

A lesson on how to reverse two decades of failed education reforms

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Jason Clare has an incredible opportunity to improve the lives of Australia's children. But, to succeed, the new federal Education Minister must first recognise the lack of progress made by his predecessors and then have the courage to reject the status quo, ignore a series of irrelevant education debates, and focus on the one thing that matters: what happens in Australian schools and classrooms.

During the past 20 years, ministers from across the political spectrum have presided over Australian education with the best of intentions and introduced some big reforms. Yet our students' performance has continued to fall. The decline is real and it is consistent across three vital subjects: reading, mathematics and science.

The OECD's Program for International Student Assessment tests and compares students around the world every three years to determine how they are performing in these three subjects. In 2000, Australia was a high performer by international standards, 24 points ahead of the US in reading, for example. Since then, we have declined in every subject area. In reading, the decline in our mean score over those decades is 25 points – roughly equivalent to nine months of schooling. Twenty years of reforms have wiped out nine months' worth of learning and put us on par with the US.

More alarming still is the proportion of students classified as "low performers", students whose literacy the OECD has calculated as "too low to enable them to participate effectively and productively in life". In 2000, 12 per cent of our students were in this low-performing category. By 2018 it was 20 per cent. One in five Australian 15-year-olds does not have sufficient literacy to participate effectively in life.

If these trends continue, at the end of Clare's first term as minister Australian students will have lost another 10 points in reading – about a third of a year of school. In maths and science, where the decline has been slightly steeper, the results will be even worse. Come the next election, Clare could walk through a school and almost every fourth child he meets will have learning at a level "too low to enable them to participate effectively and productively in life".

Clare's predecessors include some serious talent. These ministers have introduced NAPLAN, developed the Australian Curriculum and reviewed it multiple times, developed teacher and school leader standards, introduced Gonski and Gonski 2.0, issued the Melbourne and Alice Springs declarations, and championed STEM and literacy strategies, among other reforms.

They also established the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (annual budget of more than \$30 million), Australian Institute of School Leadership (about \$22 million), Education Services Australia (more than \$50 million) and, more recently, the Australian Education Research Organisation (\$50 million budgeted over its first four years). There has been no shortage of hard work, policies and money dedicated to improving school education. And Australia's performance has continued to fall.

Why? It seems a truth too obvious to be repeated but it is constantly forgotten. Student learning will not improve unless you change what happens in classrooms. All the rest is simply hyperbole about initiatives that simply don't matter for children. While each recent education minister has brought differences in ideology and focus to the position, they all shared a broadly similar approach, one that has moved education policy further and further away from classrooms.

Consider the case of science education. A host of policies has sought to improve science and STEM education. All have been accompanied by high-level announcements and talk of preparing Australian children for jobs in a "digital age". Not one has significantly improved what happens in classrooms.

Research shows that improving learning and equity in science education boils down to how we answer three fundamental questions about what happens in schools and classrooms:

- What is taught? This includes content and the skills developed, instructional materials used, learning activities, tasks and experiments undertaken, and so on.
- How is it taught? The teaching methods and practices used to teach science; for example, conducting experiments or addressing student misconceptions.
- How is learning assessed? How learning of what is taught in science is assessed through the tests and learning tasks students undertake.

If Clare asks about current classroom practice in these three areas, and how it needs to improve, he will find the answer confronting, as all Australians should.

The truth is that we don't know what is taught in Australia's science classrooms. Nor in maths, English – name your subject. We don't know how the curriculum is taught – what teaching practices are used or not used. And we don't know how learning is assessed.

We also don't know whether students in poor communities have access to the same curriculum as students in wealthy communities. In fact, Clare will quickly learn that when it comes to what actually matters in education, he has no line of sight at all.

What, then, do we know? We know that compared to high-performing systems around the world, Australia provides school leaders and teachers with little clarity, guidance and support on what to teach, how to teach it and how to assess what students have learnt. We know the professional development and training teachers receive is high-level and general, rather than focused on the central question: how to teach the subjects in the curriculum.

This means, for example, that for a year 5 teacher in a science classroom trying to teach reflection and refraction of light for the first time there is limited support available about how to teach the actual topic; for example, how to use mirrors or prisms to help young students understand the concept, what everyday examples illustrate reflection or refraction, and what are the misconceptions students commonly bring to the topic. Instead, the support provided is not aimed at what the teacher confronts in the classroom, it is generic. Generic professional development, teaching standards and practices.

In high-performing systems overseas, policy focuses tightly on the classroom, making it specific rather than generic. Singapore reforms its science curriculum, for example, through a five-year cycle of review and incremental improvement. An expert team of academics and teachers works in schools and classrooms, collecting data and working with teachers and school leaders on what is actually being taught in science classrooms.

The team looks at the science experiments students are undertaking, the content they are taught, the instructional resources used, the student assessments and so on. It spends

about four years documenting what is working well, and the challenges and barriers to improvement that teachers, school leaders and students face in classrooms.

