

Give good teachers a gold star and put the bad ones out to pasture

February 4, 2010

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Illustration: Edd Aragon.

Behind the furore over school league tables, the criticism of standardised testing, the self-interested screaming of neanderthal teachers' unions and the remarkable steel in Julia Gillard's spine, is a very important fact. More than anything else in education, it is teachers who make a difference.

Research by Professor Bill Loudon, of the University of Western Australia, and from overseas, increasingly points to the instinctively obvious: regardless of how many school halls or archery fields, regardless

even of a child's socio-economic background, teacher quality is the key to success.

The most valuable information standardised testing can provide is the difference good teaching makes, allowing the lucky child with a good teacher to improve at a greater rate than her contemporaries stuck with duds or mediocrities.

This kind of information is, of course, anathema to a union culture hell-bent on preserving a false "see-no-evil" egalitarianism among its membership, where longevity of service is rewarded over excellence, ingenuity is crushed, and children, especially those without involved, competent parents, suffer.

To her great credit, Gillard, the federal Education Minister, is determined to empower parents and policy makers with as much information as possible about the performance of schools and teachers. Her MySchool website, launched last week, includes the results of national numeracy and literacy tests for years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in each of the nation's almost 10,000 schools.

"We would expect parents to have robust conversations with teachers and principals," she said. "This should put pressure on people."

The extent of the pent-up demand from parents for such information was revealed in the fact the site crashed under the weight of 9 million hits in its first day. People started using it at 1am.

The Australian Education Union, purportedly representing 180,000 teachers, under its militant federal president, Angelo Gavrielatos, has been fighting the website on every front, and threatens to boycott supervision of this year's tests. Gillard, admirably, is standing her ground. "If they don't reconsider, we will get it done by whatever means it takes."

While some parents have reportedly been pulling their children out of schools that rated poorly on the website, the school is in fact less important than the individual teacher.

As an article this month in *The Atlantic* titled "What makes a great teacher?" puts it: "Parents have always worried about where to send their children to school; but the school, statistically speaking, does not matter as much as which adult stands in front of their children. Teacher quality tends to vary more within schools - even supposedly good schools - than among schools."

The problem is how to identify the qualities of great teachers. This is where Macquarie University's joint project with the Cape York Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, "Teach for Australia", comes in.

Based on an American program, "Teach For America", the non-profit organisation, with such sponsors as Boston Consulting Group and Stockland, operates outside the education establishment, but is now championed by Gillard.

It recruits non-teachers - high achieving university graduates - to parachute into a disadvantaged school for two years, bringing enthusiasm and a fresh approach.

They are given six weeks' intensive training, 70 hours a week over the Christmas holidays, and will receive a postgraduate diploma in teaching.

Last week the first crop of 46 TFA associate, as they are called, began teaching in Victorian schools. The program has been popular, with 750 applications for 50 places.

The average UAI score of the applicants was 97. TFA cites an American study that found Teach For America teachers are "more effective, as measured by student exam performance, than traditional teachers".

Of course, teachers' unions have been hostile, with claims TFA "demeans" the profession. But they are increasingly irrelevant, and in a speech to the new TFA teachers two weeks ago, Gillard said she expected they would be welcomed by established teachers "because I believe the best people aren't afraid to be surrounded by the best people".

The idea for TFA came from a seminal paper by Pearson for the then Cape York Institute in 2007: *Teach for Australia. A practical plan to get great teachers into remote schools*. The idea was championed by Professor Steven Schwartz, vice-chancellor of Macquarie University, whose Professor Kevin Wheldall already had been working with Pearson on successful phonics-based reading programs in Cape York.

In the US this year 7300 Teach for America teachers will teach almost half a million children, almost all of whom are poor and African American or Latino, reports *The Atlantic*.

The American TFA found a pattern among exceptional teachers - those whose students achieved at least 1½ years' growth in a year. They "set big goals [and] constantly re-evaluate what they are doing . . . frequently check for understanding; [established a] well-executed routine; avidly recruited students and their families into the process; planned exhaustively and purposefully; refused to surrender to the combined menaces of poverty, bureaucracy, and budgetary shortfalls [and they had] a relentless mindset".

The heartening discovery is that great teaching is not rocket science, and, as Steven Farr of Teach for America says, is "neither mysterious nor magical. It is neither a function of dynamic personality nor dramatic performance."

Importantly, great teaching techniques can be taught.

In her TFA speech Gillard laid down the philosophy behind the project: "That children from the poorest and most difficult backgrounds can learn and achieve and if they fail to do so, we the adults have let them down."

The war against teachers' unions is on - only this time it is not from their traditional conservative enemies, who have proved spectacularly unsuccessful over the past decade in breaking union control of education.

A new resolve from the unions' old allies and enablers, the Australian Labor Party, and in the US the Democrats, unable any longer to ignore the disastrous effect of progressive policies of the past 40 years, looks like finally breaking their destructive dominance.

At last we can prove that demography is not destiny.

