



## Fixing Education

### **Publish Date:**

April 2012

---

*This article from the [April 2012 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is by Director of Education Standards Institute and author of 'Australia's Education Revolution: How Kevin Rudd Won and Lost the Education Wars', Dr Kevin Donnelly.*

Australia's education system is overly bureaucratic and overdue for real reform.

As a result of the federal Labor government's education revolution, teachers and schools now have to deal with a highly centralised and inflexible approach to education that is onerous, time consuming and which places increasing demands on teacher time and school resources thanks to increased compliance costs.

Initiatives like a national curriculum, national literacy and numeracy testing, national teacher registration and certification and making school details public on the My School website are all conspiring to force teachers to become bean counters and to waste valuable teaching time ticking boxes, filling in forms and complying with excessive bureaucratic demands.



Such are the burdens placed on teachers that it is understandable why when asked, many new teachers say they cannot see themselves remaining in the profession for more than four to five years. It's also understandable why many older teachers appear burnt out and why, compared to other occupations, there is such a high level of sickness and stress leave.

That many teachers become frustrated and disillusioned with the profession can also be explained by the fact that existing methods of evaluating teacher performance are seen as ineffective and unable to reward good teachers and to deal with those who under-perform.

As noted by an OECD report on teaching and learning environments, the problem is not just restricted to Australia. After surveying some 200 schools across 23 countries the report notes that 'three-quarters of teachers report that they would receive no recognition for increasing the quality of their work' or for being more 'innovative'.

A large number of teachers also observed that, 'teachers would not be dismissed because of sustained poor performance' and that there was little, if any attempt to reward better performing teachers with bonuses or promotion.

That Australia's approach to evaluating and rewarding teachers is unacceptable is also argued by a Grattan Institute paper, titled *Better Teacher Appraisal and Feedback: Improving Performance*. After noting that teacher quality is one of the most influential determinants of successful learning, the paper argues current approaches are excessively bureaucratic, fail to promote improved teaching practice and that under-performing teachers are not properly dealt with.

What's to be done? Any attempt to improve teacher quality and to ensure stronger educational outcomes for students requires a multi-pronged approach.

More capable and motivated candidates need to be attracted to the profession; more effective ways need to be found to evaluate and reward teacher performance; underperforming teachers need to be dealt with and schools need to be given the autonomy and flexibility to set their own employment conditions.

While non-government schools have greater flexibility in terms of teacher remuneration and conditions, government school teachers work under a centralised, one size-fitsall model that denies schools the freedom to decide teachers' work conditions.

Across the various states and territories, every three to four years the various branches of the Australian Education Union (AEU) sit down with education department officials and ministers to settle on an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that decides teachers' work conditions, such as class sizes, payments for additional responsibilities and salary scale.

As a result, the majority of teachers across Australia move up a pay scale that, while beginning at a relatively high level compared to other OECD countries and increasing by small increments over a period of 9 to 10 years, soon flattens out. This is best illustrated by an Auditor-General's report into the NSW teaching profession, which noted that advancement up the pay scale appears to be



automatic, with very few teachers denied advancement.

Additional evidence that the current system of evaluating teachers is not working is provided in a report written by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), titled *Research on Performance Pay for Teachers*. After analysing what occurs, or does not occur, across the various state and territory systems, the researchers conclude, 'it is rare for increments to be withheld' and it 'is difficult to find systematically gathered evidence about under-performing teachers in most school systems'.

A related problem, as promotion is generally decided by seniority, is that regardless of how effective, motivated and successful a new teacher is, currently, there is no provision for such teachers to be rewarded with bonus payments based on merit.

The process of dealing with under-performing teachers is also excessively bureaucratic and time consuming as, instead of school principals having the power to dismiss unwanted staff, such matters have to be dealt with according to a process determined by head office.

While teachers' unions like the AEU justify centralised wage fixing and setting work conditions as the best way to guarantee the rights of members and to ensure a better and more rewarding work environment, it is clear that the main reason the teacher union defends such an approach is because it guarantees its continued power and relevance.

The first step to improved teacher quality and effectiveness is to replace the current centralised system that determines salaries and conditions for government school teachers (the EBA) with individual and local workplace agreements. Schools and school leaders need the flexibility to manage agreements at the local level to ensure that conditions best suit the needs and requirements of particular schools and individual teachers.

