

Australian schools: Good. Different

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I moved to Sydney from Helsinki five years ago. The first thing you need to figure out when you move to live in a new place with your children is their schooling. What was evident after the first few school visits was that Australian schools and classrooms are very different from those back home. I began asking, why?

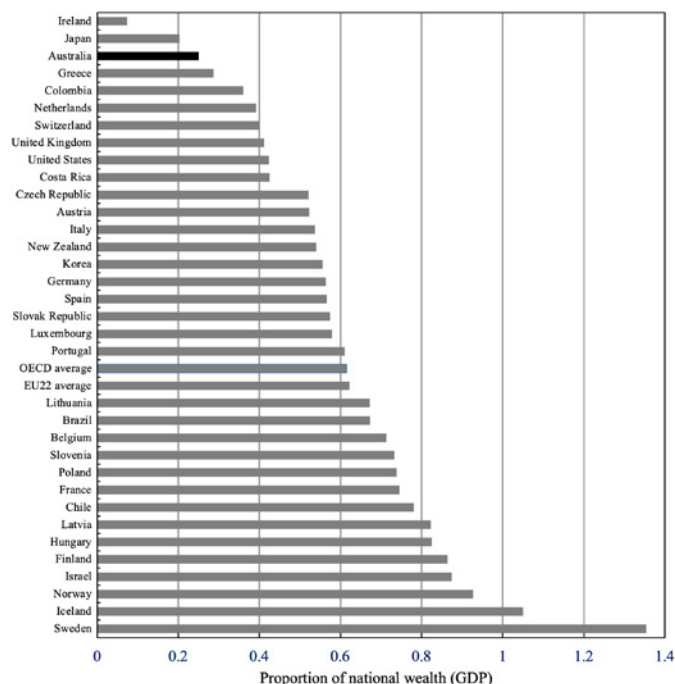
Why do Australian children have so much compulsory instruction in primary and lower secondary school? Why don't teachers teach the same children longer than one year? Why do we allow disadvantage to concentrate in public schools? These questions deal with some of the unique aspects of Australian schools that I will describe in this article. But my first question is: Why don't we start building a stronger start for all children by investing more in education and wellbeing in the early years?

An unfair start

Nordic countries' progressive legislations and public policies guarantee early childhood education and care to every child. Social benefits that allow a child's parents to enjoy extended parental leave mean that children normally stay home longer than in Australia, for example, typically until they are two or three years old. The cost of early childhood education and care to parents is heavily publicly subsidised, ranging from 90 per cent to totally free of charge depending on the socio-economic situation of parents.

The parent gap fee, or private sources paying for early childhood education and care services in Australia, is almost twice the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average proportion of private expenditure. This cost is going up for many parents creating barriers to equitable access to high quality pre-primary education (OECD, 2023c). Expenditure on all early childhood education and care settings accounts for an average of 0.9% of GDP across OECD countries, of which two-thirds are allocated to pre-primary education. In Australia, less than 0.3% of GDP was spent on pre-primary education in 2019 as shown in Figure 1 (OECD, 2021). The cost of having children in high quality early childhood education in Australia is too high. We experienced this first-hand after settling in Sydney.

Figure 1: Proportion of National Wealth (GDP) Invested in Early Childhood Education and Care in OECD Countries



OECD Education Database (<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/117c4974-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/117c4974-en>). In the public domain.

I wonder why we don't take global evidence and advice of the social and economic importance of early childhood education and care more seriously? Investing in early childhood is a cost-effective policy that promises high socio-economic returns. Nobel Economics Prize Laureate James Heckman (2008) found that high-quality early childhood programmes have estimated rates of return of seven dollars for every dollar invested, and social returns up to ten per cent. A prosperous country like Australia could certainly afford investing in giving a good start for all and, consequently, giving many more of our people a fairer go in life.

