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Education in Australia: a race to the Finnish

LETTERS

Only two countries in the world, Chile and Belgium, spend as much government money on private schools as we do. Finnish professor Pasi Sahlberg of Harvard University and former Director-General of CIMO (Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation) at Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture has repeatedly explained Finland's success at going from one of the world's poorer performing countries to the Western world's best. He says they focused on the neediest schools and didn't worry about the best. And, they have no private funding of schools. This is almost exactly the opposite of what Australia does.

Brenton White Mosman

How refreshing to read William Doyle's article ("Why Finland has the best schools" March 26) where "Educators are the ultimate authorities on education, not bureaucrats, and not technology vendors". Doyle, a Fulbright scholar and university lecturer, says: "Finland has a history of producing the highest global test scores in the Western world ... including the most literate nation".

It's about time that our politicians stopped blaming young teachers who are "not up to scratch" for our falling standards. Like Finland we do have highly trained teachers with Master's degrees but they are not valued, financially or professionally.

Where is the funding for improved teacher qualifications, ongoing professional development, classroom support for special education needs and playground monitors? The rest of the world knows that you don't need a Master's degree to supervise the playground but it's helpful to be an effective teacher. The classrooms of the top performers according to your story "Marked Down: the education system that's failing us" (March 26) – Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong – differ greatly from our multicultural classes where we cater for individual differences without adequate support. Where is the research to explain what is needed to bring us up to the Finnish model?

Anne Morrison Paddington

Twelve paragraphs into the latest mawkish paean to Finland's education system, we finally reach the nub of the matter. In an aside, we are informed that class sizes in Finland are "manageable". In fact, class sizes in Finland are capped at far lower levels than that of most other developed countries, a crucial factor which is routinely ignored or downplayed in depictions of Finland as an educational paradise. Perhaps

the legions of education academics who airily dismiss the importance of class sizes, while making a fetish of the rest of the Finland "recipe", might take note.

Michael Salter Baulkham Hills

If teacher quality is really the main factor in raising educational standards, there is no mystery about what has happened to education in Australia. Starting in the 1980s, I noticed that I was increasingly teaching next to graduate teachers whose blackboard grammar, spelling and punctuation was downright embarrassing. Sometimes I used to pop next door and correct the worst errors during recess. The policy, beloved of both sides of politics, of recruiting teachers with low HSC results has come home to roost; many will be in the system for another 20 years. Until we value teaching and reward it commensurately we will continue to see standards stagnate or fall.

Chris McGregor Cabarita

Quentin Dempster's excellent summary of just how bad our vocational education system has become made for chilling reading. His mention of the difficulties (and disinclination) among private providers to "fail" students who have just paid many thousands of dollars for their certification was particularly alarming, but VET¹⁾ assessment methods have even deeper flaws that were there before the rise of the private provider sector.

By the mid '90s all vocational courses, TAFE²⁾ and private, had abolished marks, percentages and grades (eg, pass, credit, distinction) in favour of an ideologically based and government imposed "competence" assessment system. Students were classified as "competent" or "not yet competent" (attitudes ceased to be assessed). If "not yet competent" they could resit the tests repeatedly until they satisfied the criteria for competence. The method allowed teachers who were reluctant to fail students ample opportunity to "coach to competence". It also turned employers' selection of apprentices into a raffle due to the lack of any qualitative information on a trainee's level of performance. It's more than funding that needs fixing.

Peter Russell Coogee

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noot 1 Vocational Education and Training

noot 2 Technical and Further Education