Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s “education revolution” includes a plan to link school funding with school performance. He says parents have a right to know how schools fare (comparing, as he says, like with like schools), and should be allowed to “vote with their feet”. It’s widely held that this is based on the US system, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB is a federal US law that aims to improve the performance of schools by imposing strict accountability measures and promoting school choice. It requires standardised testing of “the basics”.

What have been the major results since NCLB was introduced – for schools, teachers and students? Have ‘poor performing schools’ been shown to improve under the system (in terms of their grade)? Have student literacy and numeracy results improved as a result? Have teaching standards increased?

NCLB is among the most researched policies in history - with probably over 1,500 published studies in the US. The picture is, at best, mixed, and at worst, a real worry. In their reports to the federal government seeking further funding, a majority of the states report improvement. But there is widespread scepticism about the accuracy of state-testing, with several well documented cases of technical problems with the testing and, in some states, outright cases of test fraud in the courts. In fact, the Harvard Civil Rights Project report (Lee, 2006) reports that the higher the stakes of the testing, the more likely there is to be a lowering of benchmark standards, distortion of data and instances of outright misrepresentation. This is a lesson in itself.

Further, in the most recent edition of Educational Researcher, Ho (2008) has raised a range of technical measurement problems with testing data based on benchmark proficiency levels.

Here’s the objective picture: according
to major independent analyses of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a testing system run by the Educational Testing Service since the 1970s, NCLB has generated no significant closure of the equity gap and no consistent improvement in literacy. There are some transient effects in year four maths. Many states have seen declines in performance and widening of the equity gaps with the increase in the “accountability pressure” index.

Simply - NCLB is a very blunt policy instrument. It’s meant to take systems from the “basement to the first floor” – it won’t take a system from the “first floor to the second floor” and it might even lock many schools into permanent first floor status.

What have the major critiques of NCLB been in the US, or indeed, internationally?

David Berliner, senior educational psychologist of our generation, and Michael Smith, Clinton’s Deputy Secretary now located at Stanford, point out that there has been a host of “collateral damage” from the increase in “accountability pressure”. These include: narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, lack of promised support to struggling schools, low teacher morale and increased teacher attrition, failure to adequately assess and support special education and NESB students, adoption of poorly researched but mandated instructional programs, increases in equity gaps, and, as mentioned, school, system and state level manipulation of results.

One of the most worrying findings is that the increase in accountability pressure has contributed in US states to the “collateral damage” of lower retention rates in the senior years - the very opposite of what we all agree is an important national goal. They also found that the states that went down the accountability/sanctions/heavy testing routes in the early 1990s, including Bush’s Texas, had stalled test scores - simply, that they hadn’t been able to sustain any claimed early gains.

What have been the key outcomes of grading schools and releasing that information publicly – both negative and positive?

We all agree on the need for accountability and comprehensive, evidence bases – and state systems, schools, teachers and principals need to move towards evidence-based teaching, school renewal and reform. With a few notable exceptions, most state systems are not systematically targeting schools that are struggling, identifying the exact nature of the issues and problems, and coming to the party with targeted interventions, resource support and, indeed, leadership change. There are straightforward technical and scientific means to do this, well within the current technical capacity of state governments.

This was the highly successful approach adopted by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of the Ontario Ministry of

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Education in the last five years: it was data driven, tracking and identifying the impacts of social class, demographic diversity and location on overall school success. It was centrally well resourced, and focused on targeted professional development at the district and school level. There are some Australian cases where systematic approaches to school reform and renewal have succeeded: Western Australia’s efforts in early literacy, the ACT work in middle schooling, Queensland’s IDEAS schools, and many of the New Basics schools. At the classroom level, there is a need for the expansion of developmental diagnostic work in schools (e.g. the very successful Western Australia and Queensland early teacher-based developmental diagnostic “nets”), work on teachers’ overall assessment literacy so they can set and assess students’ work and development, and, yes, the better use of tests and assignments in schools as part of curriculum planning.

But it is silly to mortgage an educational system on the belief that high stakes testing is the sole or principal source of evidence or the simple solution. We need systematically gathered and tracked evidence on retention rates, special education ascertainment, school suspensions and behaviour problems, school leadership effectiveness, a range of social outcomes, longitudinal workforce participation, community responses to schooling, teacher and student morale, overall participation levels. We need expanded teacher moderated assessment of student writing, artistic work, digital productions, and language development.

Test scores in literacy and numeracy are key indicators but they aren’t the whole game. In Singapore, one of our key findings was that even where you had good test score results, there were a host of other educational outcomes that might be negatively impacted. These include the capacities for the new economy that the federal government aspires to: creativity, intercultural communication, community service and commitment, collaborative and independent problem solving, and, centrally, digital multiliteracies - many of these new capacities are currently beyond the reach of traditional testing. Nobody disputes the need for basic skills. But if these new capacities are currently beyond the reach of traditional testing, nobody disputes the need for basic skills. But if the accountability/testing system narrows the curriculum to basic skills - and test scores on basic skills are all that count, the system will act like a heat seeking missile and concentrate all its
“Teacher quality counts... high quality/high equity systems have much better resourced teacher education, professional development, innovative schemes for attracting high quality teachers.”

We need comprehensive data and evidence at the state level: we need to target resources with a new funding model, we need to mobilise specific programs in the most difficult areas and sectors like indigenous education and lower socio-economic communities, and yes, we need to give schools and principals more autonomy to shape their programs with accountability. As Chris Sarra and Noel Pearson argue, we can’t really accept that some schools stagger along without generating results year after year – despite difficult community and economic conditions. But school change and school reform require well-supported local mobilisation of evidence and resources, teachers and communities with the requisite funding and professional support.