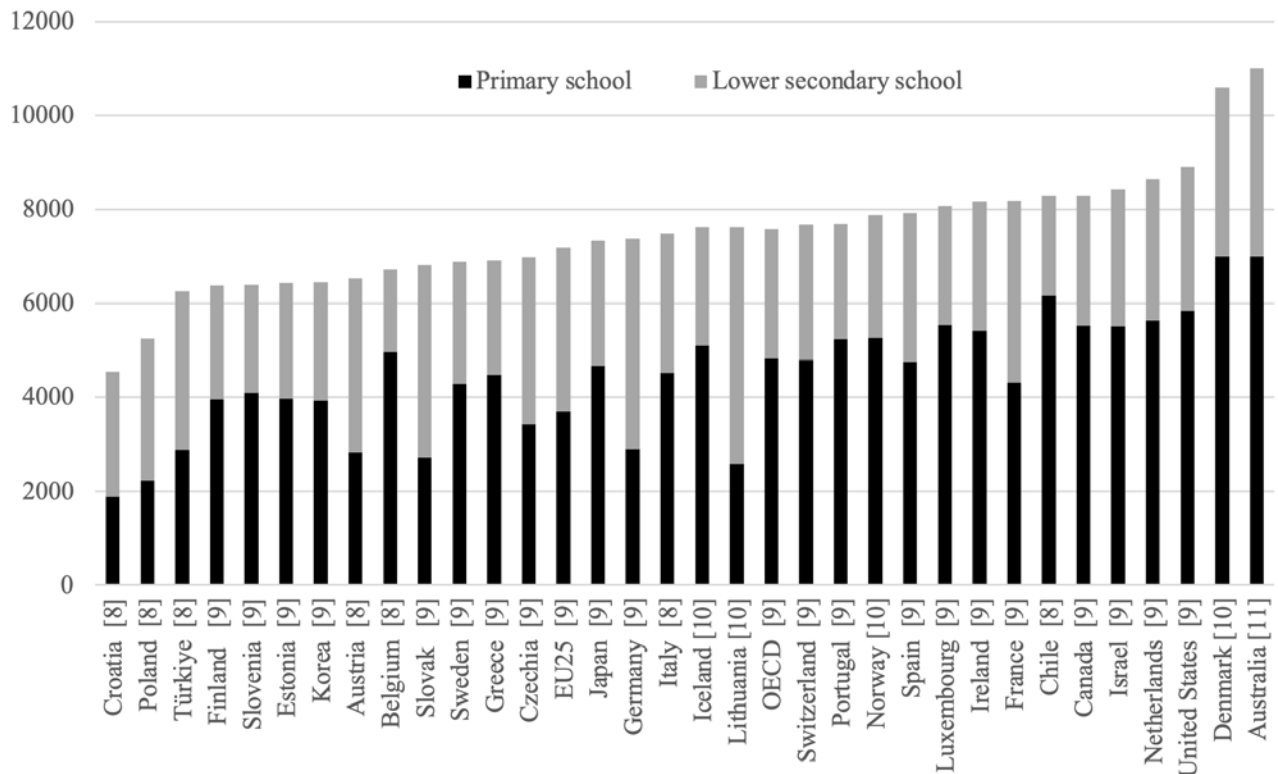
Instruction time in schools

Schools around the world are more similar than they are different. Teaching in schools is based on curricula that are arranged into a distinct hierarchy of subjects. On the top are literacy and numeracy and on the bottom are arts and music. Students study in classrooms with 25 or 30 peers of the same age most often instructed by one teacher. The duration of the school year is between 190 and 200 days, and the length of primary and lower secondary is nine to ten years.

However, there are some interesting differences from country to country that profoundly influence students' school experiences. The most concrete example is the great variability in total compulsory instruction time that students are expected to attend in primary and lower secondary schools (years 1 to 9 or 10) in different countries. In Australia, according to OECD (2023b) data, the duration of primary and lower secondary education is 11 years, equivalent to about 11,000 hours of mandatory instruction. The length of the Australian school day is the same for all students throughout these school years. In OECD countries, on average, cumulative compulsory instruction time in primary and secondary education is about 2,200 hours less. In Estonia, Korea, and Finland, for example, students have 3,600 hours less instruction in primary and lower secondary education than their peers in Australia as shown in Figure 2. This is the equivalent of about four full school years of learning.

