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Tossing teachers in the deep end: does it work?

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A RECENT paper co-written by Australian National University economist Andrew Leigh on teacher quality in America has important implications for Australia.

Leigh and co-author Sara Mead from the US Progressive Policy Institute claim that teacher quality in the US has declined over the past several decades and that new strategies for improving the situation must be seriously considered.

While there is no similar evidence that teacher quality has declined in Australia, we have a related problem, that of a looming teacher shortage in certain areas and in certain subjects.

There are potentially two consequences of failing to attract teachers to fill available jobs. One is that some students may not get the opportunity to study the full range of subjects if there are insufficient teachers (and you can probably guess which students are most likely to miss out). The other is that in a bid to make up teacher numbers, the standard of teachers and teaching will suffer.

Either way, maintaining and preferably raising teacher quality is of paramount importance. That much is well understood. What is under contention is how to go about it. The obvious way is to recruit highly able people and then train them extensively.

The first of these is non-negotiable. Both common sense and research tell us that a teacher with high verbal and intellectual aptitude gets better results from students.

So raw ability is important. What about teacher training? Again, common sense says that there are specific skills and knowledge that teachers need to be effective in the classroom.

However, according to US educational research, certification, that is, the completion of a state-mandated teacher training course at a university, is not necessarily a good indicator of success in the classroom. At best, the evidence is mixed.

It has been argued as a result that teacher certification, by requiring a long period of extra study and imposing a significant administrative and financial burden, deters would-be teachers and does not have the trade-off effect of improving quality.

Leigh and Mead go further, suggesting certification requirements might have contributed to

the quality decline because prospective teachers with the most attractive alternative career options are the least likely to choose a further year of study.

Not everyone believes that the requirements for certification are unnecessary, of course. And it is hard to dismiss the common sense notion that teachers need to be trained. But does this training have to be done in a formal setting?

A debate has flared in the US recently over the Teach For America (TFA) program, which puts high performing college graduates with no teacher certification into schools as classroom teachers. The objective is to fill the teaching gaps in challenging, hard to staff, urban and rural schools with bright young things who will learn teaching on the job.

A study published last year by research institute Mathematica showed that school students taught by TFA recruits did as well in reading, and better in maths, than students taught by certified teachers. Another study published last month, by leading teacher education proponent Linda Darling-Hammond, found that TFA teachers achieved significantly worse results from their students than certified teachers.

The methodological differences between the studies are numerous, and criticisms have duly flowed between the researchers, TFA and others.

On the surface, it would seem that the situation is irreconcilable without delving into the technicalities, but the two conflicting studies do not necessarily cancel each other out. In fact, while the Darling-Hammond study challenges the idea that an uncertified/untrained teacher is as effective as a certified/trained one, it does not rule against achieving certification on the job. It found that TFA recruits who become certified after about two or three years do "about as well" as other certified teachers.

It is early days to be declaring TFA an unrivalled success in raising teacher quality, but there is no doubt that it is clearing the first hurdle – attracting good candidates. More than 17,000 high-achieving college graduates applied for TFA in 2005, of which only 2000 were accepted.

England began a similar initiative called Teach First in 2003. Again, it's too early to say whether a crash-course in curriculum and behaviour management, combined with enthusiasm and raw ability, can always take the place of extensive pre-service training. What we can say with some confidence, however, is that the old way isn't working and the new way warrants a try.

This is my last column for some time. I am leaving the post of schools editor to do my bit for the nation's fertility rate. It has been a privilege bringing this page to you each week and I appreciated your comments and suggestions. Thanks for reading.



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- > Press Releases
- > Articles/Editorials
- > Key Facts
- > What Others Think
- > Related Publications
- *Commentaries about the Report*

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Teaching Commission Praises New Report on Teacher Quality

April 19, 2005

NEW YORK, NY – The Teaching Commission, the bipartisan organization dedicated to modernizing and upgrading the teaching profession in America, today urged policymakers to read “**Lifting Teacher Performance**”, the report issued today by the Progressive Policy Institute.

The report by the Washington, DC-based think tank—the sister organization of the Democratic Leadership Council—states bluntly that “status quo methods of improving teacher quality simply do not work.” It goes on to recommend bold new approaches—including well-designed performance pay for teachers, incentives for serving in hard-to-staff schools, and streamlining certification requirements to broaden the teaching corps’ talent pool.

“Left, right and center, people who understand the research are backing innovative new ways to recruit, retain and reward excellent teaching,” said Gaynor McCown, executive director of the Teaching Commission. “They understand that business as usual will do terrible damage to America’s economy and our ethic of equal opportunity.”

Like the Progressive Policy Institute, the Center for American Progress—another left-of-center think tank—has supported linking teacher pay more closely to performance and creating new incentives for teachers to serve in hard-to-staff schools. On this key question, that makes them allies of the Bush Administration, Democratic and Republican governors across America, and the 19-member Teaching Commission.

“Everyone agrees: we need to change. Now it’s time for action,” said McCown.

The Teaching Commission was founded in 2003 by former IBM chairman and CEO Louis V. Gerstner, Jr. The Commission’s consensus report, “Teaching At Risk: A Call to Action,” released early last year, calls for districts, states, and the federal government to enact a comprehensive package of policy reforms. To learn more or read the full Commission report, visit www.theteachingcommission.org.

We need to hire 200,000 teachers a year just to fill the country's classrooms—just as new federal policies are raising the bar for teacher qualifications.

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