

My response is based on some 30 years of education experience including time spent as a primary school teacher, support teacher (learning difficulties), special education consultant, university lecturer, researcher, education bureaucrat, and school principal. It is my experience that far too often worthwhile initiatives underpinned by the best of intentions come to nothing more than ‘business as usual’ with rebranding. It is my sincerest hope that this will not be the case with the national education evidence base.

Dr Sally Howell

Governance and institutional arrangements matter

INFORMATION REQUEST 8.1

The Commission seeks further information about the strengths and weaknesses of its proposed institutional and governance arrangements.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 8.1

The Australian, state and territory governments should task the COAG Education Council to provide explicit policy direction through a new Education Agreement, which would build on prior agreements and define the:

- objectives
- nature of the research to be undertaken in the bottom-up evaluation of what works
- evidentiary standards or frameworks to be applied, including assessment of cost effectiveness
- requirement for translation of evidence into guidelines accessible by schools, early childhood education and care services and teachers.

They should also request the Education Council to:

- assign an institution to be responsible and accountable for implementation of the functions set out above and in Draft Recommendation 7.2
- specify the assigned institution’s governance arrangements, functions and operations
 - including a responsibility for promoting a culture of using the evidence base by policy makers and educators.

The framework set out above for further developing a national education evidence base is not the end of the journey. Effective governance and institutional arrangements are important to create strong incentives for delivery on the goals.

The proposal for an institution that will take responsibility for the implementation of an evaluative framework is encouraging. Having an independent institution to determine the worthiness of specific research projects and to disseminate research findings has the potential to profoundly influence both teacher knowledge and student outcomes.

- The institution’s decision making must function independently of state, territory and national education departments.
- Representation on any such institution, working party or sub-group must not be limited to, or weighted in favour, of nominations made by education departments. Nor should representation be weighted in favour of members holding any particular philosophical viewpoint about teaching and learning.

- There is a real risk that in allowing the states and territories to “define the nature of the research to be undertaken in the bottom-up evaluation of what works” relevant research will be stymied from the start. Determining the nature of research to be undertaken should be one of the functions of the institution.

The effectiveness of the proposed institution will be determined by the level of freedom it has to appoint members outside those recommended by existing education bureaucracies and the degree to which state and territories are held accountable for programs and initiatives they roll out.

- Accreditation of teaching training at universities and of teacher professional learning should reflect the evidence base established by the institution. The institution could play a role in accreditation of courses.
- “Promoting a culture of using the evidence base...” may not be sufficient to bring about change. Built into the institution’s functions and operations there must be some mechanism by which policy makers and educators at all levels are held accountable for adopting and supporting evidence-based practices identified by the institution.

Key Point

Notwithstanding substantial increases in expenditure on education over the past decade, national and international assessments of student achievement in Australia show little improvement and in some areas standards of achievement have dropped.

A framework for furthering the education evidence base

- provide high-quality data and evidence to inform decisions
- drive improved student achievement through four interconnected processes — monitoring of performance, evaluation of what works best, dissemination of evidence and application of that evidence by educators and policy makers (Page 5)

Without good measures of progress towards stated objectives — and benchmarks against which to interpret this progress — it is not possible to assess robustly the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of policy interventions or school programs. That is, monitoring complements, and is a precursor to, effective evaluation. (Page 6)

At the student level

Without good measures of **student** progress towards stated objectives — and **valid** benchmarks against which to **measure** ~~interpret~~ this progress — it is not possible to assess robustly the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of ~~policy~~ interventions or of school programs. That is, monitoring ~~complements, and~~ is a precursor to effective evaluation **at all levels**.

More work is required to address data gaps

Additional data need to be collected to support the monitoring of progress against Australia’s education objectives, including:

- national measures of student achievement in Year 1, which would facilitate value-added analysis and shed light on the impact of early achievement on later outcomes

It will be an absolute tragedy if ‘measures’ of student achievement in Year 1 reflect no more than teacher judgement against *ACARA Learning Progressions* or content similar to the NSW Continuums (*Best Start Literacy Continuum, Best Start Numeracy Continuum, NSW Literacy Continuum* or *NSW Numeracy Continuum*). The subjectivity of many ‘indicators’ make these ‘tools’ unsuited to the purpose of monitoring, assessment and/or program evaluation.