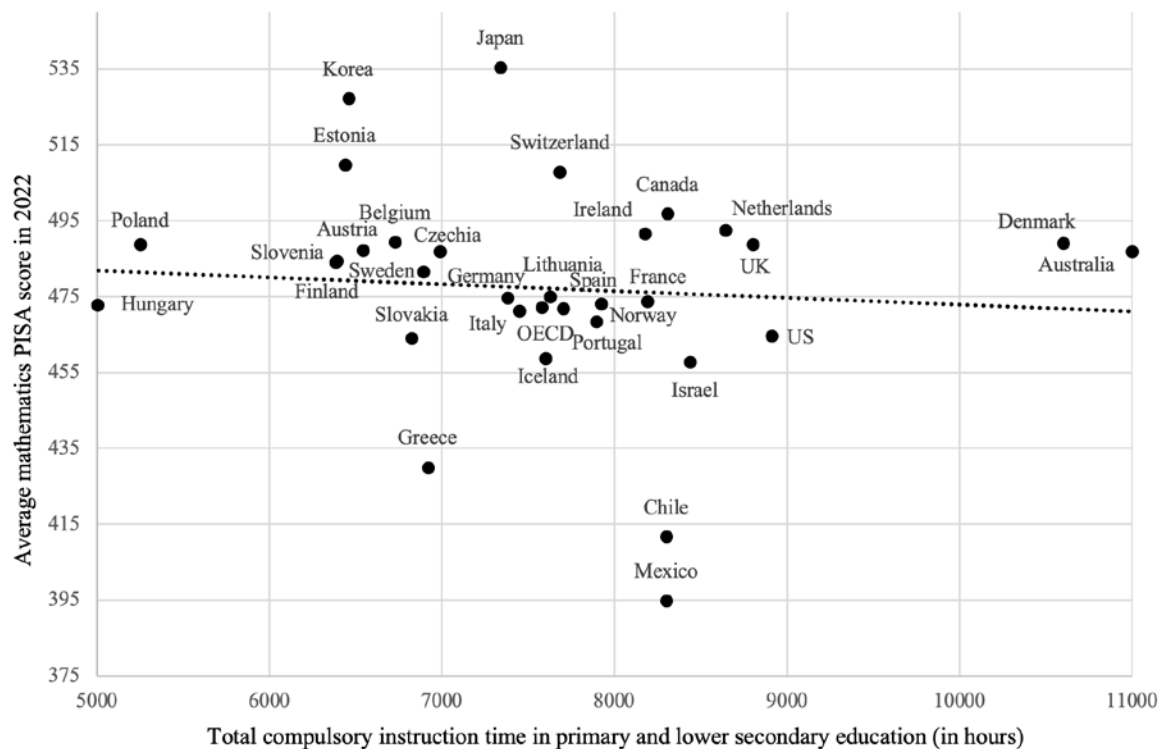


Figure 2: Total Compulsory Instruction Time during Primary and Lower Secondary Education in OECD Countries in 2022 (in Hours)



OECD Education Database (https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2023-sources-methodologies-and-technical-notes_d7f76adc-en). In the public domain.

Figure 3: Cumulative Compulsory Instruction Time per Student in Primary and Lower Secondary Education VS Average Mathematics PISA Scores in 2022 (OECD, 2023a; 2023b)



OECD Education and PISA Databases (https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2023-sources-methodologies-and-technical-notes_d7f76adc-en) and (<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2022database/>). In the public domain.



Our two boys go to school in Melbourne where state schools must provide at least 25 hours of instruction per week, or 300 minutes a day. This means that school days are filled with formal instruction and other curriculum activities leaving only a little time for informal recess for students and teachers between classes. From an international perspective, Australian schools are outliers in two ways regarding how available time is spent. First, children have less time for recess and play during school days that in turn limits their opportunities for independent activities. Second, teachers work longer hours and have less time to relax and collaborate during the day compared to their peers in other countries. When teachers and students are busy all day every day, building relationships and being actively engaged in learning become increasingly difficult.

Many people believe that instruction time is positively associated with student achievement in school. In other words, the more students are taught, the more they are likely to learn. A common policy and practical responses to unsatisfactory student performance in school is to add more teaching time to close learning gaps. As Figure 2 shows, education systems are quite different in terms of how much total instruction time students are required to have during primary and lower secondary education. So, does more teaching lead to better learning?

