

Nelson leaving kids behind (2 July 04)

ANDREW Leigh (Schools, 28/6) draws a parallel between the US's No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and Education Minister Brendan Nelson's school reform package. What the two programs have in common is a requirement for accountability in terms of regular student testing.

There is, however, an essential difference between the main thrust of the US program and Nelson's "reforms". In the US, schools are required to use practices and methods that are scientifically based, with a particular emphasis on effective teaching of initial reading. Schools obtaining funding under the Reading First program, funded through the No Child Left Behind Act, are required to demonstrate that their reading program is based on strategies that have been proved effective, as documented in the report of the National Reading Panel, which provides a comprehensive review of the research evidence relating to the teaching of reading.

This has led to fundamental changes in reading instruction, and the widespread adoption of programs which focus on the direct teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness, the two strategies identified by the National Reading Panel as essential to effective teaching of reading. These changes have been accompanied by the development of new curricula, the purchase of additional teaching resources, the appointment of full-time reading specialists, and extensive retraining of teachers to ensure they are competent to teach the new phonics-based curricula.

In Australia, the requirement for regular testing has not been accompanied by any similar review of teaching practice, or any requirement for the adoption of teaching methods whose effectiveness has been proved. If Nelson wants to look to the US for guidance, he should look more carefully at what is driving the changes in teaching instruction in the US, and ensure that a similar requirement for the adoption of effective teaching strategies is applied in Australia. Only then will testing be appropriate to monitor the outcomes of these "reforms".

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Nelson copies it out (29 June 04)

HEH! The media never misses the chance to loudly thunder "plagiarist" or "copycat" when Opposition Leader Mark Latham makes a statement, but when Andrew Leigh in "Nelson takes a leaf out of Bush reform plan" provides further evidence of the Government's lack of originality it is quietly hidden on page 16 (Schools, 28/6). Perhaps Education Minister Brendan Nelson isn't newsworthy.

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