In year 5, the Singapore science curriculum is changed based on the expert team's recommendations. If teachers are having problems with specific instructional resources, those resources are changed. Teachers struggling with specific science content, the scientific method, or with conducting experiments receive greater clarity and support. Once the five-year reform process is concluded, it starts again. The expert team continues to work with schools and in classrooms, identifies what is and isn't working, then adjusts policy accordingly to prepare for the next cycle of reform.

Successful curriculum reforms in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Alberta, and in some US states, have followed a slightly different approach, but the core focus is the same: first understand what is happening in classrooms, make incremental changes to improve it, test the changes and start again. This approach is a constant in systems undertaking effective reform.

Australia could not be further from this global best practice. Curriculum reviews are high-level and recommended reforms are rarely based on the curriculum that is actually taught in classrooms. Education policy development plays out in a similar way. A group of senior policymakers, usually assisted by advisers from the large consulting companies, develops strategy and policy based on two inputs: the weight of research from academic journals, and the direction the government of the day wants to take policy. Data on what happens in classrooms – what is being taught in classrooms, how it is being taught and how it is assessed – are generally not collected or considered.

The strategy or policy is published with announcements, press releases and so on. It is then handed over to people working with and in schools and classrooms to implement. The policy runs its course and has no impact. The policy that wasn't developed based on what is happening in classrooms didn't improve what is happening in classrooms.

The reason this keeps on happening is that when policy doesn't impact classrooms, senior policymakers and consultants invariably explain the failure as a result of poor implementation or communication issues. Except after an election, when a new government blames the policies of the last one, it is vanishingly rare to hear education ministers or senior leaders say a policy was wrong.

The process is not sinister; it is just how Australian education works. Our narrative is that the policy is always doing well, there are just some implementation issues. Given that implementation is what happens in schools and classrooms, when senior leaders say a policy is correct but has implementation issues, they mean a policy intended for schools and classrooms is correct, except for what is happening in schools and classrooms.

The whole sorry process is about to unfold again. In coming months, Clare will be inundated with stakeholders telling him the current overall approach and policy settings are correct, minus a few "implementation issues" to sort out. He should see this for the absurd admission it is.

Instead, Clare should lead by example and turn the focus of education policy to the classroom. This doesn't have to mean overreaching on federal powers. School education is largely run by the states. But there are several key issues where he would get strong backing; where he could support initiatives and policy development in states.

Here are four key initiatives to improve Australian education Clare could initiate:

- Identify and document what Australian students are actually being taught, what they are reading, what learning activities and tasks they complete, and what assessments of their learning are undertaken. This means focusing on what is actually being taught in schools and classrooms. Importantly, it would include comparisons of what is being taught to children in disadvantaged communities compared to wealthier students. Without this data, we cannot improve what happens in classrooms. From this, better support can be provided to school leaders and teachers to help them decide what to teach in classrooms. This doesn't mean dictating to schools what must happen, but it includes guidance and high-quality resources to help teachers choose the best instructional materials available.
- Be clear that all Australian children have a right to a quality education. Disadvantaged students should have the right to learn the same knowledge and skills as wealthy students. By not focusing on classrooms, previous ministers and education leaders have been able to dodge this issue. The Australian curriculum is so high-level and vague that large differences in the curriculum taught to disadvantaged students are never identified or discussed. We have not made it clear what each child – regardless of background – should have the right to be taught in schools. This is not an implementation issue. It is simply wrong and must end.
- Address gaps in the support and guidance we provide school leaders and teachers by developing world-class curriculum materials and instructional resources, and ensure they are provided for free to all schools. The federal government should not compete with the work some states are already doing in this area, but it must ensure the work gets done across the country. This is the biggest gap in Australian education and is expensive and resource-intensive to do well so states will be eager for federal support.
- Shift the focus from generic teaching advice to how to teach subjects and topics in the curriculum. This can complement the development of world-class curriculum materials by focusing on how to teach them. This means the year 5 teacher teaching reflection and refraction of light for the first time has a complete set of world-class resources to use and adapt. It means they have guidance and support on the best way to teach these curriculum materials and the best way to assess student learning. Australia's failure to properly support teachers and school leaders adds to their workload and makes our school systems both less effective and less fair than high-performing systems overseas.

All these initiatives would improve Australian education, potentially dramatically. All reflect the research of what matters most to improving learning and equity. All are the bedrock of education policy in better-performing and more equal systems overseas. All fit into the federal government's role in education; strengthening rather than replicating or undermining the role of states.

Above all, the minister must ditch the damaging myth that what happens in classrooms is just an "implementation issue", and shift the policy focus to the three fundamental questions: What is taught in classrooms? How is it taught? How do we assess student learning?

If Clare takes on this task, he will be remembered as our greatest education minister, the one who finally confronted inequality in our schools and fundamentally improved the learning of all Australian children.

Link to article in *The Australian*

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/a-lesson-on-how-to-reverse-two-decades-of-failed-education-reforms/news-story/f8d6810a4fba45191933a40aabbf6400>