If the answer is “yes,” then Australia, Denmark, and the United States would be near the top of the international student assessment charts. According to the most recent OECD data (2023a; 2023b), there is no positive correlation between instruction time and student achievement; rather, it is slightly negative as Figure 3 shows. This suggests that the quality of teaching and a stronger engagement of students are more important in school than how much time is allocated to formal instruction.

Why are school days in Australia so much longer than elsewhere, especially in pre-school and primary school, if instruction time doesn’t promise better learning outcomes? Would our primary schools get better by having less formal instruction for younger students and instead more time for recess and play? Perhaps this would also provide teachers with time during school days to collaborate, create ideas, and explore new ways to teach and work with one another.

Different culture of schooling

Another distinctive feature of Australian primary schools is the way teaching is organised. In most primary schools, teachers teach the same year level (e.g., Year 4) from one school year to the next. In other words, a teacher is allocated a new group of students at the beginning of each school year. The first week of the school year is usually devoted to getting to know all students, explaining classroom rules, setting the expectations for learning, and other important things. In many schools it is a week of getting started and building personal relationships between teachers and their new students. Learning starts the following week.

This peculiar culture in Australian schools doesn’t have a clear educational rationale or evidence base justifying this as being the best way to organise teaching. When I ask why schools have decided that this is the best arrangement, I often hear: “this is how it has always been here.” There are some schools that have found other ways to organise teaching such as Montessori or Steiner schools where children stay with the same teacher longer than a year.

“Teacher looping,” as this arrangement is called, is an old practice. When teachers teach the same students over several years, they can create a better understanding of their students’ individual interests,

strengths, and educational needs. This can help both teachers and students to make learning personalised, meaningful, and enable timely support whenever that is necessary. Research shows that looping builds stronger teacher-student relationships, reduces anti-social behaviours, and enhances continuity of learning in school and at home (Wedenoja et al., 2022). Lessons from schools where looping has been practised longer suggest that students benefit from a more stable and consistent classroom climate and positive behaviours that positively impact their learning and wellbeing outcomes.

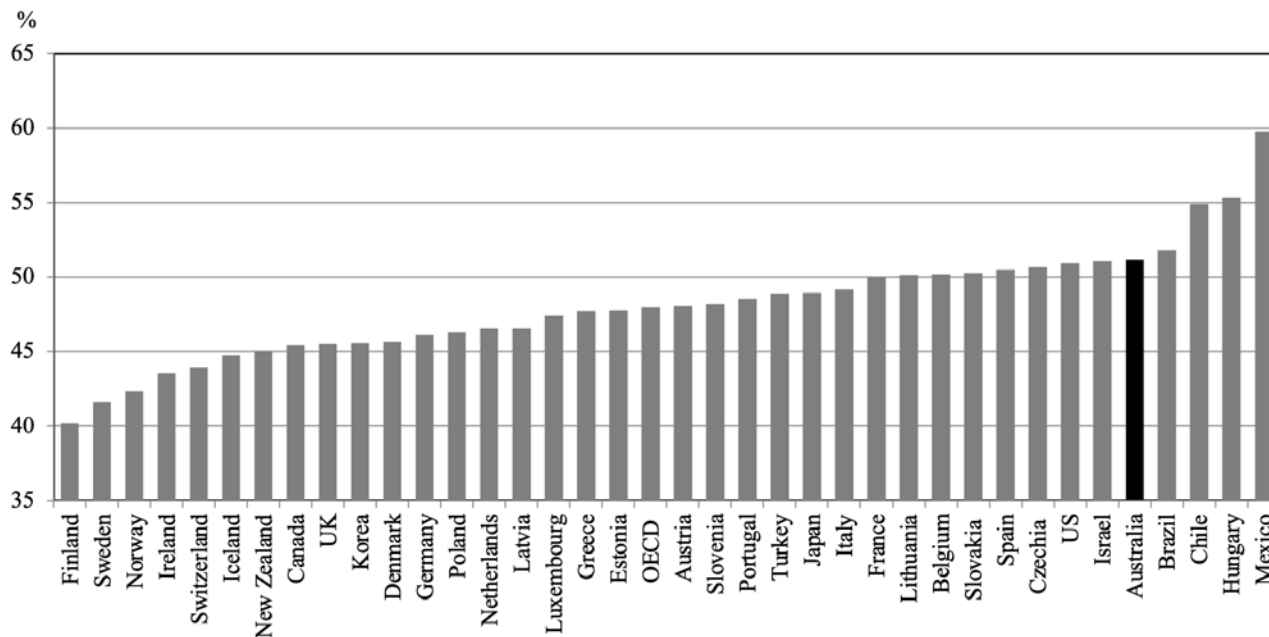
In recent years, teacher looping has become increasingly common in primary (and secondary) schools around the world. Looping can be found in schools in the United States, Germany, China, Japan, and Finland where it is the standard teaching arrangement in all schools. There is no doubt that teacher looping could work well in many Australian schools with similar positive impacts.

