



# CHILD & ADOLESCENT

MENTAL HEALTH CONFERENCE

RACV ROYAL PINES RESORT, GOLD COAST, QLD

17<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2026

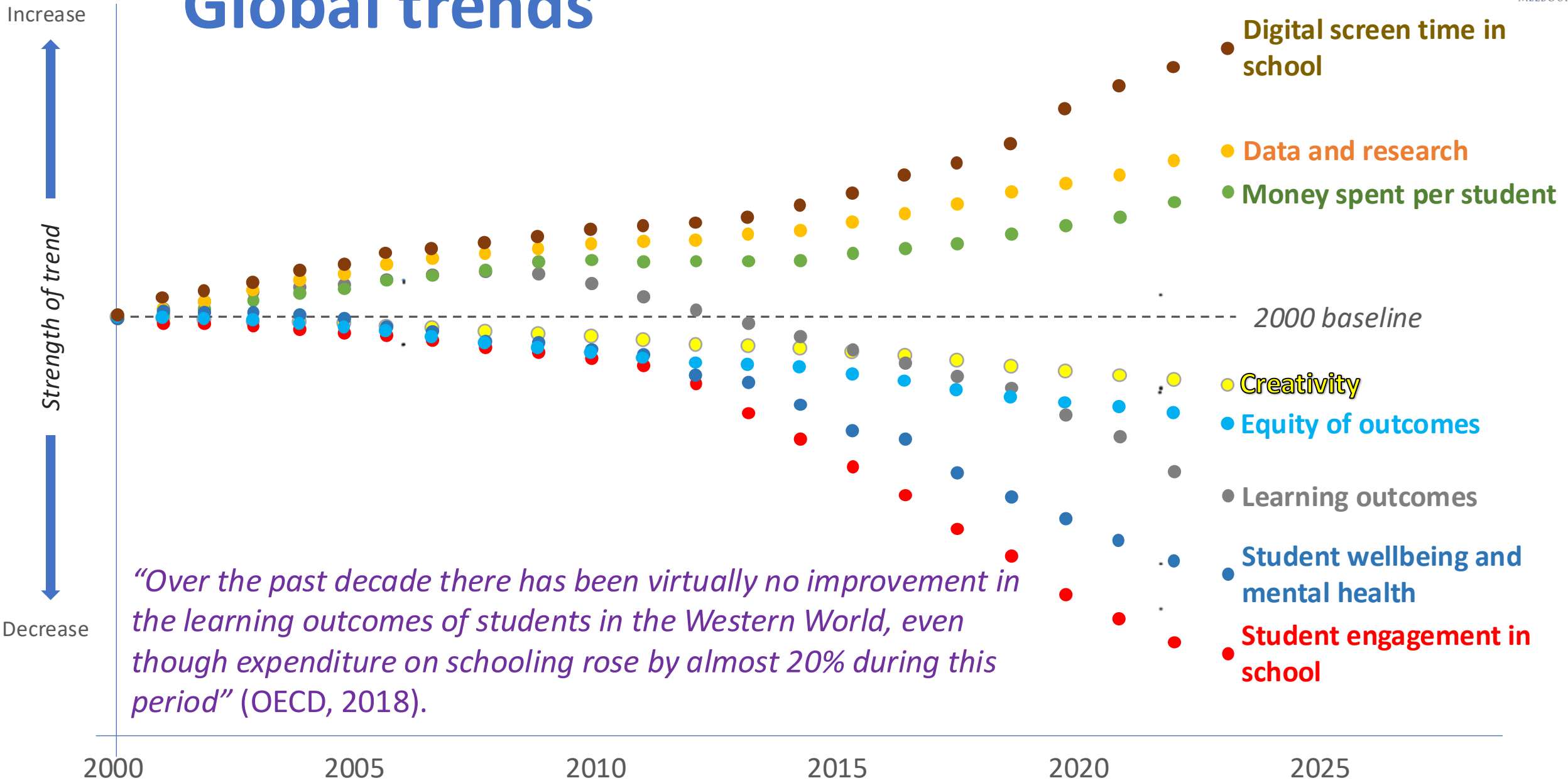
## REINVENTING AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS:

