

Reform to change learning and teaching

Submission to the Senate Inquiry on Teaching and Learning (maximising our investment in Australian Schools) by Dr Ben Jensen, Director of the School education program, Grattan Institute, November 2012.

The inquiry into Teaching and Learning in Australian schools covers the important issues in school education in this country. Given the breadth of the inquiry, it is beneficial to focus on key issues in teaching and learning.

Learning is central to reform and improvement

It is important that the inquiry focuses on both learning and teaching. Too often, the debate in Australia fails to focus sufficiently on learning. In addition, the mistake is often made to focus too heavily on teachers (their qualifications, effectiveness, training and development) rather than the quality of teaching. This is an important distinction as a focus on teachers can create recommendations that reflect an input-driven model. A focus on teaching gets us a closer to the objective of improving learning.

No school education system in Australia has developed an education strategy that provides sufficient detail of what learning and teaching should look like in their education system. This should be the key plank upon which all education policies and programs rest. Instead, it is an underdeveloped area with much ambiguity that reflects a reluctance to properly detail the learning we want in our nation, and what is and is not effective teaching that will deliver that learning.

Improving learning and teaching is behavioural change

A comprehensive reform strategy is required to improve learning and teaching. This must be developed by systems and is not necessarily the purview of the federal government. Connected to the lack of detailed objectives for learning and teaching is that reform in these areas must focus on behavioural change. High-performing systems around the world have realised that changing both learning and teaching is a behavioural, and often cultural, change process.¹ This change is incredibly difficult. Not just because of the substantial improvement in learning that are required, but because of the size and complexity of the education systems in Australia. It also requires a change in mindset for many policy makers and educators. To change behaviour in every classroom in every school, every day of the year puts an emphasis on implementation that effectively connects policy to the classroom. This is difficult and resource-intensive.

Effective and sustainable change requires four essential steps:

1. A rationale for change: To create behavioural change policy makers and education leaders must provide a clear strategy and rationale for taking learning and teaching from where it is now to where it should be in the future. Changes in learning must be explicitly detailed. The teaching to bring about these changes must also be explicitly detailed. Detail is required to build a rationale for change and to develop other programs and policies. It is very difficult – if not impossible - to argue for meaningful reform of, for example, teacher professional learning or teacher appraisal, without a clear and detailed description of what is effective learning and teaching in each system.

¹ Levin, 2008; Jensen et al, 2012.

2. Role modelling of behaviour: Sustainable change requires effective leadership. An effective leader will role model behaviour. Therefore, governments and system leaders must set an example. If system leaders want more professional collaboration in schools then it must begin with the education department. If leaders want more classroom observation and feedback then education departments must become more closely involved. If system leaders want transformational change in schools, then they must work more closely with schools.² In contrast, in some systems in Australia there is too much distance between education departments and schools. The teacher pay-for-performance debate in Australia is an example of terrible role modelling of behaviour. Of implementing reform on teachers rather than of effective leadership. If leaders want to implement pay-for-performance for teachers then it should start with the education department. An effective leader cannot ask teachers to undergo extensive change that they are not prepared to undertake themselves.
3. Capacity building: Extensive capacity building is essential. However, it must all be aimed at changing behaviours to reach the specified objectives for learning and teaching. Currently, capacity building has an unhealthy focus on traditional forms of professional development (e.g. courses and workshops). These are usually unsuited to extensive reform, and regularly fail to meet the requirements of teachers' needs.³ A broader understanding of professional learning is required that continually builds the skills and abilities of teachers (that have been detailed at the start of the change process). Broader aspects of professional learning should emphasise observation and feedback, professional collaboration, school-based research, mentoring and effective leadership.
4. Re-enforcement mechanisms: Capacity building needs to be complemented with re-enforcement mechanisms that further drive change. School evaluations and teacher appraisal and feedback are the main re-enforcement mechanisms that will drive change. Again, these need to be aligned to the strategy to change learning and teaching behaviours. By focusing on behavioural change, the methods of teacher appraisal and feedback become clearer. Too much time and resources are being invested into trying to accurately measure teacher effectiveness. Value-added measures are the most accurate education performance measures but are too prone to miss-measurement to be used for teacher evaluation.⁴ A focus on changing behaviours puts an emphasis on ongoing appraisal and feedback that continually improves teaching and school leadership. Appraisal and feedback should re-enforce the behavioural change process. This puts an emphasis on behaviours in the classroom rather than solely on pure quantitative measures of performance. Jensen & Reichl (2011) propose eight methods to appraise and provide feedback to teachers to increase school effectiveness. They emphasise the importance of setting clear objectives for learning and teaching before teacher appraisal and feedback systems can be effectively implemented.

A focus on behavioural and cultural change puts a focus on the implementation of education policy rather than its design. Improvements in learning and teaching will succeed and fail on the success of implementation in creating and sustaining behavioural change. Given the nature of the change process it is imperative that governments and system leaders work with teachers

² Hong Kong provides excellent examples of how this can be achieved (Jensen et al, 2012).

³ OECD, 2009.

⁴ OECD, 2008.

and other educators to bring about change. The current state of relationships between teachers and other educators (and their representative bodies) and governments and other system leaders is not conducive to meaningful change. In fact, what are sometimes toxic relationships are severe impediments to productive change.

Australia has achieved high quality learning and teaching across most of the nation. But if we are to be one of the top performing nations in the world substantial change is required. We need to focus on the behavioural and cultural change required to improve learning and teaching in all our schools.

References

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