It is worth noting that despite having been implemented since 2008 the NSW *Best Start* Kindergarten assessment process, data collection and use of the *Best Start Continuums* have failed to have an impact on student performance as measured by NAPLAN in Year 3. Teachers in NSW have been subjected to professional learning based on *Literacy* and *Numeracy Continuums* for some 8 years now and this has not resulted in improved literacy and numeracy outcomes. Monitoring that reflects ‘on balance teacher judgement’ against the *ACARA Learning Progressions* (currently under development), is unlikely to result in improved student outcomes.

Too much money is wasted on ‘business as usual’ approaches that are rebranded with each new government announcement. It is absolutely crucial that measures of student achievement in Year 1 adopt a new approach to benchmarking. Objective validated measures of student performance are needed. The development and implementation of such measures should be reflected in research priorities established by the proposed institution. Given the importance of early intervention this could constitute one of the institutions first pieces of work.

- Monitoring outcomes, performance benchmarking and competition between schools alone are insufficient to achieve gains in education outcomes. They must be complemented by the use of data and evidence to identify, and then apply, the most effective programs, policies and teaching practices.

Any assumption that methods of performance benchmarking currently used in schools are sufficient is erroneous.

Students, teachers and taxpayers deserve better than ‘benchmarks’ that are developed by committees of like-minded bureaucrats and ‘experts’ who support a particular point of view over available research evidence.

Any ‘bottom-up’ capability will only ever be as good as the assessment and monitoring practices that teachers adopt. Every effort should be made to develop evidence based assessment/monitoring tools and accompanying professional learning for teachers. This should be an absolute priority. Teachers are extremely busy people. Time spent on the inevitable professional learning that will accompany the launch of the ACARA learning progressions would be better spent on developing teachers’ and principals’ knowledge of research and evidence based teaching and assessment practices.

There are some gaps in existing data collections. But the largest gap of all is in the evaluation of policies, programs and teaching practices in Australian schools and ECEC services to identify what works best, for whom and in what circumstances.

Without improving and applying evidence to policy making and teaching in schools and classrooms, there is a substantial risk that increased resourcing of schools will continue to deliver disappointing outcomes.

As long as current bureaucracies are the determiners of what constitutes evidence based practice and what information will be disseminated, teachers and students will continue to be short changed. Program implementation must reflect best available research rather than hand picked research that is limited to the view of self-professed 'experts' who have little or no understanding of research and who deliberately ignore research that is inconsistent with their own philosophy of learning.

The proposed institution must establish clear guidelines as to what constitutes acceptable research. Education bureaucrats and school principals should be held accountable for decisions they make regarding programs and practices that operate in schools and for the information that they disseminate to the community.

The Australian, state and territory governments must take a shared and cooperative approach to developing a high-quality and relevant Australian education evidence base. There are already effective arrangements for monitoring and performance reporting. With respect to implementing the bottom-up capability, governments should:

- put in place a new Education Agreement (building on previous agreements) that defines the objectives of, and framework for, commissioning and applying evaluative research about what works best
- assign an institution to be responsible for the implementation of the evaluative research framework, which is accountable to, and funded by, all governments
- specify the assigned institution's governance arrangements, functions and operations.

I challenge the statement that there are already effective arrangements for monitoring performance and reporting. If this were really true, how can it be that billions of dollars have been poured into literacy and numeracy programs with little positive result? As long as it is left up to state and territory education departments to nominate 'experts' to sit on committees, provide feedback and make recommendations it is unlikely that anything much will change. Research will be limited to the theoretical perspectives of 'experts' who support their own agenda rather than an agenda of enquiry and evidence.

Research has found that only a small share (typically about 20 per cent) of variation in individual student outcomes is explained by differences between schools. The majority (about 80 per cent) is explained by differences between students within schools. Furthermore, there is a substantial body of evidence suggesting that teachers have the greatest impact on student performance outside of students' own characteristics, and that directing attention to higher quality teaching can have large positive effects on outcomes across the board. All of this suggests that looking within

the classroom, particularly at teaching practices, can be more effective at providing insights into how to improve education outcomes across schools and students. (Page 7)

Throughout multimillion, dollar initiatives such as National Partnerships, there have been insufficient checks and balances to ensure that programs selected by state and territory education departments reflect ‘best evidence’ or indeed are supported by research. The proposal for an institution that will take responsibility for the implementation of an evaluative framework is encouraging, but the effectiveness of any such institution will be determined by the level of freedom it has to appoint members outside those recommended by existing education bureaucracies and the degree to which state and territories are held accountable for programs and initiatives they roll out.

