

THE CONVERSATION

Budget 2016 brings temporary solutions for schools, and puts more demands on students and teachers

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Government wants to create a national test for reading, phonics and numeracy in Year 1. from www.shutterstock.com

While the 2016 budget looks pretty harmless for schools, the announcements about testing, standardisation and linking teachers' pay to performance could prove problematic. Some of the policies proposed do not match what the research says.

Temporary solutions

An extra A\$1.2 billion injection into schools funding over 2018 to 2020 sounds generous, unless you compare it to the Coalition's 2013 election promise of a unity ticket on Gonski. It is about a quarter of what Labor has promised for schools funding.

The additional \$118.2 million in extra support for students with disabilities over 2016 and 2017 is absolutely welcome as a necessary step towards greater fairness and equity.

Yet there will be strings attached to these funding promises. These include:

literacy and numeracy testing in Year 1

minimum literacy and numeracy standards for Year 12 school leavers

performance-based pay for teachers.

And all of this may be temporary, given that the government intends to completely reset funding distributions from 2018.

New tests for seven-year-olds

Included in the policy is a national test for reading, phonics and numeracy in Year 1. There will also be annual reporting to parents of their children's achievements against national literacy and numeracy standards.

There is some argument to be made for nationally consistent data collection on literacy. Schools are already required, however, to report to parents each semester on their child's progress against literacy and numeracy achievement standards in the Australian curriculum.

The federal government also runs the **Australian Early Development Census**, which collects data on children's language and communication, social skills, health and wellbeing during their first year of school.

State governments, individual schools and teachers also undertake a range of diagnostic testing during the early years of schooling. Many use the **Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT)**, developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

Similar tests facing backlash overseas

Few details about the testing and reporting measures are currently available.

One possible approach is to follow the UK model of a phonics screening check at the end of Year 1.

The UK also runs a national test in **Year 2** as part of a comprehensive standardised testing regime.

These tests are facing a **widespread backlash** from teachers and parents, who argue that the tests are **inappropriate**.

Similarly, pressure to **boycott** high-stakes testing of children is growing in the US.

We will need to see the detail of the government's proposed Year 1 reading, phonics and numeracy tests before we can tell if they might add anything meaningful to student achievement data or if this will simply extend NAPLAN down to Year 1.

Minimum literacy and numeracy standards for Year 12

Within five years, the government will require a minimum standard of literacy and numeracy from all students to complete Year 12.

While the policy does not specifically say how this will be assessed, the trend points to another standardised test being introduced at some point soon.

The states already have literacy and numeracy standards built into their exit requirements. For example, the Queensland Certificate of Education requires a minimum standard of literacy and numeracy, as does the Western Australian Certificate of Education.

At this stage it is unclear what the government's policy adds to the state-based requirements already in place.

Performance-based pay for teachers

The government wants high-performing teachers to be rewarded with increased performance-based pay, assessed against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

In the policy document, it argues:

Teachers ought not be able to automatically move from one pay increment to the next without demonstration of their teaching ability and effectiveness against these standards.

However, research into linking teachers' salaries to performance is mixed to say the least.

There is some evidence to suggest that performance pay makes little difference to student achievement.

For example, one study found that there was limited impact on student achievement, with another claiming that higher average salaries are linked to higher national achievement levels.

A further study found performance-based pay had some impact when there are:

high-powered incentives linked to multiple indicators of teacher performance.

Once again, the devil will be in the detail. We should be cautious of any moves to link teacher pay to single simple measures, whether those are standardised test results or the national teaching standards.

What this policy means for schools

Taken on balance, there is little of significant concern for education in this budget.

However, there is an implied threat of funding being withheld tucked away on page 14 of the Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes policy, where it says:

indexation of Commonwealth funding will be contingent on states and territories and the non-government sector meeting the outlined reform commitments.

The details of these reforms are not yet clear, nor are the measures of increasing school and student outcomes. The government warns that schools funding must also be:

based on a realistic appraisal of the current budget situation and not commit future governments to unaffordable arrangements.

A commitment to resolve a funding model for schools from 2018 is provided, along with the warning that there will be further strings attached in the quest for “real reforms”.

While the 2016 budget looks pretty harmless for schools, there is no doubt that school funding and education will be one of the key battlegrounds in the upcoming election.

Stewart will be on hand for an Author Q&A between 10 and 11am AEST on Thursday, May 4, 2016. Post any questions you have in the comment section below.



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