

Making a difference in indigenous education

Incentive programs may be OK, but it's teaching that counts

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THE recent review of indigenous education in the Northern Territory by Bruce Wilson starkly highlighted the scale of the challenges for indigenous children in remote communities.

By Year 3, indigenous students in very remote schools are, in terms of schooling, already two years behind indigenous students in other remote communities, and by Year 9 they are about five years behind their peers in other remote indigenous communities.

In other words, not only are indigenous students in remote Northern Territory communities years behind non-indigenous students, they are also years behind indigenous students in other remote parts of Australia.

And in very remote parts of the Territory it costs \$15 million to achieve one Year 12 completion (the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training) — which is 10 times the cost of each NTCET in other remote parts of the Territory.

Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne recently said on the ABC's Q&A program that the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment results released last December showed that in Australia the No 1 issue, in terms of the outcomes, was teacher quality. "In fact they said eight out of 10 reasons why a student

does well in Australia or badly is the classroom to which they are allocated. In other words, the teacher to whom they are allocated. One out of 10 reasons was socioeconomic status background and one out of 10 were all other reasons put together."

This indicates that quality teaching is the silver bullet.

Yet according to the Creating Parity review by Andrew Forrest, in the Territory teachers stay an average of seven months in a school before leaving. Hardly a recipe for quality teaching.

In response to quality teaching issues in remote and difficult-to-staff schools, states and territories have a range of incentive programs to recruit and retain teachers and provide rewards for those who stay a long time.

But there is little evidence of these incentive programs making a difference.

My contention is that the greatest challenge is attracting quality teaching to such schools, and quality does not result from tenure. Anyone who has seen the documentary *Waiting for "Superman"* knows that tenure in itself is a significant cause of inferior performance in some of the world's worst schools.

Incentives for attracting teachers to remote areas need to be targeted at attracting and rewarding high-quality teaching and the educational outcomes the teachers achieve. Incentives should not be available to retain or reward inferior teaching or tenure by itself. If there is inferior teaching we need to rid the community of it — not provide incentives for it and perpetuate the problem by rewarding its retention.

If incentive schemes are used to attract quality teaching, the incentives should scale up based on achievement of outcomes in educational attainment. Since achievement of educational out-

comes necessarily involves a reasonable period of time to measure, there would be no need to incentivise tenure if we are rewarding outcomes.

We would therefore take the issue of tenure out of the equation and instead focus on quality and results.

This way the focus is not on the input of how long they "serve" in the community but the quality of

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teaching and what is achieved in the school.

The issue we are trying to address here is quality of teaching, not quantity of teaching, in remote schools and therefore the incentive programs need to focus on the recruitment and retention of teachers who have capacity to contribute to the achievement of identified educational outcomes.

The existing suite of incentives appears to be structured around recruitment and retention of any teachers without any focus on quality teaching or improving educational outcomes. Perhaps this is why the incentives don't seem to work — they are not targeting the teachers they are seeking to attract.

There is a scarcity of evidence demonstrating how incentive strategies to recruit and retain remote teachers contribute to increasing quality teaching or improving educational outcomes in remote schools.

There needs to be a fundamental shift in the idea of "serving time" to an understanding that quality teaching and educational attainment in remote schools will be rewarded not just by pecuniary

benefits but also being rewarded with fast-track opportunities for leadership, promotion and career advancement, and perhaps even rebalancing the system so that quality teaching and successful results become a requirement for promotion and leadership positions. This could be similar to service models where overseas postings are seen as beneficial to career advancement.

Apart from targeted incentive packages, there are two other ways we could lift quality teaching in remote schools. One is to have a national teacher accreditation scheme run by the commonwealth that provides nationally consistent accreditation and recognition of expertise and could include alternative employment-based pathways into teaching for highly skilled professionals outside conventional teacher training. The second is to look at senior teachers at the other end of their careers who could sign up to a Remote Teacher Corps program for a rotational pool of senior and experienced teachers to work in remote schools.

At the same time, increasing quality teaching means decreasing inferior teaching. This could be achieved through implementing performance management tools. Alongside incentives to reward the attainment of agreed outcomes, where those outcomes are not met, teachers could be offered professional development and other opportunities to address skills deficits. If such measures are not successful, it is important that there are means to manage out inferior teaching — something that to date has been practically impossible and can only perpetuate the remote indigenous education challenges.

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