

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION DIGEST

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INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

OECD's PISA survey shows some countries making significant gains in learning outcomes

4 December 2007

OECD's latest PISA survey of the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds shows that some countries have seen significant improvements in student performance since 2000. Korea further increased its strong reading performance between 2000 and 2006 by 31 score points, the equivalent of almost a school year, mainly by raising the proportion of top-performers. Poland increased its reading performance by 29 score points over the same period. Mexico and Greece saw significant improvements in mathematics performance between 2003 and 2006.

However, across the OECD area as a whole learning outcomes have generally remained flat, while expenditure on education in OECD countries rose by an average of 39% between 1995 and 2004.

The survey also revealed widespread pessimism among secondary school students about environmental challenges and limited enthusiasm for scientific careers.

Based on tests carried out among 400,000 students in 57 countries in 2006, the latest PISA survey focuses particularly on students' abilities in comprehending and tackling scientific problems. It also provides an update on performance in reading and mathematics compared with surveys in 2000 and 2003.

Launching the report at a press conference in Tokyo, OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría emphasized the importance of education for the development of people and society. "Effective and innovative education policies open enormous opportunities for individuals", he said. "They also underpin healthy and vibrant economies." In the highly competitive globalised economy of today, quality education is one of the most valuable assets that a society and an individual can have." ([read his speech](#))

While most students polled said they were motivated to learn science, only a minority aspired to a career involving science: 72% said it was important for them to do well in science; 67% enjoyed acquiring new knowledge in science; 56% said science was useful for further studies; but only 37% said they would like to work in a career involving science and 21% said they would like to spend their life doing advanced science.

At a time when scientific and technological know-how is helping to drive growth in advanced economies, the results of PISA 2006 reveal wide variations in skills levels. Student attitudes to science will be crucial to countries' economic potential in tomorrow's world, and PISA 2006 gives a detailed picture of how well students around the world are prepared for the challenges of a knowledge society.

The top performer in science in PISA 2006 was Finland, followed by Hong Kong-China, Canada, Chinese Taipei, Estonia, Japan and New Zealand. Australia, the Netherlands, Korea, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium and Ireland, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Macao-China also scored above OECD average.

Read more at

http://www.oecd.org/document/2/0,3343,en_32252351_32236191_39718850_1_1_1_1,00.html

See the UK powerpoint presentation at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/1/39727764.ppt>

How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top

McKinsey & Company, September 2007

A new report prepared by international consultants McKinsey & Company seeks to identify and explore the factors which they consider underpin and drive the effective performance and achievements of recognised high-performing schooling systems across the globe.

For this purpose, they focus centrally on those systems which have scored well in the PISA results - together with some systems that have shown considerable improvements; and others where governments are actively moving to drive positive changes.

This is an important and challenging report, and one that repays careful study in countries like Australia, where there has been a good deal of anguish expressed at a drop in performance rating in this round of PISA. The report carefully points out that the evidence shows that there are some levers for change that are more strategically important and productive than some others: and these should provide the focus of action.

Two small caveats. The presentation of the report makes it more difficult to read than the high quality of the content deserves. But do not be put off by that - the content is well worth your attention. The other is that it quite consciously makes no references to such factors as beneficial effects of effective family-school and community partnership engagement - which was flagged in Prof Geoff Masters' 2004 study of the factors evident in effective schools in Australia. While specifically excluded from the scope of this study, we should not lose sight of this as a positive contextual factor, as illustrated in a range of highly credible and persuasive research across the world.

Executive Summary of the Report

Education reform is top of the agenda of almost every country in the world. Yet despite massive increases in spending (last year the world's governments spent \$2 trillion on education) and ambitious attempts at reform, the performance of many school systems has barely improved in decades.

This is all the more surprising because there are wide variations in the quality of education. For instance, in international assessments, less than 1% of African and Middle Eastern children perform at or above the Singaporean average. Nor is this solely the result of the level of investment. Singapore, one of the world's top performers, spends less on primary education than do 27 of the 30 countries of the OECD.

Changing what happens in the hearts and minds of millions of children - the main charge of any school system - is no simple task. That some do so successfully while others do not is indisputable. So why is it that some school systems consistently perform better and improve faster than others?

