

Learning the hard lessons of failed experimentation

- [TheAustralian](#)
- 12:00AM October 19, 2013
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DISMAYED by their children's indifferent literacy and numeracy skills and limited historical, geographical and scientific knowledge, many parents will not be surprised by today's revelation that a doubling of education funding over the past 20 years has not improved education standards. As national education correspondent Justine Ferrari writes, while school funding has doubled in real terms since 1995 to \$40 billion a year, Australian students' results in international and national tests have flatlined or fallen. Yet, despite the failure of smaller class sizes, student laptops and better buildings to improve student achievement, educators and politicians continue investing in them year after year. Working with his state colleagues and the non-government sector, Education Minister Christopher Pyne has no alternative but to pursue a sharp break from current patterns.

For an insider's view of the malaise that has progressively sucked quality, rigour, purpose and discipline from many schools, readers will relate to the insights of Michael Hewitson, an experienced maths/science teacher and former principal from South Australia, whose book *How Will our Children Learn?* (Connor Court) is reported in *Inquirer* today by associate editor Chris Kenny. It speaks volumes that Trinity College, a low-fee school founded by Hewitson in 1985 at Gawler, a dusty, working-class community north of Adelaide, grew into one of Australia's largest and most in-demand schools, with 3500 students within 15 years. After it started with only the most basic facilities, much of its development occurred with just 65 per cent of the money, per child, of a state school.

The issues on which Mr Hewitson focuses in his book provide a useful guide for education reform. He covered the importance of parental choice in education, the advantages of state schools being allowed greater independence and reporting to local school boards or councils rather than government bureaucracies, school governance, student discipline, teacher quality and commitment, streaming of students according to ability in some subjects and the importance of making the core curriculum - English, spelling, grammar and writing, number skills and maths - a priority. Like other experienced educators, Mr Hewitson also advocated extending the school day to cater for cultural and sporting activities. Nor should the anecdotal evidence in the book about the value of phonics in teaching reading, even to the most disadvantaged students, be overlooked. Unfortunately, although the benefits of phonics, in tandem with vocabulary work, comprehension and storytelling, have been proven repeatedly in empirical studies, the "whole language" system of teaching reading still prevails in many schools and university teaching programs. Importantly for students from less affluent backgrounds, Mr Hewitson's experience in resolving difficult disciplinary issues, at Trinity and as a young teacher with classes of 45 students at Whyalla, reflected the findings of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development research reported last week. Like the OECD number crunchers who surveyed the impact of rowdy classrooms on student achievement around the world, Trinity College parents, students and teachers found well-managed classrooms raised students' opportunities by boosting their chances of gaining access to their preferred tertiary courses.

After the inherent wastage of the \$16bn school building program and an upsurge of recurrent funding under the Howard, Rudd and Gillard governments to little avail, the national interest demands Mr Pyne, his state counterparts and universities in charge of teacher education move on from the flawed education theories that have shortchanged two generations of Australian students. Poor outcomes tend to hurt disadvantaged students more. But it is also a serious concern the achievements of the top 25 per cent of students appear to have stagnated, a trend pinpointed in a recent study of 37,000 students from all sectors in Victoria and in international testing.

Some states have already freed up many schools from centralised departmental control and allow principals autonomy in hiring and firing staff and setting their spending priorities. Injecting intellectual rigour and balance and removing postmodern and pop-cultural fads from the curriculum is also essential. As the Gonski funding process unfolds, however, the main challenge for the commonwealth and states is to lift the status and expertise of the teaching profession, starting with academic entry standards for school leavers aspiring to teach. Effective in-service programs for teachers to improve classroom practices and more effective leadership training for principals would also have a direct bearing on school performances. Teaching quality is the main focus of high-performing East Asian school systems, and its value was underlined by Mr Hewitson in his account of a band of dedicated teachers.

Parents know good schools or bad schools when they find them, regardless of sector, postcode, class sizes or facilities. Business as usual, with its prevailing mediocrity, is no longer acceptable. Until teachers' unions and some academics show a more mature understanding of the teaching profession and the needs of students, their continuing demands for smaller classes and more funding will render them irrelevant in one of Australia's most important social debates.