Let's commit to the young
John Quiggin
Australian Financial Review, 31 August 2006

Recent news stories have revealed features of the continuing failure of Australian education policy. This failure did not begin with the Howard government, and responsibility must be shared between state and federal governments. Still, the policies of this federal government over the past decade have done little to help.

There have been stories about the increased costs associated with shortages of skilled workers in trades, technical and professional fields. Then, a study by Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan of the Australian National University found that the literacy and numeracy skills of new teachers have declined relative to their age cohort as a whole. Finally, the decline in the number of domestic students going to university, an occurrence since the Kemp-Vanstone cuts of 1996, has accelerated. There are now 50,000 fewer domestic students than in 2002.

There are many factors at work. But the most important is that the central economic and social objective of increasing investment in human capital has been disregarded in favour of ideological dogmatism, fiscal policies driven by accounting cosmetics rather than economic reality, feel-good initiatives designed to appeal to focus groups, federal-state rivalry and trivial side issues.

As an example of triviality it's hard to go past the so-called voluntary student unionism legislation banning fees for student services, which was the highest-profile education policy debate for 2005. The VSU policy had little to do with improving education. It was mostly about former student politicians now in the cabinet settling scores dating back to the 1970s and 1980s.

Universities everywhere in the world provide campus amenities as part of a package of services, and most allow student bodies to manage the delivery of those services. Most universities will divert part of their general charge to the provision of amenities, partially undoing a government initiative which allowed a rise in those charges aimed at increasing funds available for teaching.

The tendency to indulge in feel-good initiatives is characteristic of a system of vertical fiscal imbalance. The federal government puts in enough money to exercise power, without taking responsibility for the service as a whole. So the government can impose whatever mandates seem appealing on any given day (back to basics one year, compulsory history or languages in another, more student choice in another) while leaving the states to worry about keeping schools running.

These problems are minor, though, compared with the lack of willingness to put more public money into education, due, partly, to the fact that it is still viewed, in the budget accounts, as an item of consumption rather than as the most productive component of investment. School retention rates have never recovered from the drastic cuts in spending

of the early 1990s, justified, ironically, by the need to promote national savings and investment.

Similarly, as Leigh and Ryan observed, teachers' salaries have not kept pace with those of the professional workforce as a whole, with obvious implications for the attractiveness of the field. The TAFE sector, which is crucial to meeting shortages of technical skills, has similar problems, overlaid by worse than usual federal-state problems. While any additional investment is welcome, the decision at the last election to create a rival federal network of Australian technical colleges seems likely to make fragmentation worse.

All these problems are being reflected in the decline in university participation. Federal funding of higher education has been cut radically relative to gross domestic product. At the same time as HECS charges have been increased, the number of places has been virtually frozen for a decade.

This freeze originated under David Kemp with the ideological drive to push universities into offering full-fee places. This has now happened, but it's clear that the lemon of increased student payments has been squeezed too hard. And if we can't offer a first-class education to domestic students, we will eventually lose the overseas student market that has kept universities afloat for a decade or more.

What education in Australia needs is a commitment to educate all young people in the country at least to year 12, whether the focus is academic or technical, and to give every student guaranteed access to tertiary education in universities or TAFE, with no requirement for upfront fees.

A substantial increase in public expenditure is a necessary, though not a sufficient, requirement, if this goal is to be achieved.

John Quiggin is an ARC Federation Fellow in Economics and Political Science at the University of Queensland.

Teaching game decline lesson in neglect
Peter Ruehl
Australian Financial Review, 31 August 2006

The news the other day that academic standards for new teachers are much lower than a generation ago was like being told they don't make traffic jams the way they used to. Of course the standards have been tanking. The people who teach the teachers haven't been teaching them that much.

Try asking your average high school teacher - even in the decent private or Catholic schools - the difference between an adjectival or adverbial prepositional phrase. Most will look at you as though you just asked how to put a Porsche 911 together. Nobody told them about subjects, predicates and objects in the butt-brain end of the 20th century because that stuff was, like sooo tedious and unnecessary. Consequently I have to take 15 minutes to explain to my kids why they should say "Pat and I went to see an R-rated movie" rather than "Me and Pat . . .". That's because if I were to tell them the subject of a sentence always takes nominative case, which would take me three seconds, they'd think I was doing the closing argument in a Law and Order rerun.

