

# The shared work of learning: Lifting educational achievement through collaboration. An agenda for systemic change

**Tom Bentley and Ciannon Cazaly**

---

The problem	3
The promise of collaboration	5
The solution	6
The next great education systems	7
Why change is needed: The growing pressures on school systems	8
The practice of collaboration	10
The findings	11
An agenda for systemic change	12
Recommendations for policy and action	13
The next great education systems	16

---

## The problem

Too many young people in Australia are starting behind in their education and staying behind, and too many are disengaging from school. Overall, student achievement in Australia is not improving. The gaps between high-achieving and low-achieving students and between well-off and disadvantaged students are too wide.

Meanwhile, emphasis on educational improvement intensifies, as it has done for the last two decades. The pressure to improve learning outcomes in ways that are faster, cheaper and more sustainable continues to grow.

Amidst this pressure, focus on the individual school as the unit of effectiveness continues to sharpen. There is also growing attention to the needs and progress of each student, to the impact of teaching on student outcomes, and to the influence of relationships within and beyond the school.

Yet, while the quality of teaching and learning has improved in many schools, it is not improving enough to counteract the effects of systemic inertia, fragmentation, and growing social and economic inequality.

This creates entrenched inequality of educational outcomes and opportunities, which are further exacerbated by economic and spatial trends. As a consequence, there is a mismatch between the learning needs of students and schools, and the current capabilities of education systems.

In this paper we explain the findings of a research project exploring high-impact learning systems in three Australian jurisdictions: South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. We examine the role of collaboration in lifting student achievement and overcoming community disadvantage, and set out an agenda for systemic change, based on using collaboration to achieve impact at scale.

In Australia there have been some modest gains that demonstrate the potential for improvement. Overall, the story is not good (Masters, 2014a). Australia's performance since the introduction of NAPLAN has changed marginally. The 2015 NAPLAN results confirm moderate improvements in reading for Years 3 and 5 and in numeracy at Year 5 since 2008, but almost no change in Years 7 or 9, and no annual improvement in recent years (ACARA, 2013). Australia has gone backwards in PISA tests; reading literacy and mathematical literacy have declined significantly, and scientific literacy remained unchanged between 2003 and 2012 (Thomson et al, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

The 2009 ABS Survey of Education and Training (SET) showed that Year 12 attainment of young people (20–24 years) rose from 70 per cent to 75 per cent between 2001 and 2009. However, for those living in the most disadvantaged areas it fluctuated between 50 per cent and 60 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the Victorian real estate industry reports that houses within the catchment of 'good' schools attract a price premium of 10–15 per cent (Cogden, 2014; Power, 2015). Academic research in the ACT found that a 5 per cent increase in school test scores is associated with a 3.5 per cent increase in house prices (Davidoff and Leigh, 2007).

the higher the mean SES of a school, the higher the level of academic attainment

Often this 'selection by mortgage' reinforces the effects of academic selection, which takes children into schools on the basis of their academic performance. For example, 71 per cent of students at Melbourne High School (one of the most popular and highest-achieving state schools in Victoria) come from the best-off quarter of the Australian population.<sup>3</sup> That is nearly three times the concentration we would expect if academic success were blind to the advantages created by wealth – or, in other words, was based solely on merit.

Increasingly, differences in the wealth and background of students at different schools also magnify inequalities in their resourcing. For example, compare the voluntary fundraising experience of two neighbouring primary schools in Melbourne. At Clifton Hill Primary School, the My School website shows that 77 per cent of students come from families in the best-off quarter of the Australian population. This school raised more than \$108,000 at its 2014 fete.<sup>4</sup> Just 1.1km south of Gold Street is St Joseph's Catholic Primary School. The My School website shows that 70 per cent of St Joseph's students come from families in the lowest quarter of socioeconomic advantage. They held a fete and made \$14.36 profit.

NATSEM<sup>5</sup> analysis shows that between 2003–04 and 2009–10 average family spending on preschool/primary education increased by 79 per cent, and average family spending on secondary education increased by 101 per cent (NATSEM, 2012). Poorer families just cannot keep up. Yet the increases in private spending are not leading to improvements in overall outcomes.

Analysis of Australian 2003 and 2006 PISA results confirms that the mean socioeconomic status (SES) of schools is strongly associated with academic outcomes, regardless of the individual SES of a student: the higher the mean SES of a school, the higher the level of academic attainment (Perry and McConney, 2010).

ABS data shows that young people aged 20–24 are more likely to have attained Year 12 if both their parents or guardians had attained Year 12 (90 per cent), compared with one or neither parent or guardian having attained Year 12 (78 per cent and 68 per cent respectively) (ABS, 2011).

The pattern of inequality continues into higher education. Only 19 per cent of young people (20–25) in the most disadvantaged areas of Australia had attained or were working towards a bachelor or higher qualification, compared to 54 per cent among the least disadvantaged areas (ABS, 2009). Of all university students, only 11.9 per cent are from a low socioeconomic background (DET, 2014).

