Review says Australian schools fall short on quality and equity

By Jenny Gore,
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The Productivity Commission has just released a review of school standards in Australia. It finds we “persistently fall short” when it comes to providing a high quality and equitable education for all students.

Coming in at 253 pages, there is a lot to read. And a lot we already know.

But this report comes at a crucial time for Australian education. Outcomes are slipping, despite repeated attempts to improve them. And teacher shortages mean we need urgent measures as well as long-term changes.

Why do we have this review?

In April this year, former Treasurer Josh Frydenberg asked the Productivity Commission to review the National School Reform Agreement. This sets out nationally agreed initiatives for the next five years between the federal government, states and territories.

It is focused on three main areas: supporting students, supporting teaching and improving the data we have on schools in Australia. The next agreement is due to be signed in late 2023.

Last month, the commission released its interim findings ahead of the final report to be delivered in December, when education ministers will begin hashing out a new agreement for the next five years.

What’s in the report?

There is little in this report we have not seen before. But the interim report certainly raises many key issues.

The report found too many students are falling behind. Every year, between five and nine per cent of Australian students do not meet year-level expectations in literacy or numeracy.

Student well-being is of significant concern, with one in five young people aged 11-17 reporting high levels of psychological distress, even before the pandemic.

Despite talk about improving results for Aboriginal students and those in rural and remote areas, and students with disabilities, it says, “governments are yet to demonstrate results in improving equity”.

It calls for new strategies, developed with students, parents and communities, to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We already know teacher shortages
are an issue – and state and federal governments are working separately on a new workforce plan for teachers, also due in December.

Additionally, the report found teachers are overworked with “low-value tasks” and are burned out. Work-life balance and well-being were the key reasons why teachers wanted to leave the profession.

What can we do?

There are no quick or easy fixes. But here are three practical solutions government can adopt now to improve the school system for teachers and students.

1. Quality teaching rounds

The commission’s report says quality teaching is key to improving student outcomes. It recommends teachers are given

more time for planning and professional development.

The report also highlighted my work with colleagues on “quality teaching rounds” professional development. This approach brings teachers together to learn from each other, improve their teaching and lift student outcomes.

It is centred on three big ideas: a deep understanding of important knowledge, positive classrooms that boost learning and connecting learning to students’ lives and the wider world.

Our evidence shows this approach has positive effects on teaching quality, teacher morale and student achievement, with greater impact in disadvantaged schools.

This shows clear potential to narrow equity gaps and genuinely support teachers.

2. Support throughout teaching careers

The report acknowledges that school leadership roles are becoming more complex and demanding. It calls for the creation of a specific stream for aspiring school leaders.

This would see potential principals and other leaders (such as year-level and subject leaders) identified early in their careers and given specific support.

We also need a clear pathway from teaching degrees at university to induction in schools and ongoing development throughout teachers’ careers.

This would mean teachers and school leaders are better equipped to do their jobs – and want to stay in the profession.

3. More funding for research

The report highlights the need for more evidence about what is working and what is not. It points out that previously agreed reforms for national data systems have stalled.

More than just creating systems of data, true reform requires rigorous research into all aspects of education.

Yet education does not receive the research dollars it deserves. For example, in the most recent round of the Australian Research Council’s discovery project grants, education received less than one per cent of approved funds – some A$2.5 million of the A$258 million allocated.

If the government wants change, investing in educational research must be part of the next agreement.

What happens now?

Education in Australia has a history of reviews, reports, plans and great intentions.

But we are constantly let down by implementation of recommendations. Partly it’s due to organisational complexity.

Not only do the federal and state governments have different responsibilities in education, but there is a gap between policy and what happens on

the ground in classrooms.

But with a new government and universal attention to the problem of teacher shortages, there is a rare opportunity now for Australian schools.

We have a chance to make changes that genuinely support teachers and lift student outcomes.

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