It makes teaching a lot easier if you don't have to drill this stuff into kids' heads, especially if you don't have the slightest idea of it yourself. In the nasty old days of education, kids had to learn about phonics, nouns, verbs and adjectives.

Had to get hip to conjunctions. And it all took that painful process of memorisation. But hey! One day you found your own writing, or at least most of it, didn't look as though it was done by a chimpanzee who couldn't even cut it in the jungle.

Dumbed-down teachers are going to result in dumbed-down kids, and partial proof of this came yesterday in the US where scores on the main college entrance examination, the SAT (scholastic aptitude test), showed their biggest drop in 31 years. And one of the hardest-hit areas was English, which now includes a 25-minute written essay. The average score was 497; it used to be that if you couldn't score at least 500 on this, you'd better be a damn good basketball player.

This was the test that next month's incoming freshmen (first year of college) students took last northern winter. The thing is a real grind and, lasting about four hours, carries a lot of pressure. More than 1.4 million kids took it anyway. Still as crazy as the rest of us were in 1965. Anyway, in post-test interviews many complained about a decline in the composition and grammar lessons they were getting in high school English courses, which they felt might explain the five-point drop in the SAT average verbal score. (Lest all this be blamed completely on teachers, if you spent half your waking hours downloading P Diddy, sending text messages written in numb-nut code and playing video games that turn your neurons into mayonnaise, you probably wouldn't sound much like F. Scott Fitzgerald either).

In Australia, Julie Bishop, the federal Education Minister, has noted that the average teacher trainee in 1983 was superior to 74 per cent of his or her peers in literacy and maths.

That figure, she said, had now dropped to 61 per cent, and until somebody starts teaching them the difference between the subjunctive mood and sexism in King Lear, it's not going to start getting any better. The only large group of people who were taught this stuff learned it in the 1950s and '60s. Half of us don't feel like starting at ground point zero with a class full of 14-year-olds who'd need three hours to get a grip on active and passive voice. The other half have spent their careers looking for signs of class revolution in geology, so they're not going to be much help.

The two economists who conducted the study at the Australian National University, Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan, said low teacher salaries were the root cause for the doof-down in the teaching game. They suggest one of the most effective - and cheapest - ways to start correcting the problem is merit pay increases.

This would encourage the good ones to stay around, rather than bailing out and turning a dollar someplace else. It would also send a message to the others who believe the classroom is a cool place to stump for left-wing politics in the study of the steam engine.

That conclusion, Leigh and Ryan note, is bound to cause a stink with the teacher unions (my words, the economists are too polite to put it that way), which "have consistently rejected merit pay, and have remained industrially powerful throughout the period in question". And have the results to show for it.

THE AUSTRALIAN

Print this page

Judith Wheeldon: Why words fail us

Good teachers need a good education and a worthwhile pay package

29aug06

AS a school head I have seen for myself that teachers are not as literate as they used to be. I have given up as teachers continually make errors in written communications to students and parents, and in school newsletters. In speech, fuzzy thinking results from their confusion of subject and verb, illogical prepositions and no longer amusing malapropisms. Vocabularies bled and logic was wounded. Now we have evidence I am not just a boring old pedant.

Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan's welcome research, which appeared in these pages yesterday, has done education a great service by providing an evidence base for what school heads and employers already know: the quality of teaching has seriously deteriorated in the most critical areas of literacy and numeracy, and therefore in primary education, science, technology and other subjects.

Let me defend teachers. They too are victims of deteriorating school systems. Only a handful remains whose school education predates the 1960s and '70s, when teaching was overcome by a fashion for coddling children. Don't correct errors: you might damage their little psyches and destroy their self-esteem. Don't tell them what to write about: it's undemocratic. Let them express themselves. We call their efforts creative.

The distinction between self-expression and communication was lost. Self-expression can take place without an audience. Communication requires compliance with the niceties of spelling, punctuation (including apostrophes) and diction that are also understood by the audience. The ability to structure a line of thought is gained through lots of writing practice to establish clear thinking: it requires knowledge about the subject. That is, communication requires discipline, academic and personal. Today's teachers cannot teach what they have not been taught.