Purpose, possibility, and hope

Pasi Sahlberg



# Global trends

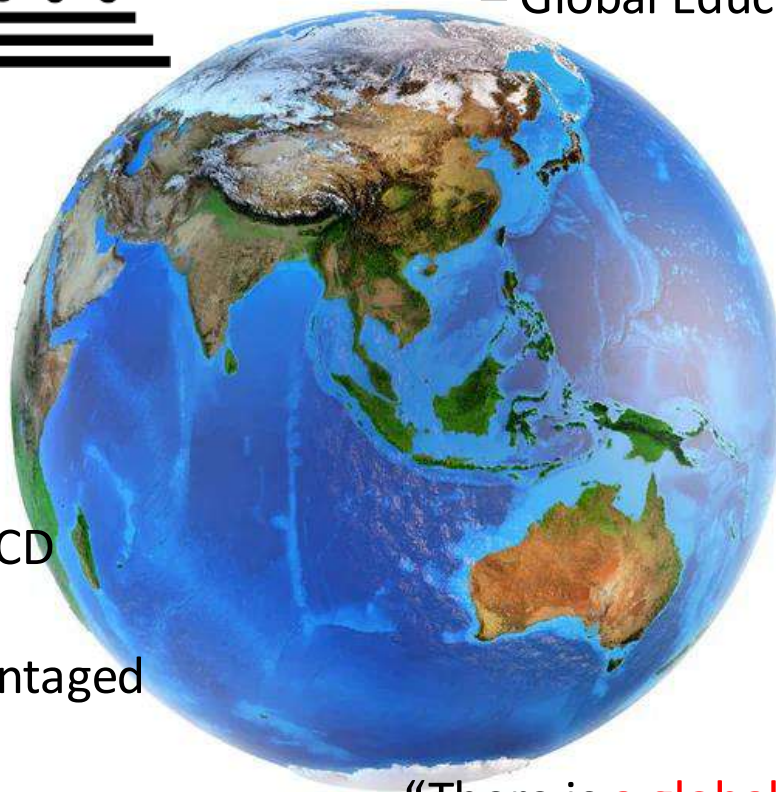


*“Over the past decade there has been virtually no improvement in the learning outcomes of students in the Western World, even though expenditure on schooling rose by almost 20% during this period” (OECD, 2018).*



“An estimated 258 million children, adolescents and youth, or 17% of the global total, are not in school.”

– Global Education Monitoring Report 2020



“The achievement gaps across the OECD countries between the most socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students have remained stagnant or widened.”

– PISA 2018



THE WORLD BANK

“There is a global learning crisis that amplifies educational inequalities that severely hobbles the disadvantaged youth who most need the boost that a good education can offer.”

