The OECD has endorsed the thrust of the Gonski report on school funding. It adds weight to the calls for state and territory governments to support the new school funding plan based on the Gonski report.

The *Education Policy Outlook on Australia* published last week, says that the current system of school funding “lacks coherence and transparency”. This was a central finding of the Gonski report.

The report also endorsed the focus of the Gonski report on reducing inequity in education. The OECD says that a key policy challenge facing Australian education is to reduce inequities between students from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. It says that Australia needs to tackle system-level policies such as school choice which hinder equity in education.

The OECD’s endorsement of the Gonski report implicitly rejects the claim of Opposition leader, Tony Abbott, that Australia’s school funding system “is not broken” and not in need of fundamental change. According to Abbott, there is no fundamental problem with the way schools are funded now and the system only needs “fine-tuning”.

In contrast, the OECD report notes that numerous studies show that it is difficult to determine how individual schools are funded in Australia. It says that this lack of transparency prompts concerns about efficiency and equity in education, particularly given the prevalence of private schools compared with other OECD countries.

The report says that evidence shows that government schools are most affected by inequitable funding and they become less attractive to students from upper socio-economic status who move to private schools. With restricted resources, government schools then have a growing share of students needing the most support.

The Policy Outlook notes that Australia is one of the highest PISA performers among OECD countries and has fewer underperforming students than the OECD average and a high proportion of children enrolled in early childhood education. It also says that Australia’s schools have positive learning environments, strong pedagogical leadership and well-prepared teachers, all supported with an effective evaluation and assessment framework.

However, it says that Australia’s overall PISA reading performance has not improved since 2000, and rural and indigenous populations have lower academic performance and less access to tertiary education than the national average. It also notes socio-economic inequities in education.
The report says that Australia’s high education performance can be complemented with further focus on reducing inequities by tackling system-level policies which hinder equity in education, including school choice, support or funding.

It notes that Australia has a high degree of school choice which can contribute to segregation of students. In Australia, about 96% of students attend a school that competes for enrolments with at least one other school. The report says that evidence shows that school choice may undermine equity in the education system by segregating students into schools based on their socio-economic background. It says it is important to ensure that there are mechanisms to mitigate this negative effect.

The report says that the key to raising achievement in Australia’s schools is developing the conditions for school leaders and teachers to succeed. It says that teachers are well-prepared, but more professional development could help them improve the disciplinary climate in the classroom. It notes that Australian teachers have a heavy teaching workload, with more teaching time than in other OECD countries - 868 hours per academic year in primary school compared to the OECD average of 782 hours.

This may contribute to the relatively low rate of participation in professional development by Australian teachers. Most teachers (97%) reported in the OECD’s Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) that they participate in professional development activities, but the average number of days (9) was about half of that reported by teachers in countries participating in TALIS (15).

The report notes that Australian teachers are granted extensive autonomy, but there are few opportunities for professional feedback, and the quality of teacher appraisals can vary widely. It suggests that aligning teaching standards with a competency-based career structure could be beneficial. Teachers would then be held accountable for their practices, and established career pathways could help to define how careers can progress and identify professional development needs. It says that teacher appraisals used to assess and improve performance should remain as they are, but evaluations conducted at schools could be improved and be validated by external inspectors.

The report raises concern about the implications of the growing role of NAPLAN tests in assessing student learning. It says that the current prominence of NAPLAN within the student assessment framework requires particular care about not reducing the importance of teacher-based assessment. It also sees dangers in narrowing the curriculum. It says that care should be taken to ensure that NAPLAN is balanced in its representation of the depth and breadth of intended student learning goals.

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