Younger teachers also copped postmodernism. Before they had learned to read thoroughly and carefully and to love reading (whether fiction, history or science), they were taught to be sceptical of everything and wary of giving it value in their own lives. They were made to see literature, history and science through "frames" of feminism, Marxism, racism and who knows what else. The frame mattered but there was not much of a picture in it as syllabuses lost content and no longer required students to have substantial knowledge of facts, names, dates and events.

A young person's search for vicarious human experience and understanding was distorted by the views of others before they learned to follow story and character development effectively. The view was through adult frames rather than the framework of childhood or adolescence. Teachers cannot now teach what they do not know.

Many complain of the difficulty of finding a "good secretary like we used to have". Teachers, like secretaries, are traditionally women. I celebrate that women now have the full range of career choices but one consequence is that we no longer can rely on a large enough supply of talented women to populate our teaching positions. Leigh and Ryan have shown the impact of what is otherwise a welcome social change.

And men? Men are a valuable but rare species in education; it takes courage to be a male teacher. A closed door can ruin a career. An adolescent girl might make allegations that will never wash away. Suspicion lurks. Can a male teacher comfort a crying child? How do you teach gymnastics or tennis without touching? It is difficult enough for women in this

climate of lewd suspicion. Wouldn't you rather be an accountant?

Schools are no longer havens. Guns and knives are not common, but regrettably they are far from unknown in schools, whether brought by students or by invaders of the premises. Students who threaten teachers directly or by innuendo prevent effective teaching and obliterate the teacher's motivation. Almost any reaction from the teacher or school head will be wrong by the time it gets to the front page. Failure to break up a fight is a failure of duty of care. If a teacher physically separates two warring children, they might reap a charge of assault with the possibility of never working with children again. After victory in court, who will resurrect the career and reputation of the teacher? Wouldn't you rather be a lawyer?

Teachers are increasingly powerless and vulnerable. Some parents defend their children no matter what the allegation and the evidence. It is extraordinarily time-consuming, emotionally taxing and increasingly difficult to help children in trouble or investigate alleged misbehaviour. The school can't search lockers or school bags, can't question students without parents being present and can't separate presumed malefactors. By the time action is taken, the problem has blown out of all proportion and parents have called in lawyers. It is easier to avoid the challenge; behaviour in schools gets worse. Wouldn't you rather be a doctor?

There is a card that trumps this list of disincentives: decent professional pay. Leigh and Ryan have shown the direct relationship between poor pay and the falling quality of teachers' academic ability. So what?

We must pay all teachers proper professional salaries or go down the plughole of the world economy. Merit pay will not do the trick. We do not need very good teachers in some schools or in front of some classes. We need them in all classes and in the playground. We need more than competition for decent pay.

Young people making career decisions will not accept a lottery that they might win. They need to know that as teachers they can raise a family and live lives similar to other professional friends; they need respect from society rather than defending their career choice or apologising that they did not use their university entry marks to become a doctor, lawyer or economist for Macquarie Bank.

Drum roll! Political courage to the rescue! Let federal and state ministers for education raise the status of teachers by recognising them as valued professionals. Pay teachers properly, every one, starting in January 2007. Providing education to build a successful human infrastructure is a valid use of our tax dollar. It can be done. Our governments must find the courage to lead.

Judith Wheeldon is a former head of two private girls schools in Sydney, Abbotsleigh and Queenwood.

THE AUSTRALIAN

Print this page

Uni's top students choose teaching

Justine Ferrari, Education writer
29aug06

MORE than half the students starting a teaching degree at one of the nation's leading universities chose a teaching career, despite having the marks to study engineering, arts, science or medicine.

A survey conducted by Sydney University's education faculty shows that more than half the students training as primary school teachers scored more than 90 out of a possible 100 in their university entrance score. Among those studying to be secondary school teachers, more than 30 per cent scored above 90.

The cut-offs for admission at Sydney University this year were 86.5 for primary teaching and about 83.5 for secondary.

John Hughes, pro-dean in the faculty of education and social work, said the large proportion of students with high marks and the rising entrance mark for teaching contradicted claims that teachers were not as smart as they were 20 years ago.

"It's very difficult to get a high UAI (university admissions index) and be illiterate," he said.