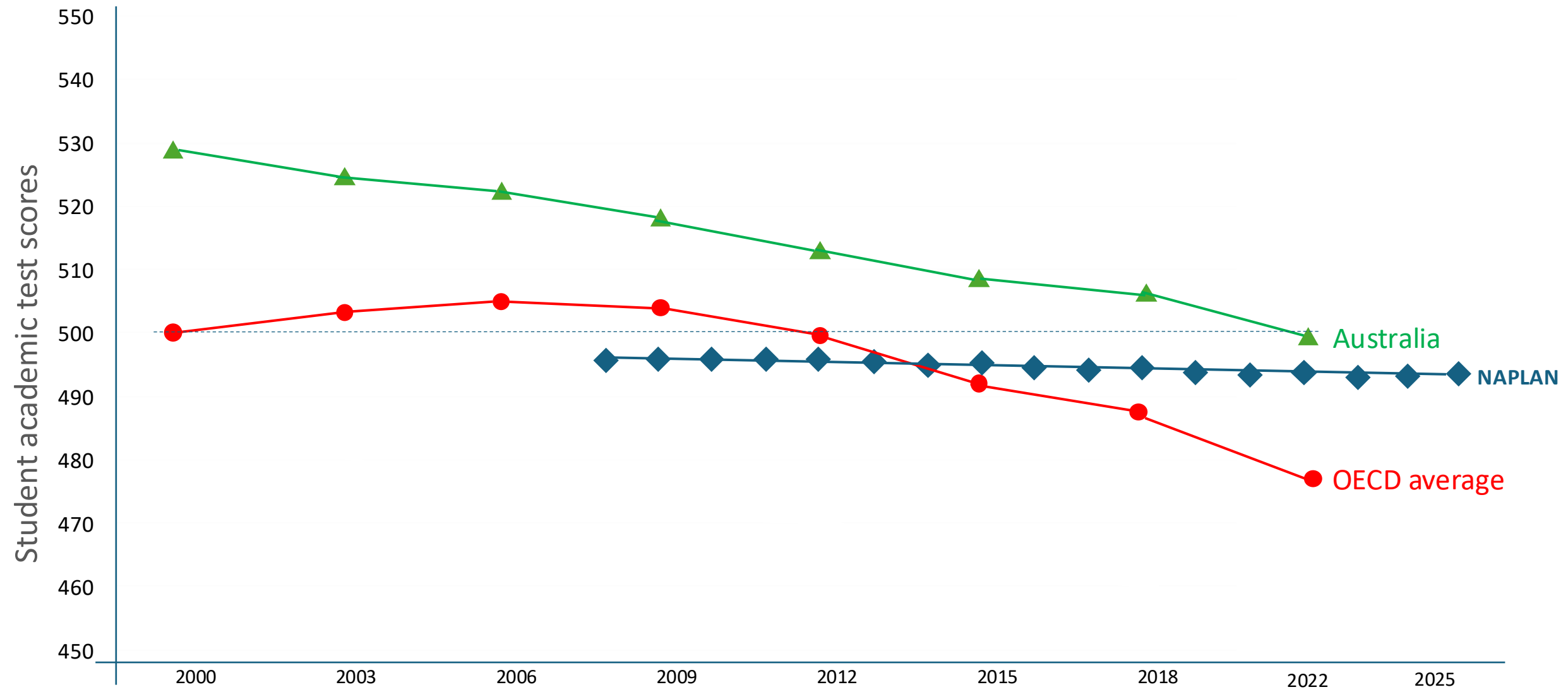
– Human Development Report 2018

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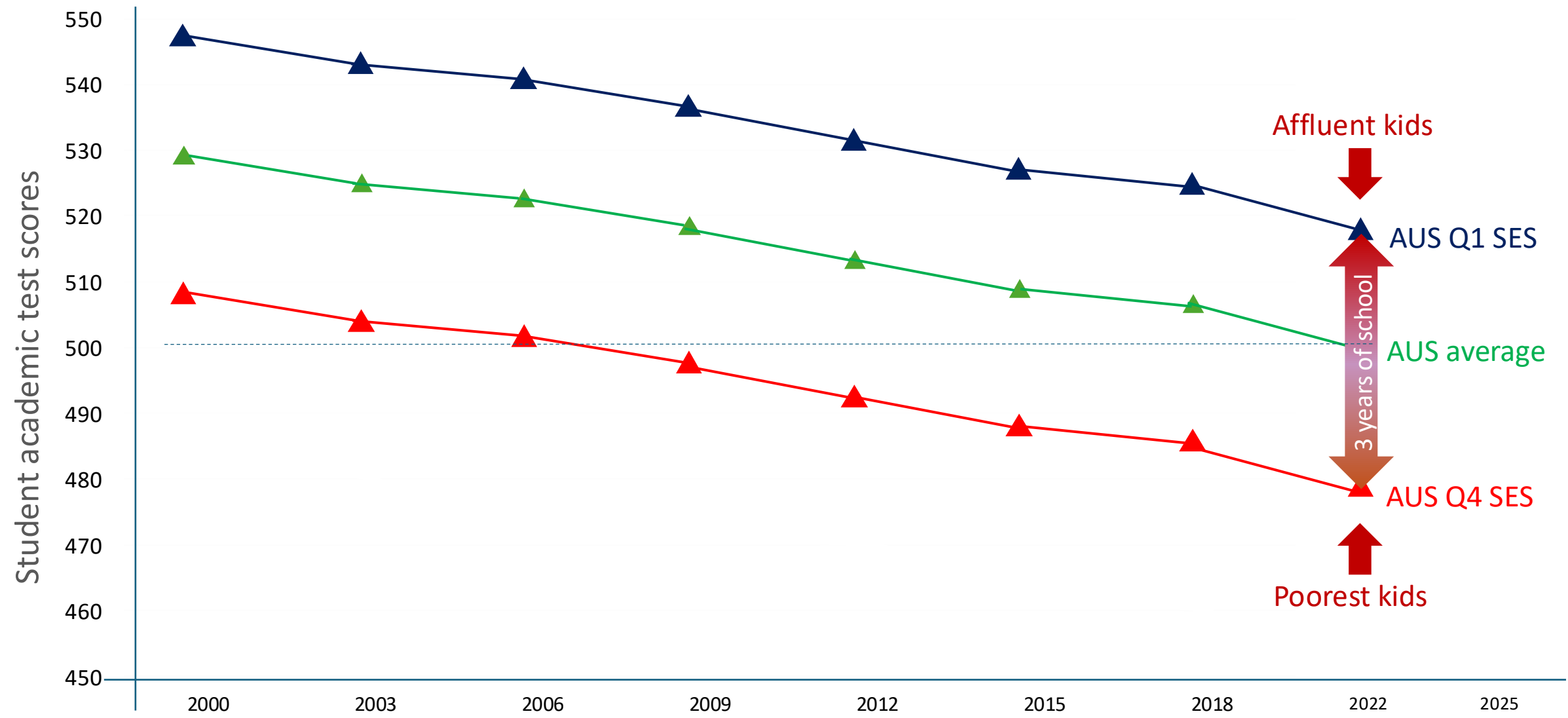
**“Insanity is doing the same thing  
again and again but expecting  
different results.”**