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Comments

77 comments so far

»«

»i thought i wuz taut very well in my skool- our teecher let us do wat we wanted«

Paul | Ashbury - February 04, 2010, 6:46AM

»«

»I am not sure that the tables are to 'provide parents with more information.' Information for what? We have not been trained in statistics nor the teaching profession, our conclusions drawn from the tables are just guesses.«

»Maybe the intention is to show that public and private schools are similar and eventually remove the government subsidies and tax breaks to private schools?«

»Maybe there are just too many teachers and the tables are a means of restricting new teacher placements.«

»Due to spin, I have less information now.«

thoughtspace - February 04, 2010, 7:16AM

»«

»Who would have thought that adding more adults into the classroom would increase the ability of students to learn???!?!

If Gillard was intent on helping schools she would not put additional pressure on the teachers already there trying to do their job amid a whole lot of pressure but would add more teachers into these schools.

Along with this empowering parents to "BADGER" teachers is fine.... but at least give them the correct information to come to teachers and discuss. Parents with incorrect information badgering teachers take up more time as a teacher tries to explain the flaws in the website information.

Short form for those with limited imagination....

Train more teachers and support them in schools - ie put more staff in schools to bring down class numbers!

Take away the misleading and incorrect information that is at this point being used to take up more of a teachers time as they try to explain why using one test on one day every 2 years is an invalid index of a school.

Support good teachers... at this point in time there is no support for teachers - only more pressure put on them by the government who doesn't really seem to understand the problems that teacher face when teaching.«

Warky | Sydney - February 04, 2010, 7:27AM

»«

»As a former teacher in NSW State Schools I would like to concur with most of what was said in this article.

Until all positions are advertised and anyone with the right experience and qualifications can apply NSW education will be in the doldrums.«

»There were teachers at my last school who had even stopped pretending to teach and their children watched tv and played games while they talked on their mobile phones. No one would take a sporting team.«

»Most of the staff were great teachers and would help and support the younger teachers but the disgraceful minority were untouchable.«

»The rest of the workplace is accountable and NSW teachers should not be a special category.«

Olivia | Blue Mountains - February 04, 2010, 7:48AM

»«

»Ah yes Miranda, another opportunity for you to foam at the mouth at the prospect of a (real or imagined) stoush between a union and, well, anyone. Not sure on what basis you leap from a description of TFA to making a sweeping statement about the 'disastrous effect of progressive policies of the past 40 years' but I won't hurt my head further trying to discern your reasoning processes.«

Bemused | Clovelly - February 04, 2010, 7:39AM

»«

»The trouble with the 'My School' website is it doesn't show how far the school has taken the child even though the school's overall results appear to be below average. Our school has just completed the Best Start assessment with our new kindergarten children. Most of them scored zero or made no attempt on the tasks. Many can't recognise or count past 2, are unable to recognise letters or the sounds they make. Also not evident on the website is the growth from Year 3 to 5 that the students in our school make. Every child 'value added' significantly from Years 3 to 5. A reflection of good teaching.«

Mistereee - February 04, 2010, 7:38AM

»«

»6 weeks training? that DOES demean the position of a teacher. It takes 4 years at university to get a teaching degree and I would be sceptical of anyone stepping up with 6 weeks training. Im siding with the teachers federation and with them representing so many teachers it will be harder to break them than you may think Miranda. Yes, i am a teacher and a federation member. Ive heard all the old complaints from people about teachers. Mostly from people that bitch about them but would never step up and try the job or have been in a room since they finished in year 12 or year 10. Im a young teacher and I do my job properly and put long hours into it. Teacher bash all you want people because most of your comments are old, heard many times and best of all, mostly ignored because they come from a place of ignorance and stupidity.«

Mountain Man | Blue Mountains - February 04, 2010, 7:32AM

»«

»All the talk about teachers is fine but really they are doing a fantastic job. It would be very rare to find a hopeless teacher in our system. There are alot of tired, uninspired, poorly lead and union misguided teachers but rarely a bad one. If you want accountability for teachers then lets start with sorting out the out of control dept. of ed size and require our principles to be leaders not lame ducks. The teachers federation need a big reality check in this all, but most important is use the information to help and back up what you childs teacher is doing not badger someone who is already expected to do the impossible with the inadequate.«

nairbe | bowraville - February 04, 2010, 7:52AM

»«

»Like so many in this debate, Miranda makes the mistake of assuming that higher standardised test scores mean better teachers. In fact the opposite is often the case - narrow the curriculum, focus on what is to be tested, teach in 'bite sized' pieces that foster recognition in testing situations, avoid integrated teaching strategies, remove special needs children from the classroom, use rote learning techniques heavily, don't allow the children to keep working on a topic until they feel satisfied - move them on when they can get 'the right answers', and don't worry whether any given child really needs more time at an earlier stage - everyone has to cover the same material by the same important date in May. For the record, I am not a teacher and my son did very well in NAPLAN, but I have no illussions about the value of his NAPLAN score in giving me information about the quality of his teachers.«

Susan | Sydney - February 04, 2010, 8:00AM

»«

»I agree with the tenor of the article. We need more good teachers who care for their profession. All the rest of the argument is peripheral to this core message - good teachers make the difference not computers, halls or league tables.«

Brian - February 04, 2010, 8:21AM

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Sydney Morning Herald columnist

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