Dr Hughes was responding to a study by economists at the Australian National University that analysed the literacy and numeracy results of new teachers and student teachers and found their academic achievement had declined substantially.

The study by Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan found the biggest change was in the number of bright women choosing teaching as a career, with only 6 per cent of the women scoring in the top 25 per cent becoming teachers in 2003, compared with 11per cent in 1983.

Dr Hughes said the UAI for teaching had increased dramatically since 1999, when the current system was introduced, and it was meaningless to compare the previous entry systems.

But Dr Leigh said the entrance score had only risen between 2001 and 2005 after falling since 1977, and after adjusting the scores for comparison, was still well below the level in the late 1970s.

For 60 per cent of students, such as 19-year-old Mandy Malone, teaching was their first career choice, not second. Ms Malone scored 99.05 in her HSC last year, high enough to choose any degree except law at the universities of Sydney and NSW.

"Teaching just isn't a job you do to earn money - it's being able to have a positive impact on people," she said.

Ms Malone said some people were initially surprised by her decision. "But then they'd think about it for a while and say, 'We definitely need good teachers - good on you for doing it'," she said.

The survey conducted by Dr Hughes and colleague Jacqueline Manual found that for 96 per cent of first-year students last year, working with young people was important in choosing to become a teacher. Other key motivating factors were a desire to help others, personal fulfilment and a love of their subject.

By contrast, salary was extremely important to less than 2 per cent, and not at all

important to 22 per cent.

NEWS.com.au

Teachers not so clever any more, study finds

By Justine Ferrari
August 28, 2006 12:00am

Article fro... THE AUSTRALIAN

TEACHERS are not as smart as they were 20 years ago, an Australian-first study concludes in a finding that will reinforce concerns over declining classroom standards.

An analysis of literacy and numeracy tests confirms the standard of student teachers has fallen substantially and that dwindling numbers of the nation's brightest students are choosing teaching as a career.

The academic calibre of teachers has been shown to have a direct effect on students' results, with US research finding that a shift to smarter teachers raises student performance.

The Australian study by economists Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan from the Australian National University finds the failure of teachers' pay to keep pace with other professions and the fact that teachers are not paid on merit are key factors in the decline of standards.

The biggest change has been in the number of smart women becoming teachers. The study says the academic achievement of women entering teaching has declined substantially.

While 11 per cent of women who scored in the top 25 per cent of literacy and numeracy tests in 1983 chose to become a teacher, this had dropped to 6 per cent in 2003.

The average woman entering teaching in 1983 was in the top 30 per cent of test results and this dropped to the top 49 per cent by 2003.

Overall, in 1983 the average teaching student was drawn from the top 26 per cent of the nation's students but this had widened to the top 39 per cent by 2003.

Dr Leigh said using literacy and numeracy tests was the best proxy available for assessing teachers' academic abilities.

"Academic results aren't everything in a teacher; we all know good teachers who aren't academic," Dr Leigh said.

"But if all else is equal, you'd rather have the people standing at the front of the classroom being the ones who did well in literacy and numeracy tests. If they do very badly on these tests, it's hard to see how they can teach children the same things."

Dr Leigh said teaching had lost its status as one of the best paying careers for women.

While 49 per cent of female university graduates became teachers in the 1960s, by the 1990s only 12 per cent chose it as a career.

The rise in salaries of high-ability women in alternative occupations is believed to account for about

one-quarter of the decline in teacher quality.

The study says that over the 20-year period, the average starting salary of a teacher fell in real terms and compared to other professions.

Teachers' pay fell 4 per cent for women and 13 per cent for men in real terms but relative to graduates entering other professions, starting teachers' pay fell 11 per cent for women and 17 per cent for men.

The study suggests that the solution lies in introducing merit-based pay for teachers, which would be more cost effective than across-the-board pay rises to make teaching a more attractive career.

Dr Leigh said that the rest of the labour market paid according to ability and was further away from uniform pay schedules than ever before.

"Governments have grasped that when it comes to paying senior public servants. They created SES (Senior Executive Service) because government had to compete with businesses for the best management talent and they understood what businesses were doing had an impact on government," he said.

"We haven't grasped the same parallel with teaching."

National president of the Australian Education Union Pat Byrne said women had less scope for careers 20 or 25 years ago, when teaching was one of the best paid jobs open to women.

