# AUSTRALIA, EDUCATIONAL LONE WOLF?

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***Pasi Sahlberg delves into a discussion of Australia's place in the world of education and examines why Australia is somewhat if an outlier in that world...***

Wolves live in extended families called packs. That helps wolves to defend their territories and ensure the protection of, and food for, the young. Cooperation is why wolves survive in harsh conditions in wilderness.

Sometimes a wolf leaves the pack and becomes a lone wolf. A lone wolf is often stronger than the others in the pack. In the wolf kingdom a lone wolf can also be a curious young adult that wants to explore new territories rather than follow the others. Sometimes it is a rebel that doesn't get along with the rest.

In this article I wonder whether Australia has become an educational lone wolf. While Australia formally belongs to international organisations such as OECD, UNESCO, and World Economic Forum, and takes part in their education programmes, Australia is becoming an outlier in terms of the directions its education systems are heading now. A couple of decades ago the Australian education system was a role model for many others, not so much anymore. But it doesn't have to be this way.

## INTERNATIONAL LESSONS

Leading an education system is not easy. Since no one seems to have an answer to all the questions to which education ministers and their servants are expected to respond, closer professional cooperation and exchange of ideas between governments have become the new normal in global educational leadership. Collective search for solutions to education systems' problems does not always succeed, but it can help to avoid adopting some bad ideas that sometimes only make things worse.

International experts have voiced their concerns that Australia might be on the wrong course if it aims to offer world class education to all children in the future. Already a decade ago Michael Fullan advised Australians by saying there is no way that ambitious and admirable nationwide goals, set out in the Melbourne Declaration, will be met with the strategies being used then. "No successful system in the world has ever led with these drivers", Fullan (2011, 7) wrote. Last year he told Australian education leaders that a decade may have been lost due to the inability to choose the right drivers in education reforms. In September, speaking to a group of school leaders, OECD's education director Andreas Schleicher warned Australia of the perils of the wrong way, saying we may end up training our youth to become second class robots instead of educating them to be first class humans. Both of these global authorities have deep personal understanding of Australian education.

During the last decade Australian education has had a trend of declining performance, similar to what most other OECD countries have experienced. For example, according to the latest international data, one fifth of Australian 15-year-olds miss adequate literacy skills targets needed in life (OECD, 2019). That figure reaches almost half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia (ACER, 2019). Trends are similar in mathematical and scientific literacy as well. Regardless of frequent reforms and steadily increased total expenditure on education, learning outcomes remain stagnant or decline.

We can change the course but not with the same logic that has caused this inconvenient situation. This would be easier through policy learning in closer collaboration with other education nations.

## LIVING WITHOUT A PACK

Recent educational literature and research describes, in detail, various aspects of the state of Australian education

today (Bonnor et al., 2021; Burns and McIntyre, 2017; Netolicky et al. 2019; Reid, 2020). Contemporary issues and challenges in professional publications are clear and commonly accepted among education practitioners, experts, and academics. These issues and challenges include, but are not limited to, school funding, systemic educational inequalities, and an inadequate initial teacher education system. It is good to keep in mind that we are not alone with these challenges; many other countries are trying to solve these same problems, too.

The problem is not that we wouldn't know enough about what is behind the declining educational performance in Australia during the past two decades. There is no shortage of reviews, evaluations, declarations, and commission reports about the education system and how it is not working the way it should. The problem is that we are not good at turning these findings and recommendations into new practices that would eventually make education better.

The real issue is that during the past decade Australia has become a passive member in an increasingly vibrant international community of education system leaders. One such global platform is the International Summit on the Teaching Profession (ISTP) that was launched in 2011 by the OECD and Education International (EI) as a response to emerging problems such as teacher shortages, initial teacher education, and professionalism in the teaching profession (Edwards and Schleicher, 2021). ISTP is a high-level invitation-only policy forum for the world's best-performing education systems. Delegates, that must include a nation's education minister and the head of national teacher association (i.e., Australian Education Union), take two days to explore current issues in the teaching profession and discuss solutions to current issues and challenges, such as teacher shortages and initial teacher education.

Australia has been invited to attend these summits since the beginning. Every time, it has declined to attend. A decade of valuable opportunities to learn from others and build professional and political relationships has been wasted. In absence of these professional and policy dialogues, the perspective to the challenges we try to work out becomes narrower. At the same time, Australian schools and educators would have a lot to offer to their peers in other countries. It seems like we are a lone wolf in global education.

