehensive. It presents a sense of a narrative of education throughout life and for all people. It also represents a sense of the crucial importance of the early and primary years of education and the necessity of support for and by families in nurturing a love of learning. Our schools have been working on attaining these goals for decades. This is a declaration of challenge for our society, and particularly for our governments and systems. The notion of equity is critical for a diverse decentralised country like Australia, where staffing schools in remote locations can be a challenge in itself.

APPA looks forward to supporting ongoing work on the implementation of this declaration. The time for paying lip service to the pillar of equity in education is over. For real change to occur, however, a concerted, supportive approach involving governments and education systems, both state and federal, is needed. More importantly, these key stakeholders need to listen to the profession – those doing the important work at schools in every part of the country. Only such an approach would really enable local contextual solutions in schools, to meet the distinct needs of their children, and create a deeper and more universal acceptance that not all schools are the same – nor would we want them to be!

\*This article was prepared for publication in early February 2020 but was swept aside by Covid-19. It is included on this site as a reference document.

## References

1. APPA Submission to the *House of Representatives Inquiry: Status of the Teaching Profession*; Australian Primary Principals Association; 19 December 2018
2. Gonski, David (AC); et al; *Review of Funding for Schooling—Final Report*; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations; December, 2011
3. Hattie, John; (October 2003); 'Teachers Make a Difference - What is the research evidence?'; ACER.
4. Masters, Claire; *NAPLAN stressing kids out*; The Courier Mail; 2 March, 2020.
5. Reid, Alan; Prof. OAM; *Exploring the Public Purposes of Education in Australian Primary Schools*; Report of an ARC Linkage Project: July 2010.
6. Reid, Alan; Prof. OAM; '*Here's what happens when NAPLAN becomes more than an education tool*'; The Sydney Morning Herald; 16 February, 2020
7. Reid, Alan; Prof OAM et al; *Researching the Public Purposes of Education*; AGPPA; September, 2011.
8. Rosling, Hans; '*Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*'; Flatiron Books; April 3, 2018.
9. Schleicher, A. (2012), Ed., *Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century: Lessons from around the World*, OECD Publishing.
10. '*Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*'; The Department of Education and Training; Canberra; March, 2018.