Ms Byrne said the answer was to raise teachers salaries across the board rather than introduce merit-based pay.

A distracted student gazes out of a window / News Limited picture

ABC Online

AM - Researchers find standards falling in teaching profession

[This is the print version of story http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2006/s1725951.htm]

AM - Monday, 28 August , 2006 12:26:00

Reporter: Lisa Millar

TONY EASTLEY: Unions and parents and citizens associations have jumped to the defence of teachers after new research showed that the academic abilities of new teachers have been falling for years.

Economists from the Australian National University say that the average teacher trainee in 1983 had better literacy and numeracy skills than a trainee in 2003.

The Federal Government has leapt on the work, using it to argue for merit-based pay, something the unions have long argued against.

Lisa Millar reports.

LISA MILLAR: The researchers from the Australian National University thought there was too much debate on whether there was enough teachers and not enough on just how good those teachers might be.

Economist Andrew Lee.

ANDREW LEE: So we looked at surveys testing the literacy and numeracy of people when they're in high school, and then following them into careers, and what we found was kind of troubling.

We found that in 1983 those going into teacher were in about the top 30 per cent of their class. By 2003 they were only in the top 38 per cent of their class, so about an 8 per cent fall over just 20 years.

LISA MILLAR: The Queensland Teachers Union President, Steve Ryan, disagrees that the quality has been dropping.

STEVE RYAN: Well, I think that's a perception that's around, and I'm not going to disagree with any research findings that have been found on that, but my evidence is based on what's happening on the ground, and certainly parents can feel rest assured that teachers teaching their children are well and truly qualified and doing a good job.

LISA MILLAR: Andrew Lee says he doesn't want the research to start a new round of criticism of teachers, but rather offer a chance to look at improving the situation.

ANDREW LEE: Well, one of the things we find is that there's been a decline in average teacher pay, relative to the pay of bachelor graduates. So one possible remedy would be to look at increasing average teacher pay.

But the other thing we find is that the teaching profession is entirely paid by uniform salary schedules. There's no difference between the wage that somebody with lower literacy and numeracy and higher literacy and numeracy get in the teaching profession.

And it might be time to start thinking about whether or not we ought to be rewarding teachers either who have better academic skills or who perform better in the classroom.

LISA MILLAR: The Federal Education Minister, Julie Bishop, has been arguing for merit-based pay, basing salary increases on skills and effort rather than years in the job. But the teachers' unions disagree.

ANDREW LEE: Salaries, obviously teachers would like to see teachers being paid more and being paid what they're worth, and that's a matter that needs to be a concern by all the state authorities that employ teachers.

At the same time, the answer's not in merit-based pay, but in terms of rewarding teachers for what they do.

LISA MILLAR: The Parents and Citizens Federation in NSW says parents shouldn't be anxious about this latest research.

President Di Giblin.

DIANNE GIBLIN: Oh, I think teaching is a profession that still is filling spaces. As a matter of fact, in the last two years there's been a rise in the university entrance to teaching. And recently the UAI (Universities Admission Index) in my local university has risen to quite a high rate.

LISA MILLAR: Why isn't there an argument then, to pay better teachers better pay?

DIANNE GIBLIN: How do you compare that? If we're talking about children's outcomes, there's a number of social and socioeconomic variables to how children achieve and why children achieve at different rates.

TONY EASTLEY: NSW Parents and Citizens Federation President Dianne Giblin ending that report from Lisa Millar.

Teachers' literacy, numeracy skills down, research shows

By Brendan Nicholson
August 28, 2006

The skill levels of Australia's teachers have
dropped significantly over the past 20 years, says a provocative new study from the Australian National University.

Researchers who studied the results of literacy and numeracy tests taken by students who later became teachers found that their average test results dropped from 74 per cent in 1983 to 61 per cent in 2003.

And they have warned that: "It's hard to see how you can become a smart country without smart teachers."

Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan blamed two factors for the drop in teacher quality they identified in research they carried out for the federal Education Department.

They said the average teacher's pay had dropped by 10 per cent over that period when compared with other professions requiring a degree.

And while teachers' pay was set to a scale negotiated by their unions, individuals with high ability could earn more in other occupations. To these individuals, teaching looked much less attractive than it did in the early 1980s, Dr Leigh said.