**End of Free Sample**  
[Click here to order or subscribe](#)

# CSE/IARTV Publications

## Recent titles in the Centre for Strategic Education Seminar Series

- No. 248** *Generational change in schools: Addressing the challenge of 'generational collision'*  
By Phil Lambert (September 2015)
- No. 247** *The shared work of learning: Lifting educational achievement through collaboration. An agenda for systemic change*  
By Tom Bentley and Ciannon Cazaly (September 2015)
- No. 246** *Making Experimentalist Leadership practical: The theory and practice of futures literacy*  
By Riel Miller (July 2015)
- No. 245** *Mentoring in teacher education*  
By William Loudon (July 2015)
- No. 244** *Big data in education – an international perspective*  
By Robert Hassell and Sacha DeVelle (May 2015)
- No. 243** *Complexity leadership learning: An alternative to competency-driven learning*  
By F S David Ng (May 2015)
- No. 242** *Open Learning Systems: Unlocking innovation*  
By David Price (February 2015)
- No. 241** *Self-improving school systems: A review of evidence and reflections on progress in England*  
By Toby Greany (February 2015)
- No. 240** *How does PISA shape education policy making? Why how we measure learning determines what counts in education*  
By Simon Breakspear (November 2014)
- No. 239** *Assessment renaissance*  
By Peter Hill and Michael Barber (November 2014)
- No. 238** *An activist or a mature teaching profession? Reflections on progress*  
By Judyth Sachs (September 2014)
- No. 237** *Facilitated networks of learning*  
By Jean Annan, Brian Annan, Mary Wootton and Rene Burton (September 2014)
- No. 236** *Educators as designers: New systems to scale deep learning*  
By Nelson R González (July 2014)
- No. 235** *Australia's national curriculum: A step in the right direction?*  
By William Loudon (July 2014)
- No. 234** *A framework for transforming learning in schools: Innovation and the spiral of inquiry*  
By Helen Timperley, Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert (April 2014)
- No. 233** *Realigning the governance of schools in Australia: Energising an experimentalist approach*  
By Brian Caldwell (April 2014)
- No. 232** *Total Learning*  
By Charles Leadbeater (February 2014)
- No. 231** *Can transforming education systems be led?*  
By Valerie Hannon (February 2014)
- No. 230** *Reforming an education system: The Tasmanian experience*  
By John Ewington and Sally Milbourne with Michael Brakey (November 2013)
- No. 229** *Transforming schooling: Small change is not enough*  
By David Loader (November 2013)
- No. 228** *Intercultural Understanding: A key capability in the multicultural world*  
Edited by Keith Redman (September 2013)
- No. 227** *Teaching gifted students: A knowing and thinking-based framework for differentiation*  
By John Munro (September 2013)

## Other publications

*Leading the education debate Volume 4: Selected papers from the CSE's Seminar Series and Occasional Papers, 2011–2014*  
Editors Vic Zbar and Tony Mackay

The Centre for Strategic Education has consolidated a selection of the best of its ground-breaking series of seminar papers from the last four years of cutting-edge contributions to educational discourse into its publication *Leading the education debate Vol 4*.

This collection includes some of the most recognised authors in education including Yong Zhao, Charles Leadbeater, Valerie Hannon, Charles Fadel, Paul Clarke, David Istance, Anthony Mackay, Nelson R González, Helen Timperley, Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert, Michael Fullan, David Hopkins, Brian J Caldwell and Jim M Spinks, Patricia Collarbone, Pamela Macklin, Graham Marshall, Vic Zbar, Dylan Wiliam, Peter Cole, Geoff Masters and Kathe Kirby with Dahle Suggett.

The 20 papers included in the publication constitute a major contribution to discussion on school improvement and reform, written in a clear and accessible way.

Volumes 1–3 of *Leading the education debate* by the same authors, collections of similar cutting edge papers from earlier CSE papers, are also available from CSE.

## About the Authors

Tom Bentley is a writer and policy adviser based in Melbourne. From 2007–13 he was Deputy Chief of Staff and senior policy adviser to Julia Gillard, Prime Minister of Australia 2010–13 and Education Minister 2007–2010. His policy work included school curriculum, teaching, funding and transparency reforms, industry and innovation policy, the Tasmanian forestry agreement and the *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper.

From 1999–2006 he was Director of Demos, an independent think tank based in London. He is a former special adviser to David Blunkett MP, Secretary of State for Education and Employment in the UK. He works with institutions around the world on how to learn more effectively, including as an adviser to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and as principal policy adviser at RMIT University.

His publications include *Learning Beyond the Classroom: Education for a Changing World* (Routledge, 1998), *The Creative Age: Knowledge and Skills for a New Economy* (Demos, 1999) and ‘Innovation and diffusion as a method of change’, in the *Second International Handbook of Educational Change* (Springer, 2010).

Dr Ciannon Cazaly is a social policy researcher and adviser. She has contributed to research projects and policy analysis within the fields of teaching and learning, higher education, sport and culture, and Australian politics.

## About the Paper

The authors argue that too many young people in Australia are starting behind in their education, staying behind, and disengaging from school. Overall, student achievement in Australia is not improving and the gaps between high and low achieving students, and between well-off and disadvantaged students, are too wide. Using examples of how some schools are making improvements, the authors explain the findings of a research project that explored high-impact local learning systems in three Australian jurisdictions: South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. In particular, they examine the evidence that collaboration plays an important role in lifting student achievement and overcoming community disadvantage. They offer recommendations and set out an agenda for systemic change, using collaboration to achieve impact at scale.

## About the Seminar Series

This series of papers, by leading educators, is based primarily on seminar presentations.

The series is intended to encourage discussion of major issues in education. Views expressed by the authors do not necessarily represent views of the Centre for Strategic Education. Comments on papers are most welcome.

## How to order back issues

A complete back catalogue of the CSE/IARTV Seminar and Occasional Paper Series, subscription rates to both of these series and detailed information on other recent publications are available on the Centre for Strategic Education website [www.cse.edu.au](http://www.cse.edu.au).

Alternatively contact  
Centre for Strategic Education:  
phone (+61 3) 9654 1200  
fax (+61 3) 9650 5396  
email [info@cse.edu.au](mailto:info@cse.edu.au)



Leading educational thinking and practice

The constituent bodies of CSE/IARTV are the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (Vic) and the Victorian Independent Education Union.

ISSN 1838-8558  
ISBN 978-1-921823-74-9