OECD report shows inequity in Australian school resourcing, class sizes above average



A new OECD report has shown Australian teachers have bigger classes and more teaching hours than the OECD average and our school resourcing is less equitable than other nations.

The OECD's annual "Education at a Glance" report found that in 2013 average class sizes in Australian primary schools were 24 students, compared with an OECD average of 21, while secondary schools averaged 24 students compared to the OECD average of 23.

Australian government spending on public schools in 2012 was 3.3% of GDP, at the OECD average, with overall funding to primary schools slightly below the OECD average.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said that the report, which covered the period before Gonski funding started, reinforced the Gonski Review's recommendations for needs-based funding of Australian schools.

"The idea that Australian schools are over-resourced is a myth. The evidence shows that our total spending on schools is around the OECD average," Ms Haythorpe said.

"But we have a far higher proportion of private spending on schools than similar countries. This has led to big differences in resources between schools and reduced equity in the system in the lead up to Gonski funding.

"We know that from 2009 to 2014 government funding to private schools increased at twice the rate of public schools – even though the public system had higher student need."

"This report is more evidence that needs-based funding was necessary to address this bias and reduce achievement gaps between schools.

"Australian teachers are doing more face-to-face teaching than the OECD average, and teaching bigger classes, because our school system is under-resourced.

"Putting extra resources into schools is the best way to ensure that all students get the support and attention they need in the classroom, regardless of which school they attend."

Key facts:

- Australia's spending per student on primary schools in 2013 was $US 8,289. This is below the OECD average of $US 8,412 (this includes public and private spending).
- Australia's overall government spending on public schools and public VET was 3.4% of GDP, the same as the OECD average.
- The percentage of schools funding provided by governments dropped from 83.7% in 2000 to 82.0% in 2012 (far lower than the OECD average of 91%).
- In 2014 Australia had higher than average class sizes for Primary Schools – 24 students versus OECD average of 21. Average class sizes for lower Secondary Schools were 24, above the OECD average of 23.
- Australian teachers taught for more hours than the OECD average: Australian primary school teachers taught 872 hours per year versus the OECD average of 776, Lower Secondary 812 versus 694, Upper Secondary 804 versus 644.
- Early Childhood Education is poorly funded: with Australia spending just 0.5% of GDP on it compared to the OECD average of 0.8%.

The OECD report links high-quality, accessible education to employment and notes that: *It is critically important to address inequalities in education opportunities in order to improve social mobility and socio-economic outcomes, and to promote inclusive growth through a broadened pool of candidates for high-skilled jobs.*

Research by education economist Adam Rorris backs this argument and says that Australia would save $60 billion in unemployment benefits by 2070 and collect an extra $12.2 billion in tax revenues – if all students left school with the basic skills needed for work.

Ms Haythorpe said schools which had already received Gonski funding were using it to make a positive difference for their students.

"Students are benefiting from reduced class sizes, extra literacy and numeracy programs, support staff like speech therapists or more one-on-one support to students. All of these things are lifting results."

"Malcolm Turnbull's plan to scrap Gonski funding after 2017 means that many schools will never receive the resources they need to give all their students the chance to reach their potential.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026