There are many different ways to improve a school system, and the complexity of this task and the uncertainty about outcomes is rightly reflected in the international debate about how this should best be done. To find out why some schools succeed where others do not, we studied twenty-five of the world's school systems, including ten of the top performers. We examined what these high performing school systems have in common and what tools they use to improve student outcomes.

The experience of these top school systems suggests that three things matter most:

- Getting the right people to become teachers
- Developing them into effective instructors
- Ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

These systems demonstrate that the best practice for achieving these three things work irrespective of the culture in which they are applied. They demonstrate that substantial improvement in outcomes is possible in a short period of time and that applying these best practices universally could have enormous impact in improving failing school systems, wherever they might be located.

Read more at

http://www.mckinsey.com/client/service/socialsector/resources/pdf/Worlds_School_Systems_Final.pdf

COMMENT

PISA Study Shows the Need for a Real Education Revolution

Save Our Schools (SOS), a public education advocacy group, has called on the Rudd Government to reduce the achievement gap in education outcomes in Australia. SOS spokesman, Trevor Cobbold, said today that glaring inequities revealed by the PISA 2006 study shows the need for a real revolution in education in Australia.

"While Australia remains in the top league of countries, education policy and funding in needs a thorough overhaul to address ongoing education disadvantage.

"The achievement gaps between rich and poor and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous are the major problems facing Australia's education system. It is unacceptable that such gaps exist in an egalitarian country committed to a 'fair go' for all.

"The PISA 2006 report shows that 15 year-old students from low socio-economic status (SES) families are about two and a half years behind their high SES counterparts. A similar gap exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These are enormous achievement gaps, despite some slight improvements since 2003.

- "The report shows that:
22-23 per cent of students in the lowest SES group and 38-40 per cent of Indigenous students did not achieve adequate proficiency in reading, mathematics and science compared to only 5 per cent of the highest SES group.
- Only 4-6 per cent of students in the lowest SES group and 2-4 per cent of Indigenous students achieved the highest proficiency level in reading, mathematics and science compared with 21, 29 and 26 per cent respectively of students in the highest SES group.

"As the report states: This gap places an unacceptable proportion of 15-year-old students at serious risk of not achieving levels sufficient for them to participate fully in the 21st century work force and to contribute to Australia as productive citizens. [p.246]

Read whole Release on SOS site at <http://soscanberra.com/media-releases/media-release-5-december-2007-pisa-study-shows-the-need-for-a-real-education-revolution>

... And Market Dogma Won't Fix Education

Trevor Cobbold is a respected independent consultant and research analyst in education and spokesperson for the SOS advocacy group on the needs of schooling

A recent article by Henry Ergas, head of the Asia-Pacific Division of CRA International, an international consultancy firm, vigorously defends the Howard Government's record on education and other issues (Australian Financial Review, 30 November 2007). Ergas supports the increasing privatization of school education under the Howard Government and says that the Government transformed education by providing greater choice for consumers.

That article responds to criticism of the Howard Government that the growth in Commonwealth funding for private schools has supported them to skim off affluent, easy-to-educate students and reduce diversity in public schools.

It makes the following points:

- government schools continue to receive far greater public funding than private schools;
- students are socially segregated in government schools because of residential zoning;
- private schools also serve children from less affluent families; and
- competition from private schools increases the quality of public schools.

Each of these defences is flawed.

The school expenditure defence essentially misses the point about the impact of increased subsidies for private schools and is misleading in its comparison of government and private school expenditure.

The argument that there is significant social segregation in government schools because of residential segregation ignores the point that the shift of more and more middle and higher income families to private schools has exacerbated social segregation in government schools.

While private schools do have students from low income families, the fact is that these students comprise a much higher proportion of government school enrolments than in either Catholic or Independent schools. Further, students from low income families are a declining proportion of private school enrolments and an increasing proportion of government school enrolments.

The fourth defence is based on selective citation of evidence. The weight of international research evidence is that competition from private schools has little to no effect on student achievement in government schools. The evidence on the impact of charter schools in the United States on student achievement in other government schools is mixed.

Contrary to the assertions of Ergas, the international research evidence tends to give greater support to the critics of the Howard Government's policies.

Read more at <http://www.acsso.org.au/cobbold0711.pdf>

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EDUCATION NATION

A Nation of Sloths: Walks elude one in five Aussies

Monday Dec 10 12:01 AEDT

Nearly half of all Australians are not active enough to maintain good health, according to a survey showing one in five don't even manage one ten-minute walk a week.