The research was based on six comprehensive surveys over two decades in which the literacy and numeracy of students was measured when they were about 14.

The surveys then followed the students into their mid and late 20s and noted their career choices. Dr Leigh and Dr Ryan picked out those who became teachers over that time and checked their childhood test results.

"The literacy and numeracy standards of those entering teacher education courses are significantly lower today than in the early 1980s," the two concluded.

"We've been worrying a lot about the literacy and numeracy of children and the best way to ensure they are literate and numerate is to ensure that we have highly literate and numerate people at the front to the classroom," Dr Leigh said last night.

"One way to improve productivity is to work smarter.

"It seems reasonable to think that if we can improve literacy and numeracy, that could potentially flow on to higher living standards."

In their paper the two said international research suggested that differences in teacher performance could explain variations in students' achievements but little was known about how the quality of Australia's teaching profession had changed over time. "We find the aptitude of new teachers has fallen considerably."

International research had found that having a talented teacher was likely to significantly improve a student's results.

The study also indicated that, even with the decline, the average Australian teacher was more academically adept than his or her American counterpart.

Australian Education Union president Pat Byrne said that over the period covered by the research, teachers' pay had declined significantly.

But Ms Byrne said Australian teachers were very dedicated and worked very hard. "You have to be careful in making the jump to student outcomes."

She said that in countries such as Finland, teachers were well paid and highly qualified. "There they acknowledge the significance and importance of teaching. That is not the case in Australia."

The Canberra Times

Tuesday, 29 August 2006

Teachers are less literate, numerate

Brad Watts

Monday, 28 August 2006

Literacy and numeracy standards among Australian teachers have plummeted over the past 20 years, heightening fears about the quality of education being delivered in schools.

A ground-breaking study by the Australian National University issued yesterday highlighted the worrying trend that academic standards of new teachers have fallen by about 8 per cent.

Data for the federally funded study was collected by the Australian Council for Education Research from more than 350 students whose literacy and numeracy abilities were tracked from age 14 until their mid 20s.

ANU education economist Dr Andrew Leigh said students entering teaching degrees in 1983 were in the top 26 per cent of their class, but they only ranked in the top 39 per cent in 2003.

Dr Leigh said the findings were "pretty troubling, especially as teaching is one of the most important occupations in Australian society".

"It's hard to see how we become a clever country without smarter teachers."

The Federal Government said the report highlighted the need for performance incentives to boost the quality and standard of the teaching profession.

Labor said the results indicated an urgent need for minimum standards to be introduced for teaching qualifications.

The economics-based study also showed a significant drop in teaching wages as a contributing factor for the decline in teacher abilities.

"Compared to non-teachers with a degree, average teacher pay fell by more than 10 per cent over the period 1983 to 2003," Dr Leigh said.

ANU economist Dr Chris Ryan, who was involved in the study, said the widening earnings gap in the non-teaching sector meant high achievers were more likely to favour other, better paid professions.

Dr Ryan suggested teacher wages should be reviewed if the Government was going to attract quality people into teaching.

"We think wages need to be addressed with some kind of pay related to performance for really good teachers," Dr Ryan said.

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop admitted teaching was one of the few professions that did not reward individual performance.

"Currently in Australia, teacher salary is based on the number of years in the job," she said.

Ms Bishop also highlighted the independent school sector in NSW had recently announced the introduction of rewards for performance.

"I particularly want to see high-quality teachers encouraged and rewarded to work in the most challenging schools where the need is greatest," she said.

Opposition education spokes-woman Jenny Macklin said teaching should be recognised as one of Australia's noblest professions.

"We need to build rewards and incentives to attract the best people to our schools, especially in the tough areas," she said.

"Labor has proposed a tough new standards body in higher education to establish minimum acceptable standards for qualifications in each field, starting with teacher education."

Ms Bishop said as teaching had become a less attractive career for brighter students, it was an issue to be discussed during upcoming negotiations with state and territory education ministers for the next round of federal funding.

Australian Education Union ACT branch secretary Clive Haggar said Canberra had largely been protected from the dropping trend in literacy and numeracy standards among teachers.

