

New research finds popular policy fixes in education have least impact on student learning

Renowned education expert John Hattie says school choice, teacher performance pay and reducing class sizes are part of a “politics of distraction”

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Learning company Pearson today publishes two new reports by the world-leading education expert Professor John Hattie which call into question some of the key reform policies pursued by governments in the last twenty years.

Hattie questions widespread government focus on policies including **longer school days, teacher performance pay, and reducing class sizes** all of which he says are less important than the variability in education outcomes and teacher effectiveness *within* any one school.

In the first report, titled “What Doesn’t Work in Education: the Politics of Distraction” Hattie calls out a number of popular, but low impact, policy “distractors”, including:

- **Longer school days:** lengthening the school day or year, a very expensive fix, is shown to have little effect, as there is no positive correlation between instructional time and student achievement.
- **Performance pay:** compensating teachers based on performance alone is proven to only increase stress levels, while decreasing enthusiasm. A better solution is increased pay for increased expertise or helping fellow teachers improve their skills.
- **Smaller class sizes:** the evidence shows that teachers tend not to change their teaching approach, regardless of class size; therefore smaller classrooms do not have as much of an impact as anticipated.
- **Technology as a magic bullet:** currently, technology is mostly used in the classroom as yet another way for students to consume facts and knowledge. In order to have a transformational impact on teaching and learning, technology needs to be seen as a tool to support teachers.
- **Choice of school:** too much attention is paid to the differences between schools, when the evidence shows that the greater issue is the difference within schools, particularly the variability among teachers. Hattie concludes that the classroom that a student is assigned to within a school matters more than the school itself.
- **Initial teacher education:** studies show teacher education programmes have among the lowest overall impact of all the influences on student achievement. Instead, more focus should be placed on the first year of full-time classroom teaching, which is where the greatest learning happens for teachers.

Professor Hattie, an education expert at the University of Melbourne who has dedicated his career to opening up the “black box” of learning, challenges policymakers around the world to reevaluate their strategies for improving learning using the available evidence on what does and doesn’t work in education.

He asserts that it’s our obligation to provide every student with at least one year of learning progress for one year of input, regardless of their academic achievement level when they begin. And he identifies within-school variability - most critically, the variability in the effectiveness of teachers within any given school - as a fundamental problem to be addressed.

Building on his world-renowned [Visible Learning](#) work, which examines the relative impact of various education interventions on student learning, Hattie shows that many of our most politically popular structural fixes, such as school choice or reduced class size, are simply “distractors”: they have had little impact on student learning despite costing billions of dollars. The evidence tells us that a much higher impact strategy is to develop a culture of “collaborative expertise” in our schools and systems.

What works best in education: building a culture of collaborative expertise

In the second report, “What Works Best in Education: the Politics of Collaborative Expertise”, Hattie lays out a series of tasks designed to reduce the problem of within-school variability by seeking out and scaling up teacher expertise. These tasks include:

- teachers working together to develop a common language around student success criteria for a year’s schooling
- teachers making learning more personal for students at varying levels by using appropriate diagnosis, intervention, and evaluation tools
- leaders working with their staff to continuously evaluate the impact on student learning.

The papers are published by Pearson as part of their “Open Ideas” series, in which independent experts from around the world provide their views on the big, unanswered questions in education.

Professor John Hattie said:

“Despite the best of intentions, education has become fraught with the politics of distraction, most drawing us away from the critical work at hand. That is, ensuring that each student makes at least one year of progress for one year of effort. If we truly want to improve student learning, it is vital that we shift our narrative about teaching and learning away from these distractions, and begin the critical work of building up collaborative expertise in our schools and education systems.”

Pearson’s Chief Education Advisor Sir Michael Barber said:

“Pearson is working with some of the best minds in education to bring their diverse and independent ideas and insights to a wider audience. These pieces can sometimes be provocative; they are certainly always interesting. The current papers by John Hattie are a brilliant example of this - they prompt the right questions and start the right debates.

“Using the evidence that he has amassed over the course of his extensive career, John has produced a provocative synthesis of the most popular policy interventions in education, and their relative impact on learning, most of which he finds lacking in terms of the size of impact we should expect.

“Our aim is that these papers, which include John's proposed model of collaborative expertise, will challenge thinking along all points of the political spectrum and hopefully inspire policy changes that will help deliver the best possible outcomes for students.”

The full papers are available at pearson.com/hattie.

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1. About the author:

John Hattie is Professor and Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and Deputy Director of the Science of Learning Research Centre, and Chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. He is the author of *Visible Learning* and *Visible Learning for Teachers*, the co-author (with Gregory C. R. Yates) of *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn* and co-editor (with Eric Anderman) of the *International Guide to Student Achievement*.

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