## HOW ARE AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS DIFFERENT?

In many ways Australian schools are like schools anywhere in the OECD. In most education statistics (whether is about class sizes, curricula, or how much is spent on education) Australia is like most others (OECD, 2022). There are, however, some aspects where schools here are very different from most others. These are all issues that beg the question: What do these differences mean in practice?

Here is a brief description of three things that make Australian school system an outlier among the OECD community.

### *Total number of compulsory instruction hours for children during primary and lower secondary education*

Around the world, children start primary education typically when they are six years old. They then continue schooling in lower secondary and upper secondary schools. Overseas, the total length of school education is about 12 years, in Australia it is 13 years. The school year includes normally 36 to 40 weeks (or 180 to 200 schooldays). Comparing compulsory instruction hours, that students in different countries are required to attend during primary and lower secondary education, reveals the whole picture See Figure 1.

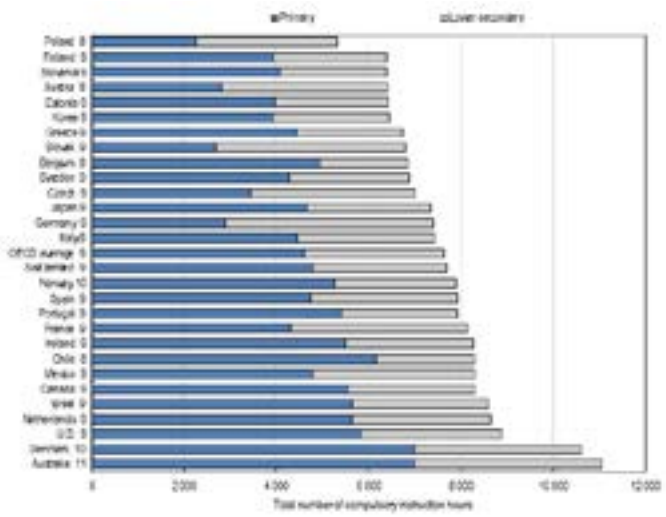

*Figure 1. Compulsory instruction time in general education in hours in public primary and lower secondary schools*
Source: OECD (2021)

According to Figure 1, primary and lower secondary education in OECD countries, lasts on average, 7,638 instruction hours during 9 years of schooling. In Finland, for example, that time is 6,384 over 9 years of schooling. Australian students have a total of 11 years of primary and lower secondary education that equals to 11,060 instruction hours (OECD, 2021). That is more than in any other OECD country. Schooldays in primary education in other OECD countries are often significantly shorter compared to Australia. Again, children spend more time in primary school in Australia than their peers in Finland, Estonia, or South Korea spend in primary and lower secondary education combined.

What does that mean in practice? Some might expect that because Australian students spend so much more time in school by the age of 15, their academic outcomes in OECD's PISA or other international assessments must be much better than students in Korea, Estonia, or Finland. But that is not so. There is no correlation between students' instruction time and academic performance in school.

***Distribution of public and private expenditure on primary and secondary schools***

Education is not cheap. Governments in OECD countries allocate 10 to 15 per cent of their national budgets to education. There are different ways to compare how much – or little – countries around the world spend on educating their youth. One common indicator is total expenditure on primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary institutions as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). Total spending in OECD countries on primary, secondary, and post-secondary non-tertiary education institutions, on average, is 3.5 per cent of GDP as Figure 2 shows.

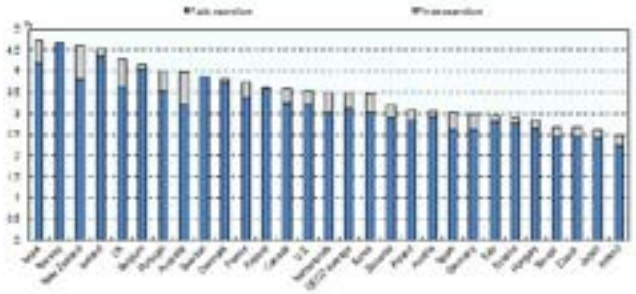

*Figure 2. Total expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP by source of funds*
Source: OECD (2021)

Education is quite expensive in Australia, too. Total spending on school education in Australia according to Figure 2, is about 4 per cent of GDP that is significantly more than the average spending in OECD countries. What makes Australia different in this club of world's wealthiest nations is the share of funding that parents pay for their children's education. At primary and secondary education, private spending from parents' pockets accounts for 0.3% of GDP across OECD countries. In Australia it amounts to at least 0.7% of GDP that is one of the largest relative shares of private funding of primary and secondary education among all OECD countries.

