

A 'FAIR GO' IN SCHOOLS

More money alone cannot overcome educational disadvantage, writes **Kevin Donnelly**

Given that the deputy prime minister, Julia Gillard, is responsible for education as well as social inclusion, it is understandable that she believes educational disadvantage needs addressing. According to Gillard, Australia has a long tail of underperforming students from disadvantaged backgrounds who need additional resources to achieve success.

At a speech given to the Sixth Annual Higher Education Summit on 4 April 2008, under the heading 'Australia's equity performance is poor,' Gillard argued that 'a frank assessment of our education system today would have to lead to the conclusion we have a major problem with equity. While we have many high achievers, our "tail" of lower performers is long. We suffer from weak literacy performance in the bottom layer of school students and high drop out rates.'

The previous month Gillard had announced an intention to apply the formula used to fund non-government schools (the socioeconomic status or SES formula) to government schools. Her rationale included the need to address disadvantage, especially amongst Indigenous, working-class, and non-English-speaking background students. Overcoming educational disadvantage has such a high priority amongst ALP governments that the March meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed that they must develop and implement strategies to meet the needs of 'low socio-economic status school communities.'

To what extent does Australia's education system promote disadvantage? Based on international research evaluating how effective systems are in overcoming disadvantage, the answer is, very little, compared to other countries.

The 2002 UNICEF report 'A League Table of Educational Disadvantage' ranks education systems on their ability to overcome disadvantage. It ranks Australia fifth out of twenty-four countries. Despite Barry McGaw's argument that Australia is a 'high quality / low equity' country, it is also the case, based on the 2006 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results, that Australia, when compared to other countries, is better at helping students at risk do well. In the words of the head of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Geoff Masters,

Another indicator of the world-class nature of our education system is the observation that the relationship between socioeconomic background and student achievement in Australia is weaker than the OECD average. In the popular jargon, Australia is a 'high quality / high equity' country based on our PISA 2006 performance. And again, this observation is made not only in relation to scientific literacy, but also for mathematical and reading literacy.

That Australia does well in offering all students a 'fair go' in educational outcomes is reinforced by an OECD study evaluating the relationship

between achievement and students' migrant backgrounds. Based on an analysis of the results of the PISA test, involving over fifty countries, the OECD study states that 'School systems differ widely in terms of their outcomes for immigrant children. In some countries, such as Canada and Australia, immigrant children perform as well as their native counterparts.' One only needs to note how many students from Southeast Asia achieve the best year 12 results to see it is simplistic to equate educational disadvantage with a migrant background.

The emphasis placed on educational disadvantage caused by a student's socioeconomic background is also open to doubt. Research carried out by Gary Marks of ACER, published as part of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, concludes that other factors, such as academic performance at year 9 and teacher quality, have a greater influence on academic achievement than socioeconomic background.

As noted in a paper by Gary Marks, published in *Educational Research*, 'Differences in student performance

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between and within schools cannot be accounted for by socio-economic background' and 'Socio-economic background does not substantially account for the relationship between educational differentiation and student achievement.' A second ACER researcher, Ken Rowe, supports the argument that factors other than a student's socioeconomic profile are more important predictors of success. He states that 'The quality of teaching is by far the most important influence on cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes of schooling, regardless of a student's gender or background.'

Arguing that Australia does comparatively well in addressing disadvantage does not mean that better supporting children at risk is not an issue. The results of national literacy and numeracy testing, as well as international tests such as those for the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), suggest that many Australian students, especially Indigenous and working-class children, perform at the bottom of the scale. Also, compared to Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea, Australia has fewer students performing at the top of the scale. The question then becomes: what can be done to overcome disadvantage?

One response, favoured by the Australian Education Union and professional associations like the Australian Curriculum Studies Association, is to invest more. Julia Gillard, explaining how educational disadvantage will be overcome, stresses the commonwealth government's commitment to increasing investment in targeted programs for so-called disadvantaged schools. She ignores the reality that spending more on education, by itself, is ineffective.

The OECD publication *Education at a Glance 2007* concludes that

Lower unit expenditure does not necessarily lead to lower achievement, and it would be misleading to equate lower unit expenditure generally with lower quality of educational services. For example, the cumulative expenditure of Korea and the Netherlands is below the OECD average, and yet both are among the best-performing countries in the PISA 2003 survey.

That spending more is not the best way to raise standards is also supported by a recent McKinsey report, *How the World's Best-performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, where factors such as attracting and rewarding the best teachers are considered paramount.

Two German researchers, Ludger Woessmann and Thomas Fuchs, analysing the characteristics of stronger performing education systems as measured by success in international TIMSS and PISA tests, suggest there is a range of factors that need to be addressed to raise standards. Once again, increasing resources is not seen as the solution. Instead, the focus is on structural and institutional matters. In their paper 'What Accounts for International Differences in Student Performance? A Re-examination Using PISA Data,' Woessmann and Fuchs argue that the factors needed for improvement are a strong academic curriculum with external examinations, school autonomy (on staffing in particular), and a robust private school sector with an emphasis on choice and competition.

A rigorous academic curriculum, benchmarked internationally and where curriculum statements are succinct, unambiguous, and deal with essential content, is considered essential. This is the approach adopted by better-performing education systems, and is unlike Australia where, since the Keating

government developed its national curriculum during the early- to mid-1990s, state and territory curriculum documents have been vague, wordy, and dumbed down.

External examinations, especially high-stakes examinations like those for the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), let the broader public judge how well schools perform, and as a result there is an incentive for schools to compete to maintain market share. Properly used, the results of external examinations can measure the performance of individual schools and teachers.

Woessmann and Fuchs also argue that a strong teacher union influence on education is detrimental, and that school autonomy, where schools can hire, fire, and reward staff for performance, is a positive influence. In a 2006 paper that draws on research by Caroline Hoxby, Woessmann also makes the point that US initiatives like vouchers, where the money follows the child to whatever school is selected, improve educational outcomes, especially among disadvantaged groups.

The Whitlam government's Disadvantaged Schools Programme was abolished in 1996 by the Howard government's minister for schools, David Kemp. Taking the Whitlam program as an example, we can see how millions of dollars can be spent for little effect in improving educational access and performance. One hopes that, in seeking to address disadvantage, the newly elected Rudd government does not repeat the mistakes of the past, and that its education revolution is more about substance than political rhetoric.