

EDUCATION

Top teachers surpass testing

An international study shows that better teacher training is more effective at raising standards than national testing.

Caroline Milburn reports.

A NATIONAL testing program that leads to the publication of school results should be abandoned within 10 years if Australia can lift teacher quality to a uniformly high standard.

A study that analysed outstanding schools in six countries says it is understandable Australia introduced national testing of students given the lack of transparency about school performance among states and territories.

However, nations with the best student performances have focused on developing a highly trained teacher workforce rather than publishing school results.

Finland, the world's top performing nation in international student tests, has no national system of tests but every teacher has a master's degree and differences in school performance are minimal.

A co-author of the study, Professor Brian Caldwell says school results published in the media could give parents a false impression because research showed that the difference in student performance between classrooms within an individual school is often greater than the differences between schools.

"Teacher expertise is the biggest in-school influence on student performance," he says. "If we are to follow Finland and the Federal Government's intention of creating an education revolution we need a highly skilled profession that knows how to interpret data about a child's performance and knows how to take action if a child falls behind."

"If we have that across all schools, a national testing program becomes superfluous because it won't matter what school your child attends: they will do very well as students do in Finland."

Professor Caldwell, the former dean of education at Melbourne University, says the Federal Government should use its power as the funding source of tertiary places to encourage university education faculties to upgrade their teacher-training courses to a mas-

ter's degree or equivalent. Almost all teacher training courses now are undertaken as a four-year undergraduate degree or a one-year post-graduate diploma.

"There's a sense of urgency here because we've had about 20 reviews of teacher education over the last couple of decades and there hasn't been much change. We should be insisting that every teacher be very well trained to at least a master's level and not allow any child to fall behind."

The five-year study by Professor Caldwell and researcher Dr Jessica Harris examined successful secondary schools in countries as

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PROFESSOR BRIAN CALDWELL

diverse as Britain and China, including seven government and non-government schools in Melbourne.

It concluded that, despite the differences in culture and student populations, all of the schools shared crucial common practices that led them to be successful. Some of the practices were strong links with neighbourhood organisations, including businesses, and each school was led by a valued and visionary leader.

"Secondary schools in many communities have simply lost contact with their communities," Professor Caldwell says. "School councils were intended to overcome that but they've had a limited impact. If we want our schools to be a central part of community life they need to engage with the wider community. The study highlights the importance of social capital and engagement in the schools that have been transformed."

In a new book based on the study, *Why not the best Schools?*, published by the Australian Council for Educational Research, the authors say it will take at least 10 years and unprecedented levels of co-operation between the Commonwealth, states and territories for Australia to achieve a genuine education revolution. "It took Finland more than 10 years to create what is generally regarded . . . as the best in public education. 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."

They propose a 10-year plan to transform Australia's schools. Its main points include:

- A national curriculum;
- Better continuous professional development, with teachers given one half-day a week in school time for that purpose, similar to Finland;
- National testing of students to be phased out once initial teacher education is reformed to ensure all teachers have a master's degree and professional development is overhauled;
- Creating school links with business, via trusts or foundations, to receive public and private money;
- Greater autonomy for schools and principals, including power to select staff;
- Fund public and private schools on the same basis, with funding determined by student needs.



HOW OTHERS HAVE ACHIEVED SUCCESS

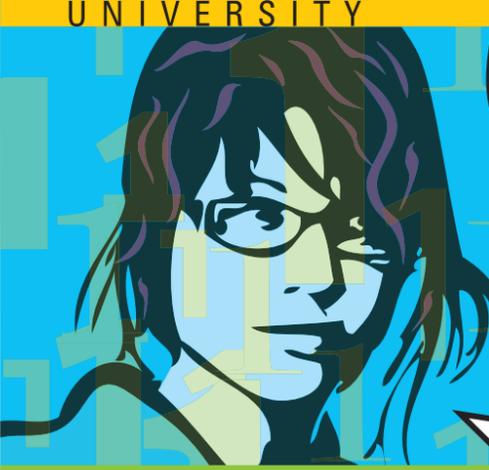


What the best secondary schools worldwide have in common:

- Strong links with feeder primary schools and nearby schools to share knowledge and skills.
- Student wellbeing is a priority.
- Government funding supplemented from other sources.
- Clearly Defined values.
- Freedom to manage daily affairs.
- Focus on continuous professional development for staff; especially sharing of knowledge and skills.

SOURCE: *Why not the best Schools?*





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