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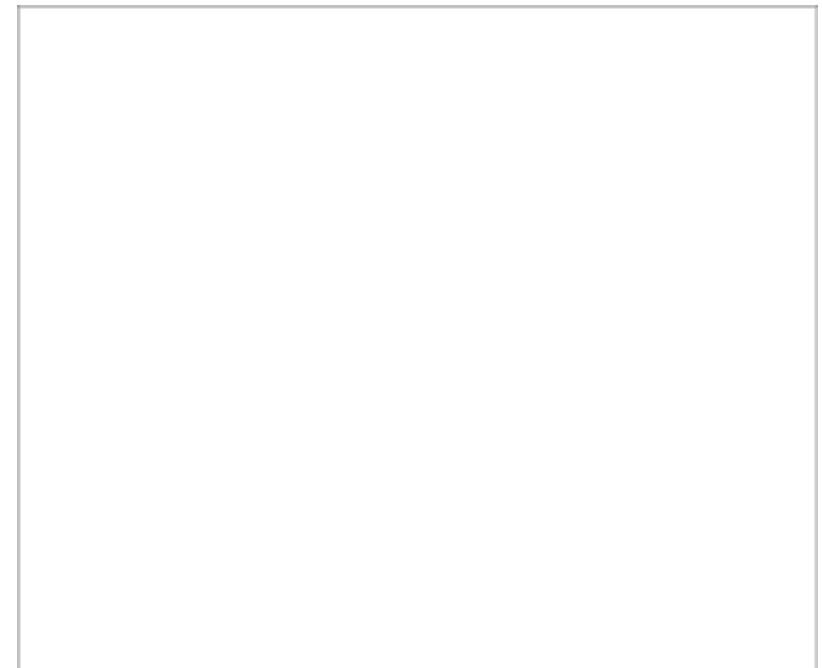
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The data is telling our governments that school performance is not good enough



Federal Education minister Simon Birmingham says it is not necessary to spend more to improve schools. **Wayne Taylor**



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by **Tim Dodd**

One down and one to go.

Last week a major international report, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), found that Australian school students **were not improving**. Indeed we are slipping down the international scale due to other nations' children learning to achieve at a higher level, even as ours stand

still.

This week we will get another indication of how well our school system is doing compared to other countries. On Tuesday the OECD will release the latest results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) which looks at the performance of 15-year-olds across all OECD countries and a few more.

Both of these reports are big deals. They don't come out very often – TIMSS every four years and PISA every three – and they include most of the world's major and up-and-coming economies.

They are very good indicators of countries' relative performance in education, telling us how well children are being prepared to be productive in 21st century knowledge-centred economies.

Helpfully, the two reports tell us different things.

TIMSS tests year 4 and 8 children on material that is mainly aligned to school curricula.

So Australia's halting performance in this test confirms what NAPLAN also tells us. Our kids are generally not getting any better at learning the standard maths in primary and early high school which sets them up for senior high school.

This also happens to be the sort of maths people need to master to be effective in work and every day life. Things like percentages, fractions, averages and such like.

Problem-based

Whereas PISA is more problem-based. It tests whether students can apply their knowledge to solving the type of basic problems they are likely to meet in life and the workplace. They are generally practical problems and not outrageously difficult.

The question is: will the latest 2015 PISA test show any improvement on the last report three years ago which showed that Australia was flat-lining in maths and science, and declining in reading?

These results are coming at the right time because federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham is now deep into building a new federal-state school funding agreement which is due to start in 2018. He will be discussing it with his state and territory counterparts on December 16.

We know that Birmingham will not be offering more money beyond the planned indexation. But there are plenty of proven strategies to improve results in schools which do not cost more.

In the hot-house atmosphere of school funding it will be remarkable if ministers can keep their eyes on the evidence, and away from the emotive politics, as they hammer out new funding arrangements.

But if they can, we will all be in their debt.

They could start by finding a way to measure how many qualified maths teachers Australia has, and how many new ones are trained each year. At least a quarter of high school maths teachers are not fully qualified to teach the subject, says Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute director Geoff Prince. Amazingly governments don't record data on this, so how can they plan to improve maths teaching?

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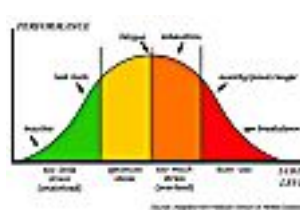
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