



Brightest students coasting to failure

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ALMOST one-third of the nation's schools are coasting, hiding behind high-achieving students but failing to secure any improvement in their performance, a situation that teaching guru John Hattie says is responsible for Australia's slide in international tests.

Professor Hattie told the conference of the Australian Council for Educational Leadership in Melbourne yesterday that Australian students had gone backwards in the past 12 years in tests run by the OECD group of industrialised nations. "And the majority of students going backwards are in the top 40 per cent of students; that's where there are more cruising schools and more cruising kids," he said.

Professor Hattie, chairman of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership and head of Melbourne University's education research institute, said school test results showed a higher proportion of disadvantaged and low-scoring students were improving than were top students. Yet the decline among top students was ignored, with the

focus being on the long tail of underachieving and often disadvantaged students.

"We see successful schools as the high-achieving ones but I see successful schools as the high-growth or improving schools," he said. "While 60 per cent of schools are in good shape, almost one-third of schools are cruising ... We have to make sure we have the right problem and the problem isn't in kids at the bottom or among Aboriginal kids, it's in the schools cruising at the top."

Professor Hattie outlined a role for AITSL establishing a corps of excellent teachers and school leaders to speak for the profession and re-establish faith in the quality of teaching.

The OECD testing, the Program for International Student Assessment, is held every three

years among 15-year-olds. Since its inception in 2000, Australia's performance in reading, maths and science has slid steadily.

Professor Hattie's comments echoed an earlier address by parliamentary secretary for education Scott Ryan, who pointed out national literacy and numeracy test results had plateaued since their introduction in 2008.

"Put simply, more money does

not equal better results. It is clear the increased investment in schools by successive governments has not translated into better results," Senator Ryan said.

He said quality teaching was the key to improving student learning yet "the public debate has tended to concentrate on proxies for quality, such as spending levels, class sizes and teacher-student ratios".

Professor Hattie said education policy had been dominated for too long by ideology, self-interest, simplistic sloganeering and unrelenting demands for funding. The profession had to jettison the idea all teachers were equal and embrace excellence.

"It's not the resources or the kids, the money, the parents, it's our expertise," he said.

The conference also heard from Noel Pearson about the establishment of the Cape York Academy of schools and the reasons for importing a particular US direct-instruction program.

"We were severely warned ... by everybody we talked to we were bringing the Antichrist into Australian education," he said.

But Mr Pearson said the results had been so impressive even the most diehard sceptic was convinced after seeing the progress of



Weekend Australian, Australia

04 Oct 2014, by Justine Ferrari

General News, page 3 - 266.00 cm²

National - circulation 238,138 (S)

ID 00321680500

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Cape York students.

“School reform, schools and education generally has been the hardest space to break into. It took me more than a decade to break into the schools scene in Queensland,” he said. “This was despite the quite obvious failure that was going on. I couldn’t understand that a scene so disastrous and obvious in its failings could be so protected and would be so resistant.”