Growing concentrations of disadvantage

Parents’ right to choose a school for their children has been part of the global education reform movement since the 1990s (Sahlberg, 2023). This has been the central idea in the evolution of Australian education. Growing school markets have served some parents and their children well, but, at the same time, has led to growing socio-economic segregation of schools and growing concentration of disadvantage in government schools.

An absence of adequate regulation of Australia’s school education markets has led to an increasing number of socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged students attending schools where most students are from similar backgrounds. Australia is an outlier when it comes to addressing increasing social and economic inequalities. Social segregation of students is an important part of that challenge we need to fix before we can have world class education for all.

Figure 4: Proportion of Disadvantaged Students Attending Schools that have a High Concentration of Disadvantage in OECD Countries (OECD, 2018)



OECD PISA Database (<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/>). In the public domain.

As can be seen in Figure 4, there are only four other OECD countries (i.e., Brazil, Chile, Hungary, Mexico) where a larger proportion of disadvantaged students are studying in schools where most students are socio-educationally disadvantaged. This is not by accident but by design and is a consequence of 21st century national education policies and reforms that have made education a marketplace where parental choice determines supply and demand of schooling. Importantly, the OECD's (2018) research shows that when a disadvantaged student attends an advantaged school (with lower concentration of disadvantage), by the age of 15 that student will be educationally approximately over three years ahead of those attending schools with a high concentration of disadvantage. For most disadvantaged students in Australia, school is not the place where there is a levelling of the playing field. Indeed, as the most recent data shows (Australian Government, 2023a), it does the opposite.

Schools with high concentrations of disadvantage are called *residualised*. Residualised refers to schools where half of the students or more are in the lowest or highest Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) quartile. Schools that have high concentrations of socio-educationally disadvantaged students are mostly government schools. Around 14 per cent of all students, that is over half a million students, attend a school with a high concentration of socio-educational disadvantage (Australian Government, 2023b). What makes the situation worse is that between 2018 and 2022 almost 40 per cent of schools with high concentrations of disadvantage experienced an increase in their concentration of disadvantage, meaning socio-educational segregation in these schools is getting worse, not better, over time.

International (OECD, 2018) and domestic (Sciffer, 2023) data suggest that the continuing residualisation in Australian schools has led to weakening equity and poorer student outcomes. Australia is not alone with this challenge. It is argued here that a more active engagement in international policy dialogues might be surprisingly beneficial.

Missed global dialogues

A quarter of a century ago Australia was a thought-leader in global education. Innovative schools, inspiring school leaders, and cutting-edge research had made education our nation's trademark that was recognised and valued around the world. I remember how in Finland and many other European countries we looked to Australia for inspiration to improve our own schools for the 21st century.

The first OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) cycle was in 2000. Australia was among the best performing nations in this triennial study that measures 15-year-old students' ability to use reading, mathematics, and science knowledge and skills to meet real life challenges (OECD, 2001). This boosted Australian educational expertise and know-how even further in global education markets. Several Australian educators played important roles in international education forums. At that time, Barry McGaw was an influential head of OECD's education directorate, and Bob Lingard, Ann McIntyre and Fazal Rizvi were distinguished scholars in academic circles, just to mention a few of them.