**Our schools.**

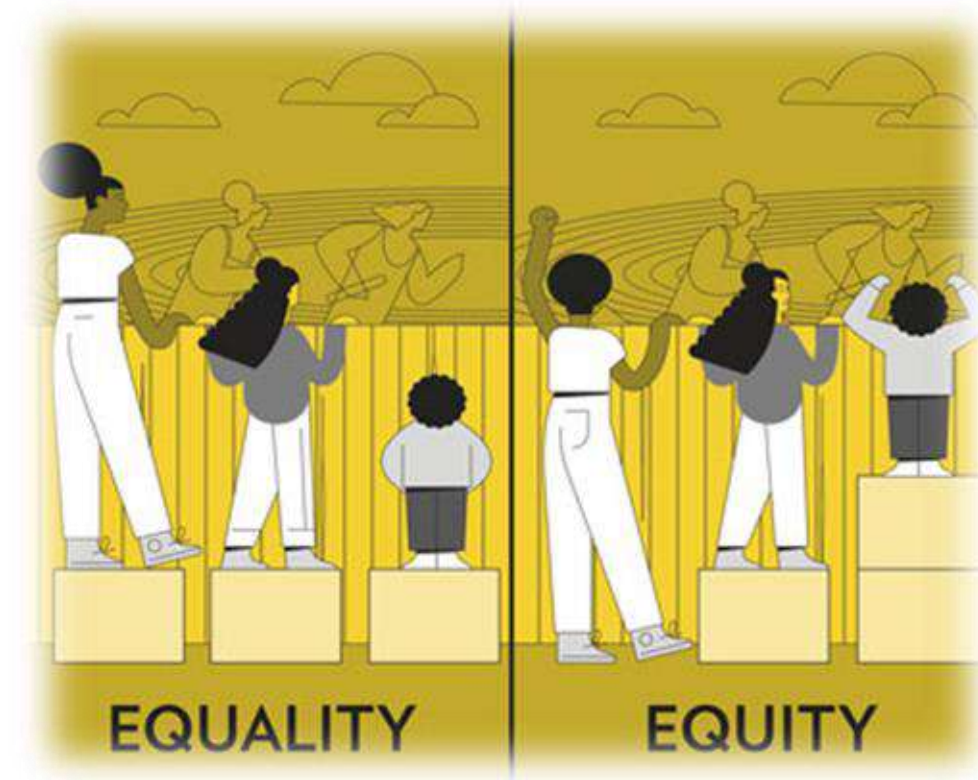
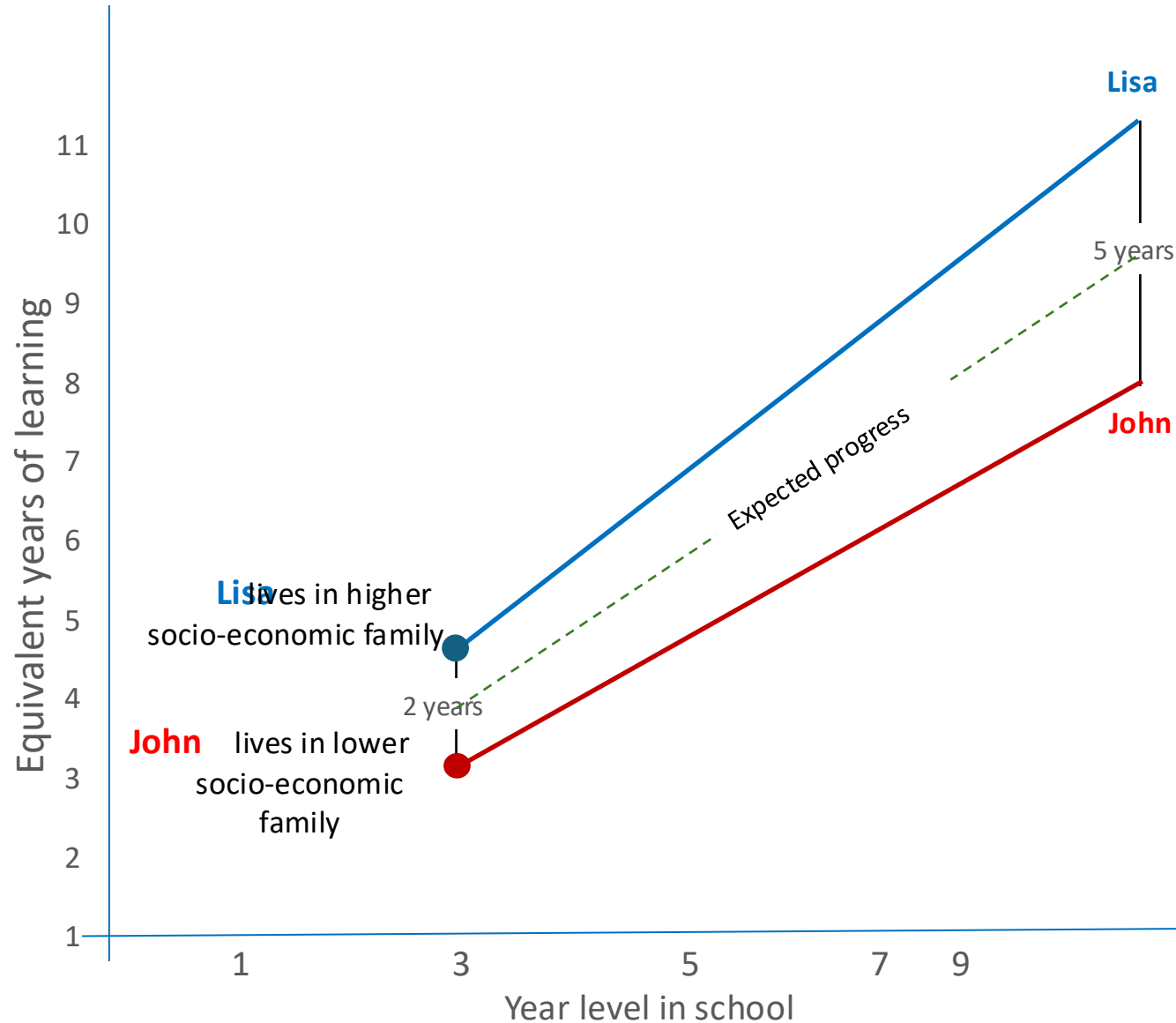
# Student achievement since 2000