The national study shows the slothful side of Australia, with 16 per cent of those interviewed judged to be "completely sedentary".

Two-thirds did not meet recommended guidelines for moderate intensity physical activity in the last week.

And 47 per cent were not sufficiently active for good health, according to the survey of almost 1,500 adults.

The Sport Medicine Australia researchers behind the project said it was most alarming that 19 per cent, or almost one in five, failed to walk even 10 minutes continuously in one week.

Most of those questioned blamed their inactivity on long working hours, increasingly lengthy commute times and lack of recreational facilities in the workplace.

Professor Wendy Brown from the University of Queensland said the research showed a serious need to incorporate the workplace into the fight against the obesity epidemic.

"And physical activity has many benefits other than the prevention of obesity," said Prof Brown, Sports Medicine Australia's public health spokeswoman.

"We really need to start looking at ways of making it easier for workers to fit physical activity into their day.

"This is an issue which impacts various levels of government policy including transport, roads and housing."

She suggested turning boardroom talks into "walking meetings".

"It may not be possible for large meetings with numerous people, but instead of sitting down one on one with someone, why not get outside and walk while you talk," Prof Brown.

Current guidelines advise 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity, like brisk walking, a day.

The survey, funded by Pfizer Australia, found 62 per cent believed the amount of time spent at work limits their physical activity.

And 72 per cent reported no recreation options or support facilities such as showers to encourage physical activity in the office.

About half also wrongly thought you must puff, pant and sweat to get health benefits from physical activity.

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Climate: A Need Not for Despair but for Informed Action

George Monbiot, The Guardian

Outdated figures have been hiding the full extent of climate change. But I am still advocating action, and not despair

When you warn people about the dangers of climate change, they call you a saint. When you explain what needs to be done to stop it, they call you a communist. Let me show you why.

There is now a broad scientific consensus that we need to prevent temperatures from rising by more than 2 degrees above their pre-industrial level. Beyond that point, the Greenland ice sheet could go into irreversible meltdown, some ecosystems collapse, billions suffer from water stress and droughts start to threaten global food supplies.

The British Government proposes to cut carbon emissions in Britain by 60 per cent by 2050. This target is based on a report published in 2000. That report was based on an assessment published in 1995, which drew on scientific papers published a few years earlier. Britain's policy, in other words, is based on papers some 15 years old. This target, which is one of the toughest on earth, bears no relation to current science.

Over the past fortnight, both British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his adviser, Sir Nicholas Stern, have proposed raising the cut to 80 per cent. Where did this figure come from? The last G8 summit adopted the aim of a global cut of 50per cent by 2050, which means that 80 per cent would be roughly Britain's fair share. But the G8's target isn't based on current science either.

In the new summary published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, you will find a table that links different cuts to likely temperatures. It suggests that to prevent global warming from

eventually exceeding 2 degrees, by 2050 the world will need to cut its emissions to roughly 15 per cent of the volume in 2000.

I looked up the global figures for carbon dioxide production in 2000 and divided it by the current population. This gives a baseline figure of 3.58 tonnes of CO2 a person. An 85 per cent cut means that (if the population remains constant) the global output for each person should be reduced to 0.537 tonnes by 2050. Britain currently produces 9.6 tonnes a head and the United States 23.6 tonnes. Reducing these figures to 0.537 means a 94.4 per cent cut in Britain and a 97.7 per cent cut in the US.

But the world population will rise in the same period. If we assume a population of nine billion, the cuts rise to 95.9 per cent in Britain and 98.3 per cent in the US.

Read more at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,2221497,00.html>

The Biggest Challenge we Face as a Nation

Don Henry, Australian Conservation Foundation

The response from right across Australia to our Climate Change Action Survey has been absolutely fantastic. One thing is already clear – awareness of dangerous climate change has now spread to almost every community – and people are desperate to see a decisive response from our government.

The fact is, climate change is the biggest challenge we face as a nation. Our survey reveals that more and more people know this and would be only too happy to make the lifestyle changes necessary and to urge our governments to act responsibly.

Individuals feel helpless to affect change, which only serves to further the interests of those who wish to keep things as they are. That is why we set up the “Who on Earth Cares?” campaign – an online project to unite Australians from all walks of life, to provide them with a chance to voice their concerns, and to reveal the true extent of just how deeply we all are about protecting our children from dangerous climate change.

