

# New reports sound alarm on school performance: Experts respond

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard wants Australia to improve its international standing in education performance, setting a goal to be in the top 5 by 2025. Credit: AAP

Two new education performance [reports](#) released by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) have painted a bleak picture of Australia's student literacy and science and mathematics achievement, with Australian students' performances stagnating over the past 16 years.



The reports, which benchmark Australian primary [school students](#) in Year 4 and Year 8 against students in 47 other countries, found many Australian Year 4 students have substantial literacy problems, with around one-quarter of students not meeting the Intermediate benchmark – the standard which [ACER](#) said is generally considered to be the minimally acceptable standard of proficiency.

Between 29% and 37% of Year 4 and Year 8 students in Australia performed below the Intermediate benchmark in mathematics and science.

And while Australia's performance has lagged, the studies found Singapore, Hong Kong and Chinese Taipei dramatically improved their performances over the same period, while Korea and the United States showed steady improvements.

"It is difficult to see how Australia will be in the top five countries by 2025 if we continue on our current path," said ACER [chief executive](#) Geoff Masters. "We need to look carefully at what improving countries are doing to see what lessons there are for Australia."

In addition to assessing 600,000 primary school students, [questionnaires](#) were also used by ACER to gather information from students, parents, teachers and [school principals](#).

The research explored funding issues and found students attending schools in which principals reported no resource shortages scored significantly higher in reading and mathematics (but not in science) than students attending schools in which principals reported being affected by resource shortages.

More than 20% of Year 8 students were being taught mathematics by teachers who reported feeling only "somewhat" confident in teaching the



subject. The percentage was similar for Year 8 science.

The Conversation has gathered the views of education experts reacting to the report findings.

**David Zyngier, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education,  
at Monash University.**

Clearly it [the report's findings] indicates what we've already known – that we have a long tail of underachievement, in particular amongst disadvantaged and indigenous children and they are bringing down the average result across Australia.

While there's been a lot of discussion about intra-school differences, one class compared to another class, that's actually not the issue here. It's schools of what Richard Teese has called "sinks of disadvantage" where they've become totally marginalised. Any parents who've been able to move their children out of these schools have done so, reducing the aspiration and achievement level of the remaining children.

The whole issue comes down to what Pasi Sahlberg from Finland talks about, and that is equity.

We're trying to achieve equity through excellence and actually it's the other way around. We need to focus on equitable outcomes and if we do that for all children then the excellence will follow.

There's no evidence in the world to say more testing will improve results. Testing is only for diagnostic purposes.

If we have the full implementation of the Gonski recommendations we will have a much more equitable funding system for our schools – those



who need the greatest funding will get it.

While we've got high performing schools they have been getting extra money when they don't actually need it. We need to target our education dollar much more systematically and that's what Gonski has recommended. Children who are underachieving need to have the extra money. Currently we punish schools by publishing results which then bleeds them of children with aspirational abilities.

All those other countries don't have strong private school systems that are funded by their government. Australia is the second most privatised education system in the world. It has bled our state school systems and its harming our education achievement results.

And one final thing to note is that while Australia might be 18th it's sitting parallel with a lot of other countries in Year 4 maths and in reading were 27th but between 27 and one is not a huge gap.

## **Scott Eacott, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, at University of Newcastle.**

There's a lot of doom and gloom, there's a lot of crisis talk, which is potentially productive, but can be unproductive at the same time.

In terms of being productive, this is the kick we need to do some innovative reform rather than just beef up our education system.

If we want to get a different result, we need to do different things. This is potentially a time that could be exciting for education if we're going to do some meaningful reform.

Given the way in which the government has pitched themselves on an



education evolution this result either: a) confirms their belief that we do need a revolution; or b) is a huge wake up call for a government pitching themselves on improving rankings – the aspiration to be top 5 by 2025. Their reforms haven't obviously worked on the way they want to be measured.

If our system isn't performing as well as what we would like cutting funds out of it arguably isn't the most appropriate means of doing something about it.

I think the Gonski review would go part of the way (to addressing the problem ) because it does some work on inequities in the system, but it's a big leap to assume funding will lead to a direct causation in performance improvement. I'm not convinced it will necessarily correlate with moving up the ranking.

What I believe we need is a ratings system, not a ranking system.

All these measures allow us to construct a global league table. I believe a rating system would be better where we say 90% of students are achieving what we need them to achieve. Rating against some sort of criteria rather than comparing all the time.

**Scott Prasser, Executive Director, Public Policy  
Institute at Australian Catholic University.**

We need to be careful to say that sometimes these tests are narrow, but Australia's falling education performance comes despite the increase in spending that has occurred in the last ten years and the development of smaller classrooms.

