

Family support the key to education

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Opinion

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IT'S an article of faith that education is the key to overcoming disadvantage and opening the door of opportunity. However, young people don't start their education from the same starting line. Some beginning primary students are already ahead of the pack.

They come from families where English literacy is part of day-to-day life. They've been read to from an early age, received a variety of intellectual stimulation, attended preschool and have begun to acquire essential literacy skills. They have had their emotional and physical needs met.

Others enter primary education well behind their peers. Their parents may lack English literacy skills and many won't have had the benefits of preschool. Their development and achievement will be compromised by poverty, disadvantage and health issues. Parental support may be limited, particularly when parents themselves underachieved at school.

Once schooling starts, it's not a level playing field. Struggling students are loaded up with handicaps and encounter new obstacles which hinder progress.

By the end of primary schooling, the achievement gap can be five years or more.

A key factor in student success is the quality of teaching each child receives, particularly in literacy, given that literacy underpins every aspect of schooling. School welfare programs and support for students are also important.

Unfortunately, students from certain backgrounds and whole schools can be categorised and stigmatised, resulting in low expectations and a self-fulfilling prophecy of underachievement. Once students start high school, previous achievement powerfully predicts future accomplishment. Some students are well equipped academically and socially for secondary schooling. Others quickly lose momentum. Their inadequate skills, especially in literacy and numeracy, see them falter while their peers move ahead.

By the second and third years of secondary school, some students actually go backwards in academic capability, such deskilling leaving them up to seven years behind some of their peers. They "hit the wall" and have little chance of completing high school. Their life options, and those of their children, are severely limited.

There are imperatives from this situation that any "education revolution" must address.

All young Australians need access to quality preschool education. This is especially so in poorer, rural and remote areas, where parents have a non-English-speaking background and parents have poor literacy. Poor literacy is debilitating and the cycle must be broken. Parents and community members need access to quality adult literacy programs.

Health problems also compromise initial and ongoing academic achievement. Diagnosis, intervention and support are required. State and federal health, education and welfare portfolios and programs need closer alignment.

The quality of the classroom teacher is the largest in-school influence on student achievement. School leadership and teachers' professional learning are major influences.

Both need attention, investment and development. A fully supported national curriculum is overdue. Effective student assessment and reporting are needed to target intervention and investment.

Across Australia in the coming weeks, another group of students start their primary schooling. If education is going to be the means to personal fulfilment and opportunity, we need to ensure that all these young people and their families are given the support they need to succeed. If not, the education process will reinforce disadvantage, not overcome it, to the detriment of us all.