# Student achievement since 2000



# Is education still the “great equaliser”?



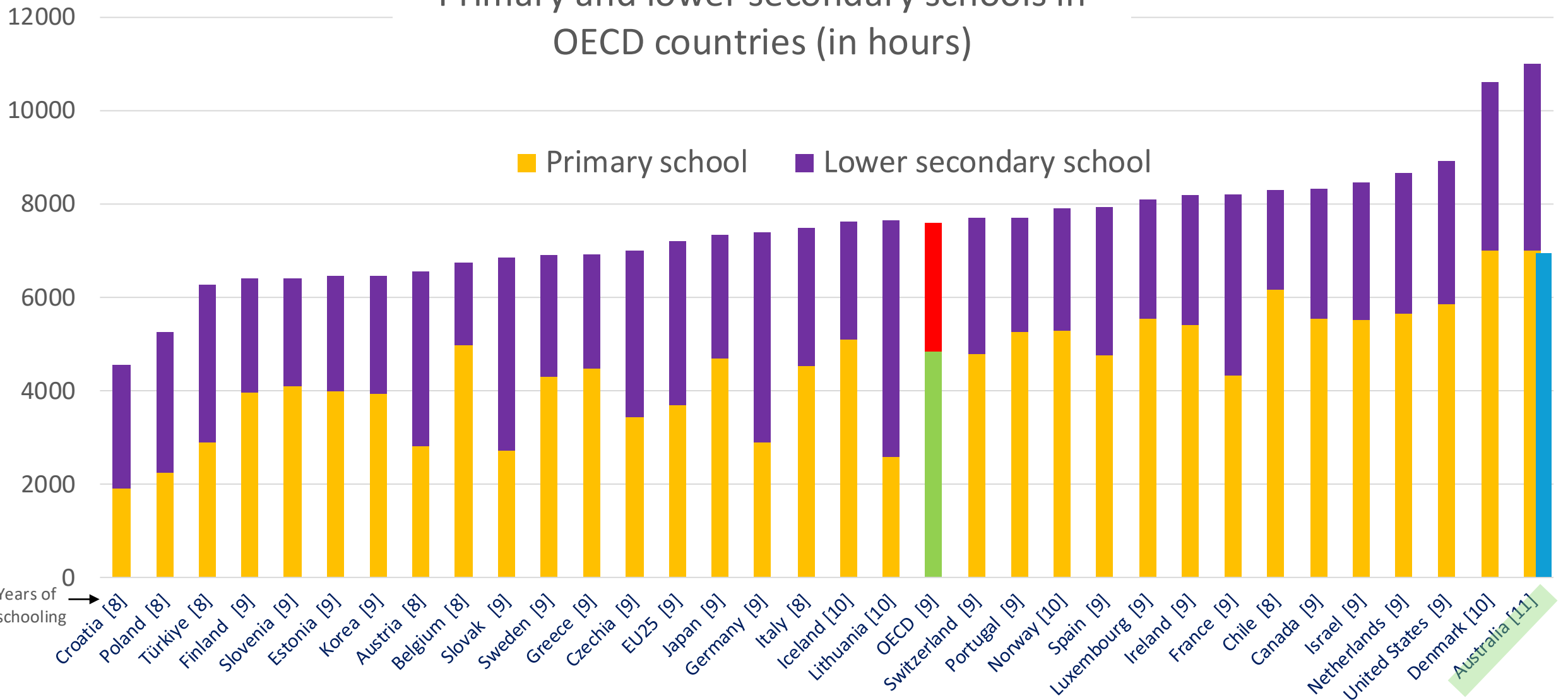
“Inclusion”

“Fairness”

# Compulsory instruction time in school

Hours of instruction

Primary and lower secondary schools in OECD countries (in hours)



Years of schooling

**Our kids.**

# Thinking about the young

What is **one value** that shapes the way you think about children and young people?



# Thinking about the young

Children have much **greater capacity** than we give them credit for.

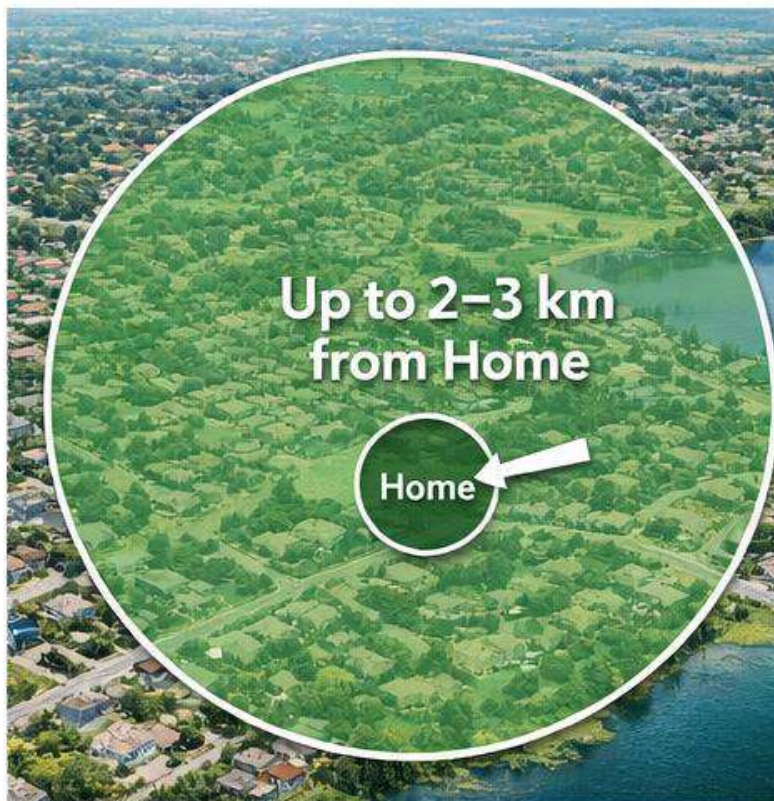
Children have a **right to play**, and we must protect that right for every child every day.

Freedom to **explore independently** is an important part of children's learning and wellbeing.



