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## LITERACY AND NUMERACY PERFORMANCE "STUCK IN THE '60s"

The literacy and numeracy performance of Australian school children is no better than it was in the 1960s and 1970s, according to new research from The Australian National University.

The research, by ANU economists Dr Andrew Leigh and Dr Chris Ryan, tracked long-run changes in test scores by comparing the performance of successive cohorts of school children on the same tests.

"Over the past three to four decades, neither literacy nor numeracy have improved, and may even have declined slightly", said Dr Ryan.

"For example, in numeracy the typical young teenage student in 2003 was approximately a quarter of a grade level behind his or her counterpart in 1964."

"Over this time, per-child spending has increased substantially. Yet this additional expenditure does not seem to have succeeded in raising literacy or numeracy."

The researchers noted that their findings were not inconsistent with Australia's solid performance on international literacy and numeracy tests.

"On international tests such as the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Australian children do about as well as one would expect, given our GDP per capita", said Dr Leigh.

"But this is not inconsistent with the finding that Australian test scores have failed to rise over time, since previous research has suggested that test scores in other OECD countries may also have flatlined over recent decades.

The researchers emphasised that their findings pertain only to trends in literacy and numeracy.

"We cannot rule out the possibility that Australian students today are doing better on outcomes that were not measured in the 1960s, such as verbal communication or social skills", said Dr Leigh.

"But it is possible that the additional education spending over the past few decades was misdirected. For example, decisions to reduce class sizes while allowing teacher salaries to decline relative to other professions may not have been in the best interests of students."

The paper, *How Has School Productivity Changed in Australia?*, is available at:  
<http://econrsss.anu.edu.au/~aleigh/>

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