After a decade of PISA, new questions emerged: Why are some education systems performing better than others? What is wrong with those systems that try hard but don't get better? How to change the course in these struggling systems? When school policies and reforms fail, education system leaders and the media act swiftly: they blame the schools. This has been harmful for the status of teachers and valuing the teaching profession in many countries. The OECD and teacher organisations around the world argued that this state of affairs could not continue.

In 2011, the OECD in collaboration with Education International (EI), a global federation that represents organisations of teachers and other education employees, organised the first International Summit on the teaching Profession (ISTP) in New York. The theme of that summit was "Building a High-Quality Teaching Profession." President Barack Obama's administration was the formal host of this event. The ISTP

brings together education ministers, union and teacher association presidents and other teacher leaders from high-performing and rapidly improving education systems to review and learn how to improve the quality and equity of education systems by developing teachers and improving teaching and learning. Each year, ISTP organisers produce a report on the state of the teaching profession that serves as a starting point for the summit dialogues.

The ISTP is an invitation-only event where education ministers and teacher association presidents must attend together and represent their country. Invitations go to the 20 best performing education systems, their governments, and leading teacher organisations. During the meeting delegates will usually make a joint contribution to the dialogue, and at the end of the summit make a commitment to move the conclusion of the summit to action.

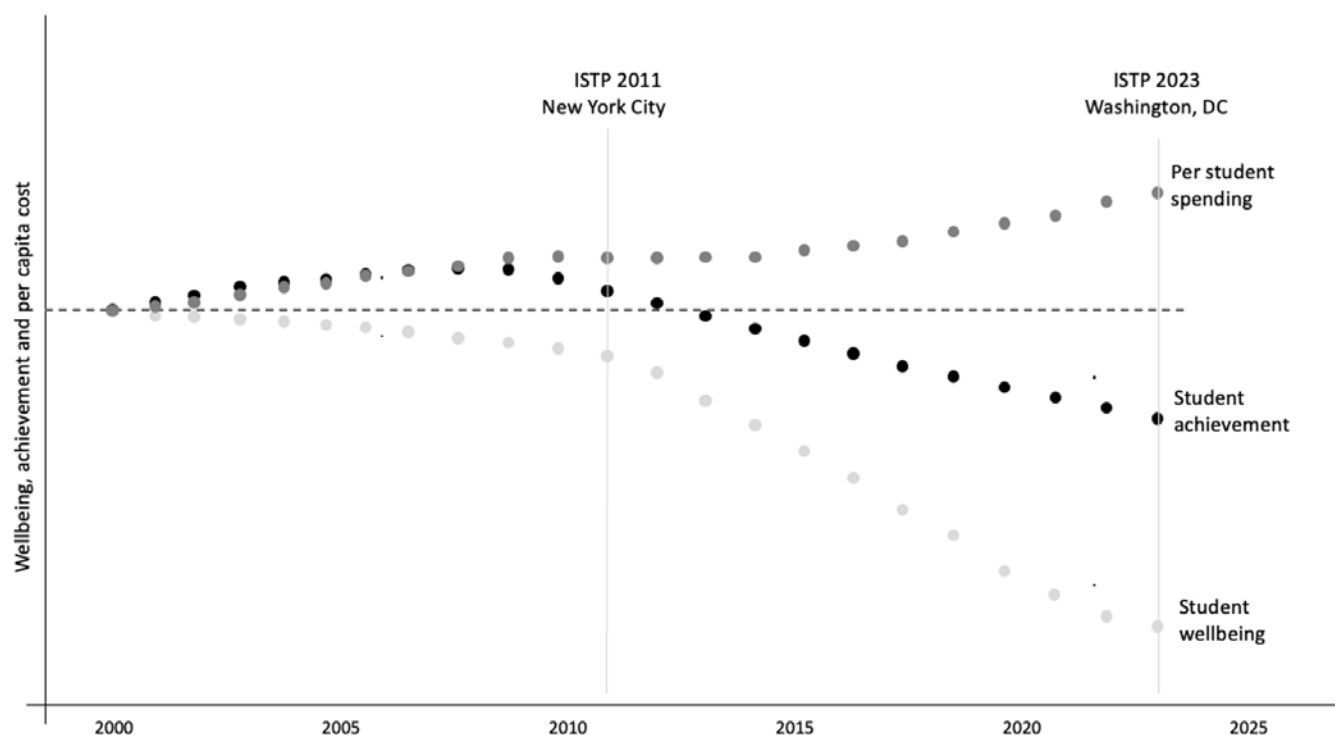
Since 2011 the ISTP has been a gold standard annual forum for education leaders to share ideas, network, and seek solutions to challenges in their own education systems. ISTP is hosted in different OECD country annually, for example past countries include Scotland, Germany, New Zealand, and Finland. Topics from previous summits include “Equity, excellence and inclusiveness of education” (2014), “Valuing our teachers and raising their status” (2018), and “Learning from the past, looking to the future” (2021). ISTP has become a highly valued opportunity among governments and teachers to work on a shared vision and better policies to address some of the most burning challenges in education today (Edwards & Schleicher, 2021). Many governments wait to be invited, but only the best or fast improving attend the Summit.