Allowing education bureaucracies to control which research is conducted in government schools and which research reports are made available has served to limit the scope of education research and to keep best evidence teaching practices out of many of our schools.

Having an independent institution determine the worthiness of specific research projects has the potential to profoundly influence both teacher knowledge and student outcomes. Approval processes for professional learning must be closely aligned with the work of the proposed institution. It is unacceptable that teachers are required to devote 100 hours over 5 years to professional learning that does not necessarily reflect evidence-based practice and that in many instances provides teachers with misinformation.

Data quality issues should be considered

Many education data collections have characteristics that might be construed as quality issues (for example, timeliness of release or the accuracy with which concepts are measured), but not all quality issues should, or can, be addressed. Any decision about whether to address a data quality issue should be guided by the following considerations.

- Is there a need to improve the quality of data so it is fit for purpose? The case for addressing a data quality issue is strongest if the data are not fit for the purpose for which they are collected.
- If there is a case to improve data quality, is improvement feasible? Data collectors sometimes have little control over the data provided to them. Parent-reported data on education and occupation collected by schools, for example, are likely to contain many gaps and errors, but there is little that schools can do to address this.
- Could the desired data be obtained using a different approach? Data linkage or new fit-for-purpose collections might be a more effective and efficient way of addressing an issue.
- Would there be a net benefit in improving data quality? Improving data quality is likely to impose costs on those who provide, collect and manage data. The benefits of improving data quality — for example, opportunities for valuable research that would not otherwise be possible — must outweigh these costs.

Yes there is a need to improve data quality. Data collected against current continuums of learning are not fit for the purpose for which they are collected (i.e. not fit for monitoring progress and not fit for program evaluation)

Yes improvement is feasible. Objective measures of core skills are entirely possible.

Yes a different approach is needed

Yes there would be net benefits in improving data quality. At both state and federal levels, billions of dollars have been allocated to improve the learning outcomes of students with little result. Clearly collecting data that is better able to inform teaching practice would be beneficial.

Additional national collections are needed and steps are in train

Additional data need to be collected to support the monitoring of progress against Australia's education objectives, including:

- national measures of student achievement in Year 1, which would facilitate value-added analysis and shed light on the impact of early achievement on later outcomes
- measures of students' non-cognitive capabilities and wellbeing, which would reveal progress in the development of students' social and emotional skills
- more appropriate measures of outcomes for students with disability.

Measuring/reporting Year 1 achievement against the draft *Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions* (or similar frameworks) is not capable of providing teachers, schools, systems or governments with the information they need for effective program planning or evaluation and/or policy development. The introduction of national measures of student achievement in Year 1 would provide an opportunity to implement valid measures of student achievement such as the UK Phonics check.

Yes, valid measures of student achievement for students with disability are required. Measuring achievement of these students against the draft *Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions* (or similar frameworks) is not capable of providing teachers, schools, systems or governments with the information they need for effective program planning or evaluation and/or policy development for students with disability. Neither NAPLAN nor the draft progressions provide indicators of student learning for this population. Data collected through the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) are insufficient for monitoring progress and for program evaluation.

What works best to improve outcomes?

Whether a relationship is causal can then be tested using appropriate, high-quality, research techniques. The gold standard for these techniques is meta analyses of randomised controlled trials and individual trials. Such approaches are the norm in health research, but they are seldom used in Australian education research.

Research effort needs to be focused on how evidence can most effectively be translated into changes in practice in Australia. Better understanding of what works best to improve research impact will likely have widespread implications for the way

researchers communicate their findings, educators are trained, the professional development of educators during their careers, and how education policy is designed. It will also help ensure that spending on both education and education research is cost-effective and efficient.

As long as select education bureaucrats control which research is conducted in government schools and what information is disseminated, research efforts will be severely hampered. Current practices actually serve to keep best evidence practices and well-designed research out of Australian schools. A flow on effect of this is that many professional development programs reflect the views of a few bureaucrats and their preferred 'experts' rather than the full extent of current research evidence. Any move that increases adoption of research-based practices in our schools will surely benefit the nation.