

## OPINION

### Effective teachers where they are needed most

*Kirsten Storry 25 February 2008*

The central and essential part of an education revolution will not be laptop computers for every child. It will be effective teachers where they are needed most.

The quality of teaching that a child receives makes a significant impact on their academic progress and achievement. Factors like socio-economic status do affect a student's achievement, but teacher effects account for between [30 per cent](#) (PDF 175KB) and [60 per cent](#) (PDF 158KB) of the variation in student achievement.

How do we improve the quality of the teachers in our most disadvantaged schools, particularly our rural and remote schools?

As a first step, we must identify effective teachers. In the early primary years, the key mark of an effective teacher is to have successfully taught children the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. At a minimum, children must leave their care with the level of literacy and numeracy they need to progress to the next year of school.

Of course, good teachers must be empathetic, encourage imagination, build self-esteem, and promote a love of learning. Particularly in our most disadvantaged schools, good teachers will need significant reserves of resilience, initiative, resourcefulness, leadership, critical thinking, and high expectations to be effective.

While such personal qualities can be difficult (though not impossible) to assess, the value that a teacher adds towards student gains in literacy and numeracy can be measured in test scores. [Australian research](#) (PDF 796KB), replicating research results in the United States, shows that teachers in the top 10 per cent achieve the same increase in literacy and numeracy test scores in half a year that teachers in the bottom 10 per cent achieve in a full year.

[Research from the United States](#) also tells us that first year teachers are, on average, much less effective than their colleagues. Teacher performance increases significantly in the first three years of teaching, with novice teachers hitting their stride by their fourth year. New teachers often have a lot in their favour, particularly enthusiasm, but teachers do not graduate from universities with the skills they need to be effective in the classroom and must learn on the job in their first few years.

These findings suggest that the schools attended by our most disadvantaged students should be seeking to attract and retain teachers with at least three years of classroom experience and with a track record of effectiveness. Three years of experience on its own does not guarantee effectiveness, but this requirement alone would be expected to raise overall levels of teacher quality in disadvantaged schools.

The reality, however, is that a disproportionate number of our most inexperienced teachers go to our most needy rural and remote schools, according to the [Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, and Youth Affairs](#) (PDF 6.68MB). In New South Wales and Queensland, just less than half the newly graduated public school

teachers went to regional, rural and remote schools. In Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, just more than half did so.

The second step in the education revolution must be to ensure that there are effective teachers where they are needed most. It is essential that these teachers must be both able and willing to take up the challenge and this brings us to the question of incentives.

The current situation is no accident: the states and territories have incentive systems that promote this outcome. They do not reward evidence of teacher quality and the same incentives are available whether or not a candidate has experience and whether or not a candidate has a track record of effectiveness.

Take Western Australia, for example. The WA Department of Education and Training is [specifically targeting](#) (PDF 63KB) first year teachers for its Remote Teaching Service in the Midwest, Pilbara, Goldfields and Kimberley districts. From this year, first time teachers who take up positions in these hard-to-staff rural and remote schools will receive nearly \$70,000 a year, including a \$50,000 starting salary and up to \$19,800 in location allowances.

There is no problem per se with targeting strong candidates from our teaching graduates. Graduates will have to learn on the job, but may have robust content knowledge and strong people management skills.

But the WA education department does not require that Remote Teaching Service candidates be interviewed, let alone teach a mock lesson to demonstrate their effectiveness. A selection panel assesses the written applications and contacts referees, but does not conduct interviews "unless deemed necessary by the Panel". This stands in contrast to usual merit selection processes in the public service that require at least one interview.

The central and essential part of an education revolution will be an incentive system that offers a salary, status and career path that recognises their worth to those effective, accomplished teachers willing and able to take up the challenge of teaching in our most disadvantaged schools. Could the Rudd Government be willing and able to take up the challenge of leading such an education revolution?

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