

MEDIA RELEASE

Brightest students not being challenged

19 March 2015: Too many of Australia's most able students are coasting at school and not achieving their true potential, the Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) will tell an education conference starting today.

Speaking ahead of his keynote address to the International Conference on Giftedness and Talent Development in Brisbane, Professor Geoff Masters AO said that year-level curriculum expectations often impose artificial ceilings on student learning.

"Many students in our schools are judged to be performing well because they achieve high grades on middling expectations for children of their age," Professor Masters said. "Rather than being stretched and extended, many very able students achieve year-level expectations with minimal effort.

"Very able students often disengage when material is so easy that it fails to challenge them – just as students often become disengaged when given difficult material on which they have little chance of success," Professor Masters said.

There is anecdotal evidence that, in some classrooms, students are being rewarded with 'free time' when they complete the work set for a lesson, rather than being given more challenging extension activities.

"There sometimes appears to be reluctance to give additional, more difficult material to able students who complete set work early. Some teachers also are less sure about how to challenge and extend more able students," Professor Masters said.

In mathematics, the top 10 per cent of Australian Year 4 students perform at the same level as the top 40 per cent of students in Singapore, Korea and Hong Kong. By Year 8, the top 10 per cent perform at the same level as the top 50 per cent of students in Chinese Taipei, Singapore and Korea.

"In Australia, we have seen a decline in reading and mathematics levels at 15 years of age over the past 15 years, with the greatest decline occurring among our higher achieving students. It is worth asking whether we have been so focused on ensuring that all students meet minimum standards that we have neglected the needs of our most able."

Professor Masters said that judging and grading performance against year-level expectations was often a waste of time for very able students.

"There is evidence that, despite their good grades, very able students sometimes make relatively little annual progress in their learning. Rather than assessments against year-level expectations, these students require assessments to establish the points they have reached in their learning, to identify their special strengths and talents, and to assist in meeting their unique learning needs."

Conference participants will be told that a challenge lies in building the capacity of the teacher workforce to assess and identify the learning needs of Australia's most able students and to design learning activities that appropriately challenge and extend these students.

"This requires teachers who have deep understandings of the material they are teaching and who know how to meet the learning needs of individuals who may be several years ahead of the rest of the class," Professor Masters said.

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