

SCHOOLS IN AUSTRALIA ARE FACING THEIR GREATEST CHALLENGE

Schools in Australia are facing their greatest challenge for more than a century if current trends and international benchmarks are a guide. There are regular reports of Australia being overtaken in the ranks of nations in the International Program for Student Assessment (PISA) and our performance across the country in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has flat-lined or declined. Performance on these measures dominates public discourse despite a consensus that schools have a much wider mission. Expert views on what it takes to turn a country around and what to avoid in the process suggest that time is short and getting the right strategies in place is urgent.

These are the inescapable conclusions from keynote presentations by four of the world's leading experts in education and public policy at the 2012 Joint Conference of the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) and the New Zealand Principals Federation (NZPF) held in Melbourne in September on the theme 'Leading Learning: Our Primary Purpose'. APPA is the national voice for Government, Catholic and Independent Primary School Principals in Australia.

In drawing these conclusions, APPA makes clear its commitment to the aim of the Australian Government to make Australia one of the top five nations in the quality of its schools and to intentions for needs-based student funding that would accrue from implementation of the Gonski Report. APPA has been an active and positive contributor to deliberations on these matters and will continue to be so. However, Australia is not listening closely enough to the experience of other nations who are setting the pace in international rankings and who, themselves, are committed to further dramatic improvement.

Pasi Sahlberg is Director General of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation (CIMO) at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. Finland has consistently been at or near the top in PISA. He drew attention to the slide in performance of nations that have been 'infected' by the GERM – Global Education Reform Movement – and it is clear that this applies to Australia. Drawing from his best-selling book *Finnish Lessons* Sahlberg listed the characteristics of GERM (with contrasting approaches in Finland in parentheses): standardised teaching and learning (customised teaching and learning), narrow focus on literacy and numeracy (focus on creative learning), teaching prescribed curriculum (encouraging risk-taking), borrowing market-oriented reform ideas (learning from the past and owning innovations), and test-based accountability and control (shared responsibility and trust).

Yong Zhao holds a Presidential Chair at the University of Oregon where he is Associate Dean for Global Education and Director of the Centre for Advanced Technology. He reported that nations that focus on PISA do so at the expense of Entrepreneurship and Creativity, with both capacities being critical to success in the twenty-first century. He is highly critical of the path that the United States is on when he wrote in his award-winning book *Catching Up or Leading the Way*: 'As we enter a new world rapidly changed by globalization and technology, we need to change course. Instead of instilling fear in the public about the rise of other countries, bureaucratizing education with bean-counting policies, demoralizing educators through dubious accountability measures, homogenizing school curriculum, and turning children into test takers, we should inform the public about the possibilities brought about by globalization, encourage educational innovations, inspire educators with genuine support, diversify and decentralize curriculum, and educate children as confident, unique, and well-rounded human beings'. These words could well apply to Australia.

Andy Hargreaves is the Thomas More Brennan Chair in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. In *Professional Capital* (with Michael Fullan) he stressed that quality of teaching is the key to the transformation of schools and this must become the top priority. In *The Fourth Way* (with Dennis Shirley) he argued that cut-throat competition, excessive standardisation, persistent autocracy, imposed targets and obsession with data should be abandoned in favour of inspiration, innovation, autonomy, local interpretation of standards, urgency, consistency, all-inclusive equity, balance and inclusiveness, public involvement, financial reinvestment, better evidence and professional networks.

Kishore Mahbubani is the Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He is a former President of the UN Security Council. He raised the possibility that Australia and New Zealand may face the greatest challenges in a century that is sure to be dominated by China and India, the two nations that had the largest economies until 1820 and will do so again. He contends that the West's recent domination has been an aberration. The paradox is that Asia is implementing the seven pillars of the West: free market economics, mastery of science and technology, culture of pragmatism, meritocracy, culture of peace, rule of law and education.

- Does Australia have a sense of urgency and a vision that reflects expert opinion along the lines presented at this landmark conference?
- We support a national plan for school improvement, but should we not lift our sights higher to school transformation and ensuring the highest quality possible in learning and teaching, which is what other nations whose performance we aspire to have achieved?
- We are wedded to strategies that have not worked well enough for us in recent years, despite a huge investment of public funds. Do we have the honesty to recognise this and do we have the will to change course?
- Will a higher level of student needs-based funding as advocated in the Gonski Report, if achieved, be targeted in the most effective way in the light of evidence from already high-performing schools, including those in challenging circumstances?
- Will it be possible to secure this funding when agreement among the states and territories may not be possible as it is becoming increasingly difficult to make 'cooperative federalism' work?
- Will there be serious commitment to deliver major reform in teacher education to match what has been achieved in countries like Finland?

APPA has raised these issues for more than a decade and has been a committed and active contributor to national dialogue. However, time is running out if Australia is to be among the very best by 2025. The time to get the right strategies in place is now.

For further information contact APPA President, Norm Hart, on 07 3832 2169 or email norm@appa.asn.au

Video and audio recordings of keynote speakers and workshops can be accessed through the APPA website www.appa.asn.au

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