I would be grateful if you could take the next step and visit the campaign website. The address is: <http://www.whoonearthcares.com> By adding your voice, you will once again help to demonstrate to our government that firm action is what voters now expect.

By working together with like-minded individuals nationwide, you are doing a great job as caring Australians to ensure that the environmental legacy we leave our children and our grandchildren is one that we can be truly proud of.

*Don Henry
Executive Director
Australian Conservation Foundation*

Parents urge soft drink companies to stop targeting children

Media Release – Parents Jury 10 December 2007

The Parents Jury’s “Trial by Jury” panel has returned a resounding guilty verdict against Coca-Cola’s marketing campaign that promotes Coca-Cola as the perfect accompaniment to the family dinner. The Trial by Jury panel believes this marketing campaign is seriously undermining the healthy eating messages parents are trying hard to give to their children.

In light of parents’ concerns regarding the promotion and consumption of sugary soft drinks by children, The Parents Jury has joined forces this month with the Global Dump Soft Drinks Campaign.

The international campaign is calling on governments and beverage companies around the world to act on ceasing the marketing of sugary soft drinks to children aged under 16.

The Parents Jury is urging both the Australian Federal and state and territory governments, as well as the beverage industry to help reverse the rapidly escalating childhood obesity trend by banning the marketing of sweetened beverages to children and removing them from all primary and secondary school environments across the country.

The Coca-Cola ad found guilty by the Trial by Jury panel, promotes Coca-Cola as the perfect drink to have with the family meal saying "Meals come alive on the Coca-Cola side of life". The TV ad shows a family sitting down for a meal together with a bottle of Coke as the main drink. (You can view the ad at <http://www.coca-cola.com.au/meals/>)

Justine Hodge of The Parents Jury says the key message the ad is giving to families contradicts the health messages being given out by health officials and governments across the world.

Media enquiries: Simone Fenech, The Parents Jury: (03) 9667 1744 or 0402 448 438, email: simonef@parentsjury.org.au

Read more at <http://www.parentsjury.org.au>

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CONFERENCES & EVENTS

8 February, 2008: Quantitative Analysis of Teaching and Learning Forum, (all day) – run by the Teaching and Learning Unit in conjunction with the Department of Economics at the University of Melbourne. The Forum, one of the few national forums for quantitative research in teaching and learning, is now in its fourth year.

Registration http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/contact_us/register.html

Paper titles are listed: http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/teaching_staff/forum/.

Previous paper titles can be viewed here and copies of previous proceedings can be purchased for \$30. There are no parallel sessions at the Forum and normally around 100+ people attend from 38 universities nationwide. For further information please contact Sonia Borg: sborg@unimelb.edu.au or Dr Martin Davies: wmdavies@unimelb.edu.au

3-6 June 2008: International Conference on Learning

The 15th annual Learning Conference is to be held at the University of Illinois, Chicago, Illinois, USA,. Details at <http://www.LearningConference.com>

26-28 June 2008, Adelaide "Being, Becoming and Belonging"

World Education Forum SA – International Conference

How do we care for and educate children and young people for the world in which they live now and in which we hope they will flourish as citizens of tomorrow?

The World Education Forum, South Australia, thinks that it is time to take stock of the effectiveness of the effort that has been made to date. They urge you to join them and share your expertise and re-examine the values which underpin many of the assumptions that drive modern educational policy.

For more information, go to <http://www.infront.com.au/evt/wef/>

25-27 July 2008: NSW Federation of Parents & Citizens Associations State Conference, Albury NSW. <http://www.pandc.org.au/>

8-9 August 2008: The Education Show. Caulfield Racecourse, Melbourne

The inaugural Education Show in 2007 was a great success, with more than 100 exhibitors, and the 2008 event is shaping up even better; to include seminars on key education issues in the classroom and the school community. For more information: <http://www.educationshow.com.au>

27-29 August 2008: Society for Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) Conference, Melbourne

20-21 October 2008: Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) National Education Conference, Brisbane. <http://www.acsso.org.au>

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RESOURCES

Fundraising Directory - www.fundraisingdirectory.com.au Also: www.fetesandfestivals.com.au

Drug Awareness Website - www.drugawareness.com.au/

Australian Schools Directory - www.australianschoolsdirectory.com.au

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