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Call to fast-track school reforms

Justine Ferrari, Education writer | *October 30, 2008*

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AUSTRALIA has 10 years to fix its education system and cannot afford to be distracted by headline-grabbing, short-term initiatives such as putting a computer in front of every high school student.

A five-year research project examining six countries has concluded that core issues such as teacher quality are the keys to achieving a genuine education revolution.

The Rudd Government must fast-track the education reforms agreed at the 2020 Summit in April, the authors of the study say. Failure to do so would put Australia behind world best practice, achieved in countries such as Finland, where every teacher has a master's degree and all schools are "best schools".

The authors, former University of Melbourne dean of education Brian Caldwell and researcher Jessica Harris, call for the development of partnerships between private and public schools, as flagged recently by Victorian Education Minister Bronwyn Pike.

While 80 per cent of Australia's schools are "among the best in the world", they say, there is "no question that a number are struggling, especially when they are in remote locations with large numbers of indigenous students or in disadvantaged areas in urban settings".

"We believe all schools can be 'best schools' in the sense that all schools, regardless of circumstance, can be as good as those exceptional few that are currently considered to be the best," the report's authors say.

Professor Caldwell and Dr Harris outline a 10-point plan to achieve a "transformation of Australia's schools" in a new book, *Why Not The Best Schools?*, based on the study and published yesterday by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

The main points include:

- * Development of a national curriculum.
- * Minimising or even abandoning plans for national testing programs.
- * Funding private and public schools on the same basis.
- * Auditing the intellectual capital -- that is, teacher quality -- in all schools.
- * Greater autonomy for schools and principals.
- * Creating a federation of schools, in line with the British model.
- * Refurbishing or replacing most school buildings constructed in the 20th century.
- * Increasing the business sector's involvement in education, including private funding of schools through foundations and trusts.

The authors repeat international research that says a school is only as good as its teachers.

"The quality of schools will never exceed the quality of their staff," they write. "We believe that intellectual capital is the chief driving force for creating the best schools.

"Australia is falling behind the best-performing education systems around the world because it is not insisting on top-quality people entering the teaching profession."

New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein, who is visiting Australia, has emphasised that the key investment to improving student achievement is teachers: their pay and their quality.

In an interview on Tuesday night, Mr Klein said attracting the best and the brightest of society into

teaching, and paying them accordingly, was critical.

That has "attracted really quality people to New York City", Mr Klein said on the ABC's *7.30 Report*.

Professor Caldwell and Dr Harris recommend as a starting point that all schools undertake an audit of their intellectual capital.

They caution that expectations for an education revolution in the short term are unrealistic.

"It will take at least (10 years) in Australia," they wrote.

"Short-term, headline initiatives that increase the numbers of computers in schools are simply completing a revolution in technology that gathered momentum in the 1990s."

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