# The Shrinking Childhood Radius

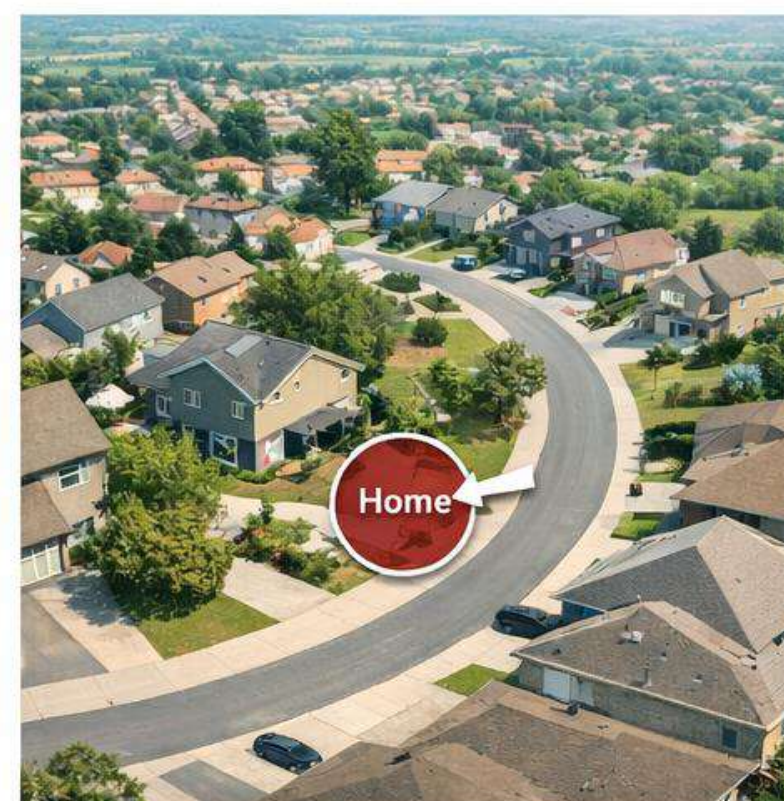
1970s



1990s

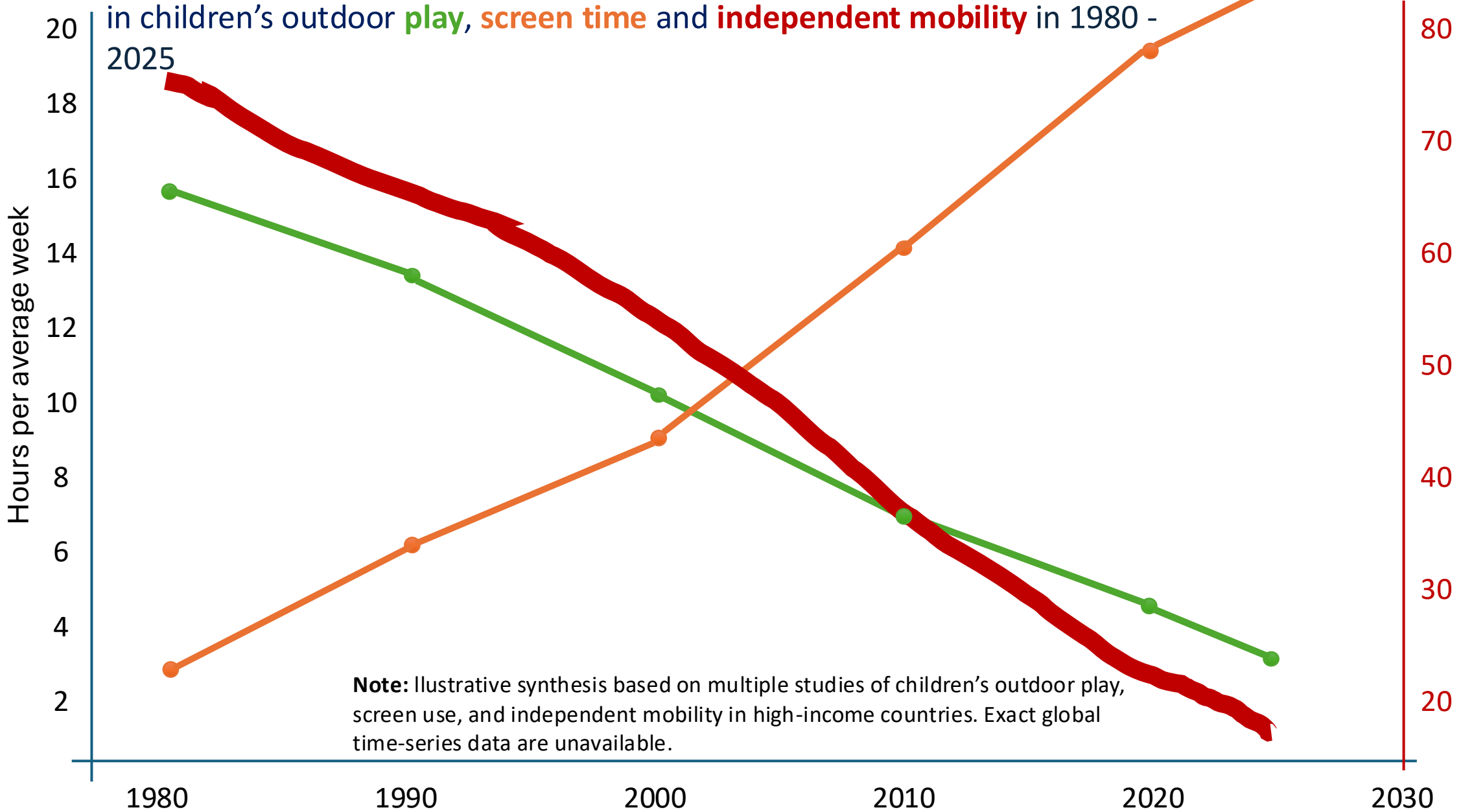


Today



# Illustrative trends

in children's outdoor **play**, **screen time** and **independent mobility** in 1980 - 2025



**Note:** Illustrative synthesis based on multiple studies of children's outdoor play, screen use, and independent mobility in high-income countries. Exact global time-series data are unavailable.