In other words, private spending accounts for 10% of expenditure at primary and secondary education on average across OECD countries, but it reaches 20% in Australia (OECD, 2020).

Australia is also an outlier in terms of the relatively high proportion of students, in primary and secondary education, who attend non-government schools. Now, that figure is about 35 per cent, being higher among secondary school-aged students especially in urban areas where there is more choice (ABS, 2022). What it means to have public education has become a different question in Australia compared to many other rich countries.

***Proportion of disadvantaged children attending schools where the majority of students are disadvantaged***

Parents' right to choose the suitable school for their children has been part of the global education reform movement since the 1990s (Sahlberg, 2016). This has served well some parents and their children but has led to growing segregation of schools by the socio-economic conditions of students. Market mechanisms don't always work in education as expected. Absence of intelligent regulation of education markets have led many countries to see increasing number of disadvantaged students attending schools where most students are disadvantaged like them. Figure 3 illustrates what the situation was in 2018.

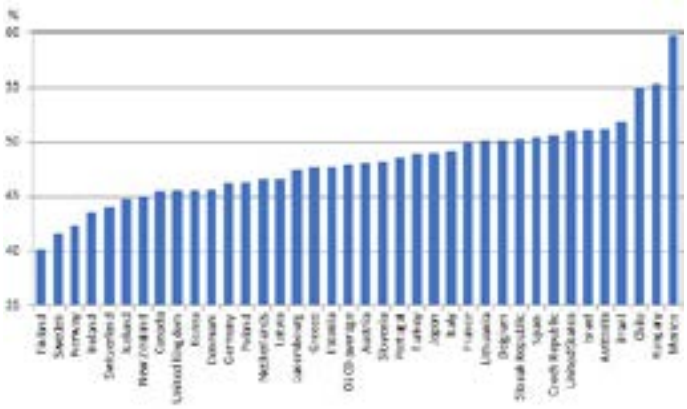

*Figure 3. Proportion of disadvantaged students attending schools where the majority of students are disadvantaged in OECD countries*
Source: OECD (2018)

There are only four other OECD countries where larger proportion of disadvantaged students are studying in schools where the majority of students are disadvantaged. In Australia, based on OECD data shown in Figure 3, that figure is 52 per cent. This is a consequence of education policies in Australia during the last two decades that have treated education as a marketplace where parental choice determines supply and demand of schooling. OECD's (2018) analysis has revealed that when a disadvantaged student attends a school where the majority of students are not disadvantaged, by the age of 15 that student will be, educationally speaking, approximately 2.5 years ahead of students who attend schools where the majority of students are disadvantaged.

## WHERE NEXT?

Being a lone wolf may be good if the rest of the pack is heading in the wrong direction. But, if you are alone surrounded by challenges and have lost a way to go, being without a pack may become difficult. Navigating in the wilderness alone can be difficult and risky. Solving wicked problems with others often leads to better solutions.

In 2022, Australia has a new federal government and many of its jurisdictions are electing new parliaments soon. One good decision the ministers and their education system leaders could make is to return to international education policy dialogues. There are many good opportunities to learn how other countries deal with the teacher shortages or modernise initial teacher education to better meet the needs of future schools, for example.

Every year, since 2011, the OECD and Education International have organised the International Summit on the Teaching Profession with the world's top-performing education systems. Here education ministers and education leaders from the top 20 education nations explore current issues and innovation in the teaching profession. Collaboration between ministers and teachers' unions as well as genuine policy learning between the nations are the key principles of these summits. Minister Jason Clare could attend in the 2023 summit that will be hosted by the Biden administration in Washington DC. This is perhaps the best next opportunity to learn what could be improved in the current federal government's action plan and in teacher policies across the country. All 'education nations' are there, why wouldn't we be?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Pasi Sahlberg** is a Finnish educator, former schoolteacher, and award-winning author who has lifelong career in education. His books and essays about education are translated into 30 langauages and read around the world.
Pasi is recipient of several honours and awards for his work for education as human right, including 2012 Education Award in Finland, 2014 Robert Owen Award in Scotland, 2016 Lego Prize in Denmark, and 2021 Dr Paul Brock memorial Medal in NSW. His research interests include education policy and reform, equity in education, international education issues, and school improvement. He is Professor of Education at the Southern Cross University in Lismore, visiting professor at the UNSW Business School, and Adjunct Professor at the Universities of Helsinki and Oulu in Finland. Pasi lives in Lennox Head with his wife and two sons.