

Incentives will bring top teachers

By Noel Pearson
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THE performance of Australia's education and training systems is an area of constant contention.

The trigger for debate is usually some study showing that Australian schools or universities have lost ground relative to educational institutions in other countries or to their own past achievements. However, the relative failures affecting students in the mainstream pale in comparison to the absolute educational failures diminishing the life prospects of thousands of students in remote indigenous communities.

A significant minority of students from these areas leave school without having acquired any literacy or numeracy skills, and are therefore unlikely to participate in the real economy. This is the most critical disaster in Australian education.

In Cape York, Year 2 diagnostic tests reveal that 60-80 per cent of indigenous students have below benchmark literacy and numeracy skills. Nearly all indigenous students in Cape York are two to four years behind the mainstream standard.

Improving school attendance is a first step on the road to turning this around. School attendance is therefore a main focus of the welfare reforms to be introduced in Cape York Peninsula communities this year.

Once the children are in school, well fed and rested, teacher quality is the most important lever to improve educational outcomes. Research from the Australian National University shows that a teacher who rates in the 90th percentile of performance can achieve in six months what a 10th percentile teacher can achieve in a full year.

Improving the quality of teachers does not negate the need for whole-school reform, but nothing else has been shown to have such a decisive impact on school results.

These insights - the importance of teacher quality for education outcomes and the importance of early education for life prospects - have profound implications for indigenous policy. Remote schools must receive a much higher proportion of Australia's most experienced and successful teachers than they do now..

The Cape York Institute, in concert with Macquarie University, has put together a plan to get such great individuals into remote schools ("Teachers' \$50k bush bonus", *The Australian*, Friday).

Our plan targets two groups of people. First, the existing cadre of experienced teachers who have an exceptional track record of delivering results. Second, the huge

number of outstanding university graduates or professionals who do not have an education degree.

Over time, we expect that being associated with this program will become highly prestigious, acknowledging a participant to be one of Australia's most outstanding teachers. For the outstanding graduates, such experience would be a significant asset on their resume.

We believe that the prestige of the program will become an important motivation for participation. However, to send the message that expectations of participating teachers and professionals are extremely high, and to compensate for the hardship of relocation, it is necessary to significantly improve on the incentives now offered by the states and territories to make remote teaching positions attractive.

Incentives largely target the inexperienced teacher. We propose that experienced teachers be lured to remote schools through the establishment of \$50,000 annual fellowships paid to selected teachers.

This fellowship program will inject significant numbers of outstanding teachers into remote areas, but it will not address the overall shortage of teachers. The issue in remote schools is not simply one of quality, but of quantity. Vacancies are already widespread in remote schools and this will get worse as student numbers increase (due to both improved attendance as a result of welfare reform measures and the rapidly increasing population in many communities) and the expected rapid retirement of teachers over the next five to 10 years. An additional source of quality teachers will be required to address this.

This is where the outstanding university graduates, from non-teaching degrees, comes into play. Our plan involves targeting the best and brightest individuals who are at present not in the teaching profession, providing them with two months' intensive training and then placing them alongside a fellow in remote schools for mentoring. A \$20,000 stipend would be provided (conditional on performance) in addition to the usual salary package of a first-year teacher.

This aspect of the plan is modelled on the successful Teach for America program and Britain's Teach First program. In both cases, top graduates from the best universities are recruited, given four to six weeks of training, and then placed in a disadvantaged school.

The studies on the effectiveness of these new teachers found that the individuals achieved results as good, and frequently better, than the average teacher and considerably better than entry-level teachers. We believe that similar results would be achieved in the Australian context.

Under our plan, a new organisation, Teach for Australia, would be established to recruit the fellows and the new graduates (associate teachers), provide them with intensive training, develop assessments and monitor student and teacher performance.

The greatest difference between our plan and existing policies is that the fellowship would be contingent on the teacher assessing students' literacy and numeracy performance on a monthly basis against standardised assessments. A teacher who was not delivering results would not have their fellowship renewed.

Will this mean that the fellows will simply "teach to the test"? Quite possibly, but if the tests are well constructed and properly assess the knowledge that students are supposed to learn, then "teaching to the test" presents no difficulties.

Teach for Australia would initially recruit for two locations: the Northern Territory, to coincide with the federal Government's interventions in remote indigenous communities there, and Cape York Peninsula.

There has been little educational focus in the federal interventions (other than the attendance measures), and the need in the NT is probably the greatest in Australia.

Cape York has been selected because of the desperate need in Cape York communities and because of the introduction of the Cape York welfare reform trials that will be implemented this year.

The cost of this plan is \$67 million over four years, with the bulk of this cost in covering fellow and associate teacher stipend. We would envisage corporate support covering organisational costs in the latter years. State and territory governments would employ the fellows and associate teachers, but not carry the cost of the incentives scheme.

Within four years, half of the teachers in remote primary schools in the NT and Cape York could consist of Australia's best teachers.

Through these teachers, a strong performance culture would be embedded in remote schools, with a relentless focus on improving results in literacy and numeracy.

We recommend this plan to the Australian Government. We believe it will improve the lives and prospects of thousands of students in remote Australia.

Noel Pearson is director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.