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The Courier Mail

Performance-based pay rejected

Tess Livingstone and David Crawshaw
August 29, 2006 12:00am

Article from: The Courier Mail

PARENTS and teachers in Queensland have rejected performance-based pay as a solution to the problem of falling entry standards in the teaching profession.

New research from the Australian National University shows that the academic aptitude of new teachers has fallen over the past two decades.

The research, conducted by economists Dr Andrew Leigh and Dr Chris Ryan, found that the literacy and numeracy standards of those entering teacher education courses were significantly lower today than in the early 1980s.

The researchers blamed the trend on declining teacher pay relative to other occupations.

While the Federal Government has gained Opposition backing for its push to link teachers' pay to their performance, Australia's largest parents' group and teachers do not agree.

Education Minister Julie Bishop said the ANU study's findings backed her drive to pay teachers according to their performance.

"Currently in Australia, teacher salary is based on the number of years in the job. It is one of the few professions that does not reward individual performance," she said.

"I particularly want to see high-quality teachers encouraged and rewarded to work in the most challenging schools where the need is greatest."

Opposition education spokeswoman Jenny Macklin said Labor supported moves towards performance-based pay for teachers, as it would reward initiative.

"We need to build rewards and incentives to attract the best people to our schools, especially in the tough areas," Ms Macklin said.

The Opposition wanted to establish a new standards body in higher education to set out minimum standards for qualifications in each field, she said.

But Queensland Teachers Union president Steve Ryan said teacher bashing by federal politicians was the leading cause of low morale among teachers.

"I have never seen a single politician or academic demonstrate how performance-based pay would work," he said.

"Mention that to a teacher working with a class of special education students and they'd laugh in your face."

Queensland Council of Parents and Citizens Associations president Wanda Lambert said better pay, professional development and greater recognition would make the profession more attractive.

Teacher literacy falls with salaries

David Humphries and Lisa Pryor
August 28, 2006

EVIDENCE that the academic standards of new teachers are significantly lower than a generation ago will underscore a Howard Government push for the introduction of merit pay.

The Education Minister, Julie Bishop, seized on research released yesterday that showed the average teacher trainee in 1983 was more literate and numerate than 74 per cent of age peers. By 2003, that advantage was down to 61 per cent - and the decline was similar for new teachers.

Low salaries for teachers were the main culprit, the researchers from the Australian National University concluded. But they said merit pay for good teachers would be more cost-effective in tackling the problem than across-the-board pay rises.

Ms Bishop will pursue the problem with state and territory ministers this year, in an attempt to reverse teaching's status as "one of the few professions that does not reward individual performance".

The ANU researchers, the economists Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan, found fewer high-ability graduates were lured to teaching as pay in other professions outstripped that of teachers.

Teacher starting salaries had fallen 4 per cent for women and 13 per cent for men over the 20 years, in real terms. This blew out to 11 per cent for women and 17 per cent for men compared with the pay of other recent graduates.

The findings are a slap for teacher unions which "have consistently rejected merit pay, and have remained industrially powerful throughout the period in question", the researchers said.

But cracks have appeared in teacher resistance to merit pay, with the NSW independent school sector recently announcing rewards for performance.

Ms Bishop said teaching was now less attractive to brighter students. Performance pay - based on skills and effort, rather than years in the job - would encourage the best teachers to work in the most challenging schools, the minister said.

In that, at least, she was supported by Labor's education spokeswoman, Jenny Macklin, who said: "We need to build rewards and incentives to attract the best people to our schools, especially in the tough areas."

Ms Macklin said the talent shortfall would be partly remedied under Labor's pledge to raise qualification standards.

Another Labor MP, Craig Emerson, a campaigner for better rewards for the best teachers, said the top talent was going to other professions or overseas. From 265,000 teachers, 8400 went overseas last year and a net 18,000 left over the past 10 years.

"This ANU evidence shows just how bad it has got," Dr Emerson said.

The president of the NSW Teachers Federation, Maree O'Halloran, said the quick tapering off of salaries - which started relatively high at $50,000 - turned away potential top teachers.

"The other thing is the conditions under which people work; the levels of classroom disruption and behaviour can be much more wearing than people realise."

Duncan McInnes, the executive officer of the NSW Parents Council, said parents looked "more at the qualities and the attributes of the teacher, the enthusiasm". But he said the pay and competition from other industries made it hard to recruit teachers.