The share of children allowed to travel or play outside locally (e.g., going to school, visiting friends, going to a park) without an adult.



## Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence

Peter Gray, PhD<sup>1</sup>, David F. Lancy, PhD<sup>2</sup>, and David F. Bjorklund, PhD<sup>3</sup>

It is no secret that rates of anxiety and depression among school-aged children and teens in the US are at an all-time high. Recognizing this, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Association issued, in 2021, a joint statement to the Biden administration that child and adolescent mental health be declared a "national emergency."<sup>1</sup>

Although most current discussions of the decline in youth mental health emphasize that which has occurred over the past 10-15 years, research indicates that the decline has been continuous over at least the last 5 or 6 decades.<sup>2,3</sup> Although a variety of causes of this decline have been proposed by researchers and practitioners (some discussed near the end of this Commentary), our focus herein is on a possible cause that we believe has been insufficiently researched, discussed, and taken into account by health practitioners and policy makers.

Our thesis is that a primary cause of the rise in mental disorders is a decline over decades in opportunities for children and teens to play, roam, and engage in other activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults. Such independent activities may promote mental well-being through both immediate effects, as a direct source of satisfaction, and long-term effects, by building mental characteristics that provide a foundation for dealing effectively with the stresses of life.

We develop the thesis by summarizing evidence for, respectively, (1) a large decline over decades in children's opportunities for independent activity; (2) a large decline over the same decades in young people's mental health; (3) effects of independent activity on children's immediate happiness; and (4) effects of independent activity in building long-term psychological resilience. Then, we discuss the relation of independent activity to well-being from the perspectives of self-determination theory and evolutionary mismatch. In 2 final sections, we briefly review the evidence cited, comment on some other putative causes of declining mental health in youth, and offer some suggestions for pediatric practice. Unless otherwise noted or obvious, we use the word "children" throughout this article to refer to people younger than age 18 years.

### Decline in Children's Opportunities for Independent Activity

Those of us old enough to have been children in the 1970s or earlier know from experience that children then had far more freedom to roam, play, and engage in various activities independently of adults than do children today. Research has confirmed that our memories are not distorted. For example, Rutherford analyzed hundreds of articles and advice columns about childrearing that appeared in popular magazines from the early 20th century onward.<sup>4</sup> She found that earlier articles portrayed a world in which children spent much time with other children away from adults, walked or biked to school alone or with friends from as young as age 5 years, contributed meaningfully through chores to the household economy, and by age 11 or 12 years often had part-time jobs, such as babysitting and paper routes, performed without direct adult oversight. Over time, however, beginning in the 1960s and accelerating in the 1980s, the implicit understanding shifted from that of children as competent, responsible, and resilient to the opposite, as advice focused increasingly on children's needs for supervision and protection.<sup>4</sup> Rutherford noted, as have other reviewers,<sup>5</sup> that in some respects—such as freedom to choose what they wear or eat—children have gained autonomy over the decades. What has declined specifically is children's freedom to engage in activities that involve some degree of risk and personal responsibility away from adults.

Books on the history of childhood in America have likewise documented the decline of both free play and children's independent, responsible contributions to family and community. Chudacoff describes the first half of the 20th century as "the golden age of unstructured play" and shows how children's free play, especially outdoors, declined from about 1960 on.<sup>6</sup> Mintz supports the premises that "contemporary children are more regimented and constrained than ever before" and have "fewer socially valued ways to contribute to their family's well-being or to participate in community life."<sup>7</sup> In systematic surveys, parents have reported that their children play independently outdoors far less than they themselves did as children and that they limit their children's freedom outdoors largely because of fears of crime and traffic.<sup>8-10</sup>

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CIM Children's independent mobility  
LOC Locus of control  
SDT Self-determination theory

*“A primary cause of the rise in mental disorders is a decline over decades in opportunities for children to play, roam, and engage in other activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults.”*

# Life without free play

Research shows that long-term impacts of *play deprivation* include:

- **mental health issues, e.g., depression**
- **behavioural issues, e.g., aggression**
- **reduced self-control**
- **poor resilience**
- **obesity**