“A prosperous country like Australia could certainly afford investing in giving a good start for all and, consequently, giving many more of our people a fairer go in life.”

Australia as one of the best performing education nations has always been invited to attend the ISTP. Yet, Australia never attended before 2023. Why is not entirely known? What we know is that a decade of opportunities to be part of global dialogues about teachers and teaching, to tell others about our ideas about building better education systems, and to learn from them about other ways, has been lost. In April 2023 an Australian delegation, for the first time, joined the global dialogue for the ISTP on “Teaching for the Future” in Washington, DC.

It is interesting to note that in 2011 at the time of the first ISTP in New York City, there were already clear signs that quality and equity of education in OECD countries was not what it should be. It was also known then that the teaching profession and school leadership would likely experience difficult challenges in coming years. As we know now, student learning and wellbeing have been travelling in a downward course although expenditure per student has steadily gone up (OECD 2023a; 2023b). PISA 2023 findings released late last year confirm these trends shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Three Global 21st Century Trends in Education in OECD Countries



OECD PISA Database (<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/>); World Bank Database (<https://data.worldbank.org/>); UNICEF Data Warehouse (<https://data.unicef.org/>); OECD Child Well-being Dashboard (<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/child-well-being/data/dashboard/>). In the public domain.

Lead Article

Despite these inconvenient facts, my argument is that school education in Australia is world-class but not for everyone. This means that the top half of our students perform as well as good students in high-performing countries, such as Canada, Estonia, or Japan. Many Australian schools offer students foundations to a good life above and beyond academic knowledge and skills. The challenge is the bottom half of students who attend underfunded and inadequately resourced schools deserve a world-class education.

Here is my conclusion. Australia is an educational “lone wolf” because of its mindset that has downplayed international collaboration at the policy and education system levels during the past decade (Sahlberg, 2022). In many ways, as I mentioned previously, our school systems look like others. However, a closer observation reveals some important differences compared to schools and school systems overseas. Here are some examples. First, too many of our youngest are already behind other children in the early years because of insufficient investments in inclusive, high-quality early childhood education and care. Second, principals and teachers are working longer hours, and students are studying longer hours than most of their peers in other countries. Third, we pay less attention to finding effective ways to build healthy relationships and wellbeing in our schools compared to schools overseas. Fourth, government funding of private schools that charge fees and often restrict student enrolment prevents properly resourcing many public schools that remain underfunded. Finally, and consequently, we have higher concentrations of socio-economic and educational disadvantage in our public schools than in any other wealthy nation.

These and other educational anomalies in Australian school education exist because of peculiar policies and reforms over time (Reid, 2020). Yet, we can change these policies and reforms if we want to. I will continue to ask why we haven’t done so. The evidence is clear that alternative ways to educate children can be more productive for the nation than the current model of schooling. More importantly, as the most recent education indicators show (Australian Government, 2023b; OECD, 2023a), we need an education system that is better and much fairer for every child in Australia.

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