

Education: Rethinking Pay for Performance

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Ten years ago, the front page of a Sydney tabloid identified Mount Druitt High Year 12 as the 'Class We Failed' when no student achieved a Tertiary Entrance Ranking over 44.4. It was upsetting for the school, teachers and students involved and, in response, NSW introduced [legislation](#) (recently repealed and [replaced](#)) to prevent the publication of any school performance data.

The newspaper's then editor, interviewed in 2005, explained: 'Our argument was that it was not because they were dumb or stupid or didn't work hard, it was because they were not getting the resources, the help, the kind of education that was given to a lot of other kids in the city, simply because of geography.'

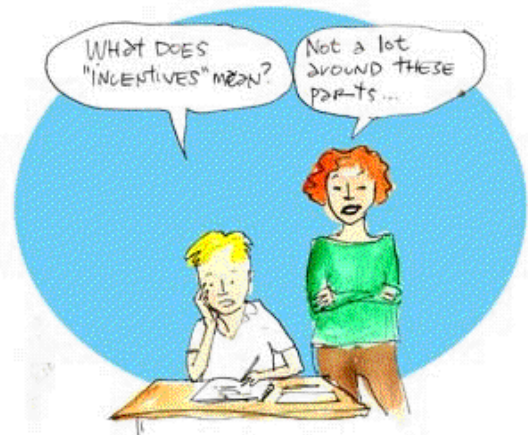


Image thanks to [Fiona Katauskas](#)

There is evidence of 'a long tail of underachievement' amongst our most disadvantaged school children, according to the recent Commonwealth Senate Committee report, [Quality of School Education](#). It begs the question: what should NSW do about schools whose students consistently post low achievement rates?

By Year 5, the top 10 per cent of readers are at least five years ahead of the bottom 10 per cent. In NSW, around 82 per cent of Indigenous children in Year 3, along with about 72 per cent in Year 5 and 69 per cent in Year 7, can read at the minimum standard to allow them to make satisfactory progress at their grade level.

Research has estimated that teachers account for around 30 to 60 per cent of the variation in student achievement. But NSW was among the States and Territories which recently refused to provide the Commonwealth with individual performance data on students and schools because identifying data could be used to punish poor performing schools.

In the United States, the controversial [No Child Left Behind](#) legislation tackled accountability for the academic achievement of such disadvantaged student groups head on. It placed accountability for student achievement in literacy and numeracy squarely with schools and recognised the link between teacher quality and student achievement.

Of course, even its supporters realise that the legislation has its problems. However, as the [Education Sector](#) think tank's co-director Andrew Rotherham put it, people 'worry that calling attention to these problems and publicly identifying schools that have to improve will erode support for public schools, while increasing support for ideas like school vouchers. But they have it backwards: it is inattention to the problems that No Child Left Behind is pointing out that is the biggest problem facing public schools.'

What is our community more concerned about: that children are not reading and writing at grade level or that poor performing teachers and schools might be treated differently from their more effective counterparts?

In NSW, as in the United States, we need to face up to the issues of teacher quality, performance and remuneration. In other professions, those who are more effective or take on more difficult tasks are rewarded. In the teaching profession, the fixed pay system rewards seniority, not performance, and teachers max out their salary by their mid-thirties.

This was a central issue in the Senate Committee's report. It recommended that steps be taken to improve the remuneration of teachers so as to raise the profession's entry standard and retention rates by providing incentives.

The key will be to get the incentives right.

Take, for example, our hardest-to-staff rural and remote primary schools in NSW such as those in Walgett and Wilcannia, both of which have high percentages of indigenous students. Available [incentives](#) include rental subsidies, priority 'incentive transfers' to another school in an agreed location after 'serving' two or three years, and an annual retention bonus of \$5000 for those who stay longer in particular schools.

Not one of these incentives is directed at attracting teachers who have a record of effectiveness in the classroom. Nor is a single incentive directed at retaining teachers whose students achieve strong gains in literacy and numeracy.

NSW is not alone. The other States and Territories have incentive systems to attract and retain teachers in rural and remote schools, but not to boost or reward performance.

So what is the way forward? How can we restructure the incentive systems to attract and retain effective, accomplished teachers in our remote primary schools?

We need to raise the quality of the candidates who apply to teach in our rural and remote schools. To do

that, we need to raise the status of the teaching profession generally and remote teaching specifically.

The success of [Teach for America](#) in the United States and the spin-off [Teach First](#) in Britain in making teaching an attractive option to high achieving graduates is instructive. Teach for America and Teach First take top college and university graduates from across the whole range of disciplines, provide them with intensive instruction in pedagogy, and place them in highly disadvantaged schools struggling with teacher vacancies.

Their popularity is impressive and yet these programs do not offer higher salaries. Astute marketing and links with in-demand employers, like management consulting firms, have attracted candidates who would never have considered teaching because of its low pay, lowly status, limited career pathways and high barriers to entry.

It is not all about the money, but it should not be forgotten that money is — unavoidably — an indicator of the regard in which a profession is held in society. High quality candidates who know their value in the market may be prepared to make large salary sacrifices in the short term in the interests of making a difference. In most cases, however, financial reward will eventually figure in their career decisions in the long term.

To boost teacher quality in remote community schools, we will need an incentive system that offers effective, accomplished teachers a salary and status that recognises their worth. A remote teaching fellowship program could be the answer. Two year teacher fellowships could be offered to teachers who have already demonstrated their effectiveness in the classroom over at least two to three years of teaching. This would include, but not be limited to, boosting student achievement in literacy and numeracy.

To take up the fellowship and relocate, fellows could receive a significant signing bonus. To stay on, those who meet performance criteria could also receive an annual stipend. After completing the fellowship successfully, fellows could receive a certification that recognises their accomplishment and a career path that rewards it.

The brand of the fellowship will be critical to its success and must be jealously guarded. The fellowship program must have high expectations of its fellows and ensure that they have high expectations of themselves and their students. The program must also collect data on the effect of fellows on student achievement in literacy and numeracy and make it available to researchers and policy makers.

It is time to start rewarding those teachers who repeatedly demonstrate their effectiveness, especially those who teach our most disadvantaged students in remote and rural NSW. For that, we will need to start linking teacher and student performance data and start paying good teachers what they are worth.

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