**Reinventing Australian schools.**

# What do young people want?

**Work on and learn meaningful things  
with purpose**

**Positively contribute to the community  
and beyond**

**Build positive relationships to peers  
and adults**

**Pursuit of mental wellbeing and  
happiness**

**Feel that their identities are  
understood and valued**

**Agency!**

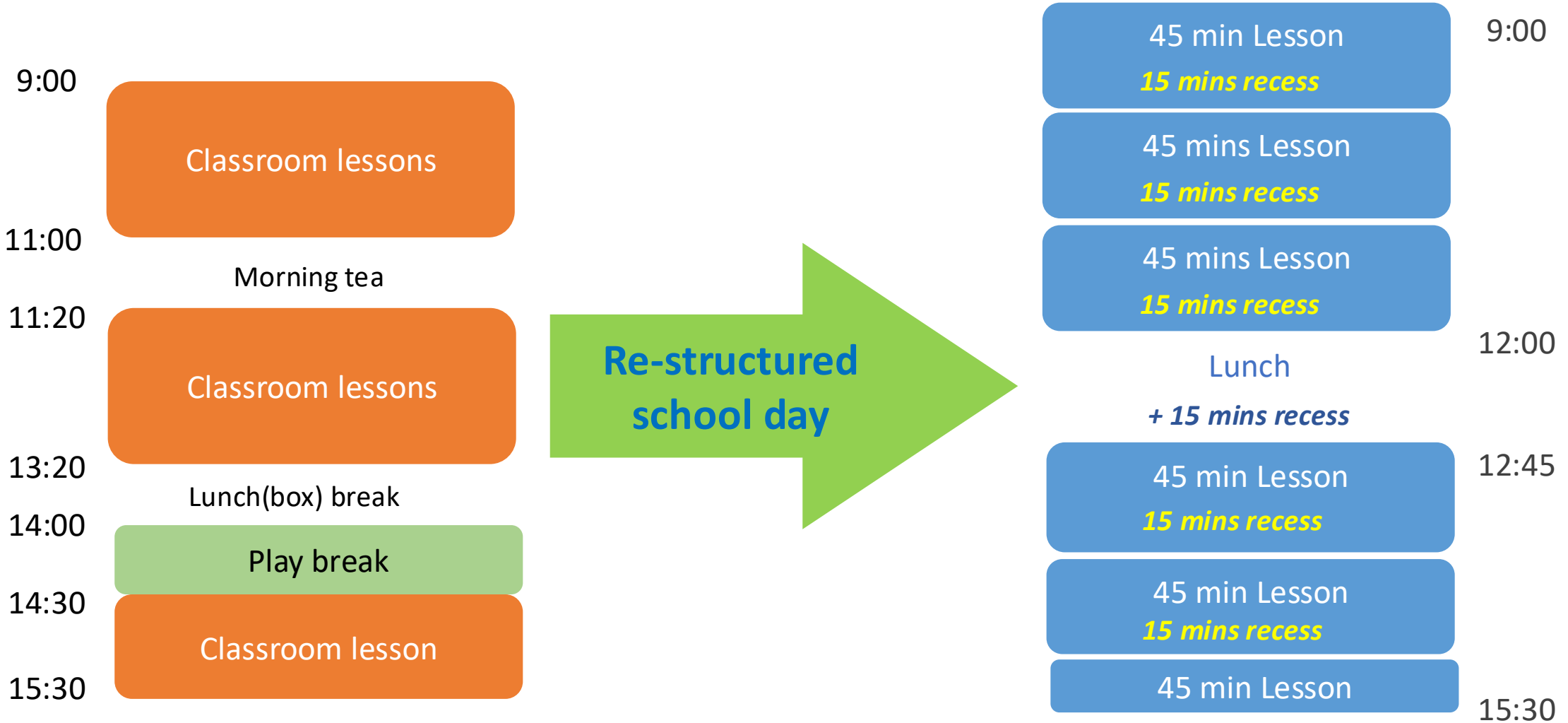


**Free play.**

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# Redesign daily schedule





# Relationships.

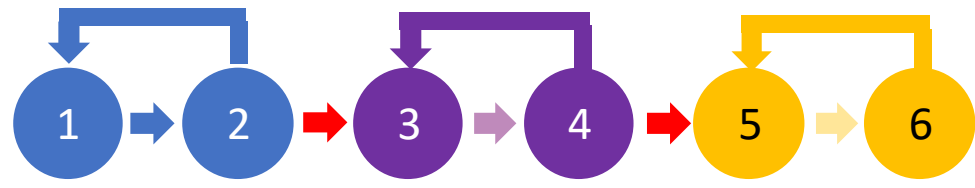
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# Allow 'teacher looping'

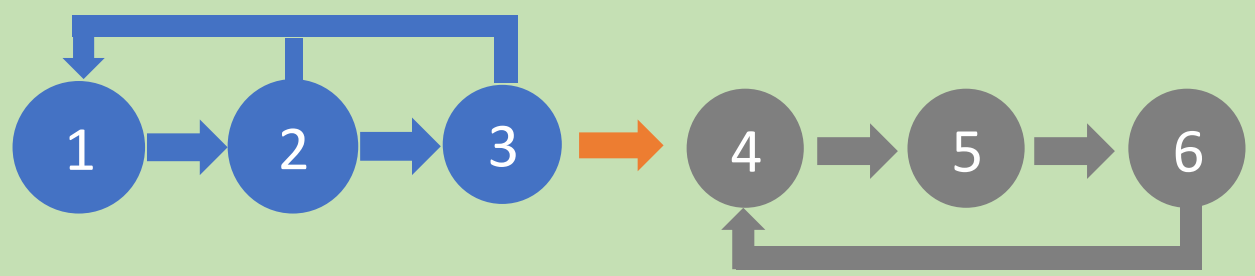
Primary school

Three 2-year loops:



The Finnish Model

Two 3-year loops:





# Unleash curiosity.

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**Keep wondering  
“What if...”**

**Teach students to  
identify and solve  
real problems**



**Start asking “How  
are our students  
smart?”**

**Prepare students to  
be wrong!**





**Thank you!**



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