Instead of a regimented pay scale where all teachers are paid according to years of service, the ideal is one where schools have the ability to set their own levels of remuneration to ensure that better qualified and more successful teachers are properly recognised and rewarded.

Schools should be funded according to an acceptable formula, based on the funding required to enable a student to achieve agreed educational outcomes with an additional weighting for factors such as low socioeconomic background and migrant and refugee status. Government schools, similar to the current situation with independent schools, should then have the freedom to allocate their budget as desired, unencumbered by centralised agreements.

It should be noted that while there are attempts to better recognise and reward teachers, such as Australia's 'National Professional Standards for Teachers', where teachers are categorised as 'graduate', 'proficient', 'highly accomplished' and 'lead', the reality is that such standards enforce a bureaucratic, one size-fits-all model and lends itself to teachers going through a time consuming process of gathering evidence and ticking the boxes.

Secondly, better ways need to be found to attract better quality teachers to the profession and to



ensure they are motivated to continue teaching. Currently, in order to be allowed to teach a candidate has to have completed a course at a registered teacher training institute.

It's no secret that traditional models of teaching training are less than successful. An ACER submission to a Commonwealth government inquiry into the matter stated, 'To our knowledge, no teacher education program or institution has ever been discredited, yet variation in quality is known to be considerable. Teacher education is arguably one of the least accountable and least examined areas of professional education in Australia'.

Instead of new teachers having to complete teacher training in the usual manner, schools should be given the freedom to employ who they believe best suits their needs, regardless of whether they have formal teaching qualifications. Much like what occurred many years ago, such teachers should undertake an apprenticeship where they are mentored on the job.

In order to motivate teachers to continue in the profession, more effective ways also need to be found to evaluate and monitor teachers in terms of performance. While the various states and territories currently have in place such arrangements, much like the national standards for teaching previously referred to, they are also exercises in centralised control, ill-suited to meet the diverse and varied demands of individual schools.

The reality is that education bureaucrats, teacher academics and representatives from the various stakeholders, such as the AEU and subject associations, set current methods of evaluating teachers and, as a result, such standards simply reinforce the status quo in education and restrict innovation and the search for more effective classroom practice.

The national standards for teaching, dated February 2011, best illustrates such dangers. The standards are designed to 'ensure that those who are qualified members can demonstrate certain levels of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement' and sets out 7 standards, including 37 focus areas and 148 descriptors.

Not only are many of the descriptors vague and generalised but, in addition, teachers wanting certification or promotion are pressured to conform to ineffective education fads such as whole language, open classrooms, personalised learning and making learning immediately entertaining and contemporary.

Its significant that while Australian education authorities enforce a centralised, cumbersome and inflexible model of certifying and evaluating teachers, Michael Gove, the English Secretary of Education, argues in a November 2010 White Paper that the ideal situation is where schools enjoy, 'direct funding and full independence from central and local bureaucracy'.

Central to Secretary Gove's vision of schools is one where government schools, much like non-government schools, have increased autonomy and flexibility in areas like staffing, budgets, curriculum and shaping a school ethos that best reflects the needs and aspirations of their communities. While acknowledging the need for some accountability, Gove argues:



Over recent years, government has tended to use highly centralised approaches to improving schools. It has tried to lead, organise and systematise improvement activity, seeking to ensure compliance with its priorities. It has led target setting, introduced improvement initiatives focused on particular issues, used ring-fenced or targeted grants extensively and employed large numbers of field forces. We think that this is the wrong approach.

Largely as a result of federal Labor's so-called education revolution, Australia's approach to education, especially setting work conditions and certifying and evaluating teachers, has much in common with approaches developed during the years Tony Blair was the British prime minister.

Instead of continuing down that path, the best result for Australian schools and teachers is to free schools from provider capture and to give all schools, government and non-government, the freedom and flexibility to best chart their own course free from external, bureaucratic constraints.

As noted in a number of research papers commissioned by the OECD, such autonomy, especially over staffing, is a characteristic of stronger performing education systems and explains why Catholic and independent schools generally outperform government schools, even after adjusting for students' socioeconomic background.