The minister's response to look to Gonski and spend more money, that's



not the right response. We've been spending more money on school education for a considerable time.

The issue is to look to the evidence, where should we spend the money and what should be the emphasis in education programs?

The spending has been skewed in a number of different ways and that's why we're not getting good results. So what do we know makes a difference to quality of education: spending money on targeted programs for disadvantage, not just increasing recurrent spending, focusing on teacher quality, focusing on quality in the classroom – so people have to meet certain standards, focusing on early intervention in school education.

We know that autonomy of schools makes a difference, that competition and choice make a difference. So it's a combination of all these things.

And there's been an over-focus on basic testing like Naplan, people have become too obsessed with those narrow basic tests. Teaching in the 21st century has to be broader.

So there's a whole range of things that affect quality and the education system can't solve the issue of socioeconomic disadvantage by itself. I think if you focus on quality and improve quality you'll improve the other issues of equity and disadvantage.

## **Robyn Ewing, Professor of Teacher Education and the Arts.**

We tend to look at these sort of benchmarks and think they're the be all and end all. I think it's really important that we're balanced in terms of how we look at a report like this. We need to think carefully about the



information it gives us.

If you look at a range of results we've been getting over the last decade it certainly seems whereas we were ranking very highly in 1999/2000, we've stagnated and are on a downward spiral.

However it's not good enough to immediately blame teachers and pre-service teacher education.

We need to look at the reductive policy towards teacher education from both governments and the overemphasis we have been placing on high stakes testing, on ranking schools, on getting results in an election 3 year cycle, instead of actually thinking carefully about what's happening.

Look at what's happened in NSW and Queensland in terms of cuts to the professional learning support that teachers get so they can continue to take on new research and match it with their experience.

We have not in this country ever given education the priority it deserves, particularly early childhood education.

The ACT results are very good, they have put a high emphasis on high quality teacher education and pre-school education for a long time. Early childhood education is the area that's most important in terms of learning and yet it's the one we spend the least on. The government's funding for schools demonstrates that.

Those schools where the principals reported they were short of funding – they're the schools where our most vulnerable children are. We already know that. We don't need an international benchmark to tell us that. We've known for decades that we have a big tail.

Yes ,the government initiated the Gonski report but what have they done



about it? Nothing. They haven't done anything real yet. The national curriculum is focused on content not quality pedagogy.

We know that quality teaching and effective school leadership makes a huge difference. This is helping us put the microscope on things we already know about where our education system needs to improve.

As usual people look for scapegoats immediately without thinking about the political, policy and bureaucratic reasons for some of this. It needs to be put into that bigger picture.

If we continue to skimp on education, and I mean all levels of education, then we will continue to slip down the scales, however you measure them.

## **Greg Thompson, Lecturer in the School of Education at Murdoch University.**

Using TIMMS and PIRLS data to understand what is happening in Australian schools is a complex task. We should rightly be sceptical about the extent to which any one study can account for the complexity of teaching and learning.

A comparison of averages shows that the 6,126 Australian student participants in Year 4 are ranked 27th in Reading, 18th in Mathematics and 25th in Science. For a wealthy nation, this is concerning, and continues to fuel crisis talk about our schools and teachers.

However, by Year 8, these results have been markedly improved, with the 7556 students surveyed from 275 schools ranking equal 11th in [Mathematics](#) and 12th in Science. This would appear to indicate, based on these results, the longer Australian students spend in schools, the



better their results get.

The point is that results like this need to be carefully examined, and weighed up to examine the trends over time rather than used to justify pre-existing beliefs about what is happening in schools.

Year 4 Maths average achievement was stable since 2007, while Science achievement dipped from an average of 527 in 2007 to 516 in 2011. Year 8 Maths achievement improved from an average of 496 in 2007 to an average of 505 in 2011 and Year 8 Science from 515 in 2007 to 519 in 2011.

However, the TIMMS and PIRLS results from 2011 identify a continuing problem within Australian [education](#). This problem is one of equity. Across the country there are too many students achieving below the benchmarks in Australian schools. The gap between our best performing and worst performing students is too high. There are many reasons for this, and we should resist the urge to apportion blame.

We need a better, more consistent evidence-based approach to what is happening in classrooms across Australia, better support for, and trust of, teachers and principals, rather than assuming that increasing accountability through policy intervention will drive improvement.

Changing our policy mindset that performance is the same as learning would be a good start, and may be more effective at delivering the improvement in outcomes that we aspire to achieve.

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