School reform and renewal needs smart policies. This is a complex art and a science. It can’t be achieved by populist discipline and punish rhetoric from the press and politicians.

Do you think this is the right model to apply to Australia? What other approaches are on offer?

We’re at a policy cross-roads. We know from the PISA data that the US and UK systems are struggling and are getting high quality/low equity outcomes. The OECD PISA data suggest that the high quality/high equity systems - including Finland, Sweden and, in the case most similar in student demographics to our own, Canada - have not gone down the expanded testing/high pressure accountability route. They’ve found more moderate ways to up their game. What these systems have done is stress high levels of professionalism, targeted educational approaches, and the clever and strategic use of data to mobilise resources and action.

Teacher quality counts - and all of these high quality/high equity systems have much better resourced teacher education, professional development, and innovative schemes for attracting high quality teachers.

This isn’t just a matter of better teacher pay - it’s also a matter of increasing the status of teaching and resourcing the profession properly. In Finland the top ten per cent of high school graduates go into teaching; in Canada, there are three qualified applicants for every teacher education opening. So the school reforms need to be accompanied by a wave of innovation in teacher education. The situation at present here is disastrous: the average school of education receives less than an independent school in federal funding per student; Singapore is investing five times as much per teacher education student than Australia.

We need a national teacher education innovation fund. But every time a politician or the press bashes teachers - whatever their intent - the effect is to drive away prospective teachers, embitter dedicated and highly competent teachers, and polarise the debate.

Let’s take Ontario, for example, which has turned around its performance in the last decade. The reforms there have stressed: a well articulated, well supported and well communicated educational program - not threats to teachers and students. Ontario brought in: balanced reading programs; a strong equity emphasis that all children could learn; simpler, more accessible syllabus documents and local, school and district based curriculum planning; rich and well resourced professional development programs; a strong emphasis on schools communicating their goals and their progress to communities, and, then, provided central support to assist schools to improve their outcomes.

They had an educational plan - and they put a team of 100 expert teachers, researchers, statisticians and policy makers onto identifying struggling schools and districts, and provided the appropriate technical expertise to solve the problems.
Then they enlisted the unions, the universities and the community in support of the approach. All of their indicators - including but not limited to test scores - have pushed up for the last five years. Ontario reports overall state results, principals can compare their results on a range of indicators with different categories of schools, and schools have access to a wide range of data for their annual reporting to parents and communities. But there are no published league tables that can be misrepresented and distorted – making the job of school reform and change even tougher. So public accountability and reporting can be done without reduction of schools’ performance to reductionist and potentially misleading league tables. Peter Mortimore, of the University of London Institute of Education, has published similar studies of the negative effects of league tables in the UK.

What about the basics?
The myth that primary teachers aren’t teaching the basics is just that - a myth. In a current ARC study we’re undertaking in Queensland, we’re finding almost all of the year one teachers we’ve surveyed and interviewed - a random stratified sample – are teaching phonics. The question is not phonics or no phonics - it’s how and when they taper off the phonics in a balanced reading program as the children acquire automaticity of skills. At the same time, the teachers in the most at risk areas are contending every day with increased numbers of kids with learning difficulties, the impacts of poverty on families, complex evidence of early language developmental delays, increasing numbers of second language learners and a host of other issues. This requires the highest levels of professional skill and judgment - not a magic bullet instructional program or a simple expansion of testing.

Is the federal government going down the right path?
We all should be glad that the federal and state governments are talking about equity, are talking about evidence, and are talking about how to systematically improve schools. We need a new focus on equity, a wholesale revamping of funding, a simplified curriculum that isn’t mired in culture wars, and a rich sense of the multiple and complex indicators of success for kids and schools. But reducing it down to more tests, league tables, and punishing a demoralised workforce without a strong and practical educational plan is not good policy. Why follow the US and NCLB down a road that was designed to deal with a very different system, some very severe problems, and that has generated mixed and problematic results? Simply, asking schools and teachers to compete in a choice market has not worked in large state and federal systems.

I’ve recently returned from my second visit to Finnish schools, where we met with Ministry officials, teacher educators and visiting schools as part of an OECD review. In Finland, Singapore and Ontario, nobody is talking about the virtues of a free market in education. For what it’s worth, they’re debating proper levels of central government resourcing to improve and advance what are already world-class systems. All three systems have strong policy foci on equity and on the continuous improvement of teacher professionalism and capacity.

Our system has some real strengths and has not reached the basement that Texas or New York schools reached. We’re at the first floor and need to get to the second. At the same time, business as usual isn’t good enough. We have some real problems that we should be talking about, beyond the media cliches: the fourth and fifth grade slump in reading comprehension, many states with no coordinated approach to the reform of middle years, some senior systems that are still designed as if all kids are going to sandstone science study, an equity gap that will be exacerbated by the current economic crisis, lowering retention rates, and an intolerable situation in Indigenous kids’ outcomes. But there are smart solutions to these - well calibrated policies that don’t sledgehammer friend and foe. We need to find our own way, with an eye on those high quality/high equity systems like Canada and Ontario that have started from baselines similar to ours.

Yes, we need smart teachers and kids - but we also need smart, targeted policies with credible, well-researched educational plans, and indeed, smarter bureaucracies.