

# From the President

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## Why haven't student outcomes improved across Australia over the last decade or more?

As this is our first issue of AEL in 2013, I take this opportunity to belatedly acknowledge the start of the new school year and to wish all of our many readers every success in your work as you progress through the year ahead.

Unfortunately, however, it would seem that based on national statistics and an examination of the data over the past decade, for many teachers, schools and jurisdictions improved performance may continue to prove elusive.

From my perspective, as someone who is in schools of all types on a regular basis, our stalled national performance is not because teachers and school leaders are not working hard enough nor is it because we don't know what to do. I also doubt that it is the quality of capital investment that is holding us back, although building better schools and fixing the old ones wouldn't hurt a bit! From a brief scan across the curriculum developed in each state and territory that is now being overlaid by the Australian Curriculum, I doubt that this is the root of our problems. So what could be holding us back?

First, I must acknowledge that there are amazing stories of school transformations across the country where outcomes have been turned around, often in challenging locations and without the investment of significant resources above and beyond the normal allocation. So noting that my space in this column is limited let me get to the point I want to make...

Are we looking at the right levers from a national point of view in order to systemically improve educational outcomes across Australia? If we continue to improve schools one at a time and hope that lighthouse transformations in pockets of the country will provide a pathway based on diffused best practice then I fear we will be writing articles like this for many more decades.

We need to understand what it will take for Australia to move up the rankings of PISA, TIMMS or PIRLS. It will be statistically improbable to elevate ourselves to top tier performance if we focus only on underperforming schools and students in low social economic areas. The "needle" can't move far enough across the dial for the country as a whole to change its performance trajectory unless every Government, Catholic and Independent school improves its performance.

Our problem needs to be well understood; it is just as much about high performing and "coasting" schools ensuring that all students reach their potential as it is about those at the bottom of those league tables that newspapers construct in some of our less enlightened jurisdictions.

Second, instead of the usual and well-worn suggestions of trying to emulate the practices of East Asian countries or attempting to turn Australia into Finland, where are the levers that may not have been prominent in the Australian improvement discussion over the past decade that may be part of the required solution? Let me point out three areas that we could focus on that may not have been prominent until now in debates around possible solutions:

- Pre-service teacher education
- School leadership preparation
- Teacher performance management.

Hattie (2005) has demonstrated through his meta-research that the quality of the teacher is the dominant influence on a student's learning. To that end, we must take a much greater and demanding interest in the course construction, delivery and curriculum of teacher preparation programs. I would argue that we have left this up to universities for too long to determine what is best for school preparation. As employers we need more influence and we must be clear about our expectations of the capabilities required for a 21st Century classroom-ready graduate.

In an era of greater autonomy and a constrained resource base, we also need to be more instructive in terms of school leadership succession planning. Instead of leaving leadership development to chance and the domain of those seeking the position, we must be more proactive and comprehensive in terms of ensuring that every leader in a school is fully prepared and able to deal with the contemporary complexities to create a culture of improvement in the modern context. This means early identification of prospective high performing leaders and integrated pathways to fully prepare candidates for the role ahead.

Third, and most important, we need to manage teacher performance in every classroom just as we would for elite performers in any endeavour. Can you imagine any other worker, sports person, musician or dancer who is not coached based upon their ability to perform? Teachers, for the most part, don't have one-on-one support to improve based on their in class performance. How many teachers receive regular and constructive feedback based on observations and collaboration in situ as they teach?

The identification of development areas with resources provided to improve performance is not the norm in teaching but is the essential aspect of performance development outside the profession. For example those entering retail are trained, observed, measured against transparent outcomes (turnover) and supported to improve. Teacher performance management, in my view, is mostly unsophisticated, unrealistic and limited in terms of being focused on bringing out the best in everyone. We can do better.

It is time to focus on what more we can do to help teachers, to create the space, professionalism and support required for them to be the best they can be. The current environment lays bare an expectation for teachers to improve but the scaffolding and policy environment are not in place to universally bring about the whole-scale change required. Teacher performance can no longer be left to chance.

If you would like to continue the discussion about any aspect of this article, I am keen to receive your comments on my blog ([drjimwatterson.com](http://drjimwatterson.com)), where this article has also been posted.

Until next time.