

Making the grade: how to improve teacher performance

Stefanie Balogh *The Australian* November 9, 2016

For the past 31 years, straight-talking principal Kevin Mackay has been at the helm of the Dandenong North Primary School.

In the early 2000s, Mackay found the makings of a crisis at his school in southeastern Melbourne: performance was slipping to a level below schools with a similar student make-up. He spurred teachers into action and, eventually, the school was eclipsing state averages.

“Our staff had grown together to do that. We’d all seen the need to sort of develop together,” Mackay says.

No easy feat given 90 per cent of Dandenong North’s 800 or so students come from a non-English-speaking background. And almost two-thirds of the students are in the bottom quartile of socio-educational advantage.

But as enrolments grew and teachers came and went, a new problem emerged. “The new teachers didn’t get it — just how hard you have to work and how specifically you have to work to keep those performance levels up,” Mackay says. “So we said, ‘What are we going to do to make sure these new teachers can perform like we were before?’ ”

Mackay tackled the dilemma by devising his own system — IMOCAD — to accelerate the performance of freshly minted teachers. To guard against inexperience, the aim was to develop them into highly effective teachers in three years, rather than the standard five.

IMOCAD stands for induction, mentoring, observation, coaching, appraisal and development, and Mackay launched it two years ago.

“It is just basic stuff,” Mackay says. “There’s no rocket science in it, and it is focusing on what matters most.”

Earlier this year, Victorian Education Minister James Merlino pointed out “the single most important thing we can do to improve student outcomes is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in every classroom”.

For great teachers, an adrenalin buzz strikes as they achieve a certain type of synergy in the classroom. “The kids are into it, and you’re into it and that’s why we teach,” says Zena Carusi-Lees, a master teacher at Brisbane’s Balmoral State High School. “It doesn’t happen in every lesson, it doesn’t happen throughout a whole lesson. But you see teachers and they walk out of a classroom and they’re on fire and so are the kids — and that’s what education is about.”

It is a travesty, then, that some never reach this sweet spot. As with any profession, in teaching there are the great, the good, and the underperforming.

As desire to improve teacher quality steadily gains momentum, state government reforms are trying to attract the brightest students to classrooms, encourage teachers to keep learning and weed out the incompetents.

But change takes time.

“There is less room to hide but I don’t think we’ve got to the stage where we really know how to use the system to ensure that level of quality,” says Carusi-Lees, who is part of a wave of specially accredited educators focusing on development of teachers.

In NSW, Education Minister Adrian Piccoli has zeroed in on teacher quality, taking to task some principals for accepting low standards and lamenting those teachers who resist change.

Last month, Piccoli drew audible chuckles at a conference of educators when he quoted a principal saying of an underperforming teacher: “He’s not great but he’s retiring in a couple of years and I’ll just wait.”

He says: “We shouldn’t be prepared to say to students, ‘You’re going to have to put up with this.’”

“Too many decisions are made around what’s in the interests of adults in education — teachers, administrators, principals, unions — rather than what’s in the best interests of students.”

Piccoli calls for a cultural rethink, an embrace of accountability and a rejection of the mentality that says “it’s the best we can do”.

It’s a notion Mackay has never entertained. His IMOCAD system starts new teachers off with an induction program that focuses on teaching students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

“You can’t just learn how to teach when you’ve got kids with no English. You’ve got to be a better teacher than average to start with ... we can’t afford teachers to just be learning at a leisurely pace,” he says.

The mentoring is boosted by outside consultants who work with younger teachers.

And the most effective development during his time in education is to let teachers observe other colleagues during their lessons, Mackay says. “It was a sort of a closed practice once upon a time: private practice, it was called.”

Young teachers have a one-on-one coach who monitors progress and guides them on the next steps.

Then there are the logbooks. “It’s like when you’re learning to drive and you need to log the hours of experience you’ve had with the driving instructor,” Mackay says.

During the past four years, Dandenong North’s results in the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy slipped.

“We had anticipated that, and that was why we started this program, and we believe that we will be able to turn it around and revert to an upward trend again,” Mackay says.

In 2014, the school was one of only eight to take part in the Bright Spots Schools Connection program, supported by non-profit organisation Social Ventures Australia. This partnership helped Mackay develop IMOCAD.

The program aims to turn “bright spots” — schools in low socioeconomic areas punching above their weight — into “bright systems” by promoting its teaching methodologies that deliver high student performances.

Other schools are not taking up the cudgels and Mackay is unsurprised they are not adopting the approach.

“Not at all, and I’ll tell you why because it costs a fortune. It does,” he says.

As a disadvantaged school, Dandenong North receives additional needs-based funding from the Gonski national education funding system. “It’s hugely expensive because every time you take a teacher out of a class to have them observe somebody else ... that’s time and time costs money.”

Around the country, state governments are trying to boost teacher quality.

In NSW, Piccoli is instituting significant changes through the Great Teaching, Inspired Learning initiatives. Queensland is targeting teacher quality with an action plan to attract the best people in teaching, as well as online coaching modules to improve teacher confidence. South Australia has a drive to develop “great teachers”, offering 240 scholarships worth up to \$20,000 for its teachers to undertake a masters degree, while Western Australia has teacher training internships, graduate teacher inductions, teacher development schools, classroom observation, mentoring and professional learning programs.

Teachers are registered by state bodies, so standards vary, but a national approach to standards and registration began rolling out three years ago. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, overseen by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, has seven standards expected of teachers. This includes knowing students and how they learn, knowing the contents of lessons and how to teach, maintaining supportive and safe learning environments and engaging in professional learning.

NSW is leading the charge for its university entrance rules to be adopted nationally. They require students entering undergraduate teaching degrees to be drawn from the top 30 per cent of high school graduates. They need to achieve three band 5 outcomes in their Higher School Certificate, including in English.

In Queensland there are minimum English, maths and science standards, and Victoria is investigating ways to raise the quality of teaching degrees. Nationally, mandatory new standards are set for graduate teachers requiring them to demonstrate they are in the top 30 per cent of the adult population for personal literacy and numeracy.

One of the dedicated teachers at the forefront of efforts to improve teacher quality is Emily Rhodes at Belmore South Public School in Sydney’s southwest.

Rhodes is a lead teacher, accredited by the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW. A teacher for a decade, she says a lead teacher has expert knowledge of pedagogy (the methods and practices of teaching) and curriculum and influences the school and community by working with students, parents and staff.

It’s one of the coalface initiatives in place to support the development of all teachers. “It has very much a strong focus on professional learning and upskilling and ensuring our teachers deliver high-quality teaching programs,” says Rhodes, who has noticed a sea change in the profession across the past five years. “Teachers in the staffroom are talking about celebrating student learning, talking about successful shifts they’ve seen in their students,” she says. “It’s a big change around teachers talking about teaching and talking about learning. Before, the staffroom was a different type of place where people really switched off.”

Much of the efforts on boosting teacher quality concentrates on new entrants. But Greg Craven, who chaired the federal government’s Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, says the “obsession with new teachers” is part of an “industrial surrender” by state education ministers preoccupied in engaging in a blame game instead of investing in education.

Craven, vice-chancellor and president of the Australian Catholic University, says new teachers will probably be the best trained generation in history and certainly the most accountable after implementation of a TEMAG report, Act Now: Classroom Ready Teachers. But, he says, the climate of blame against entrant teachers provides a “get out of jail free” card for underperforming teachers already in the system.

“The workforce is full of incredibly dedicated people and very good teachers and like any other workforce, it has people who are jaded and disengaged and less than optimally committed,” Craven says.

“Now, the great advantage for those teachers has been that they have been completely out of the frame because the only thing that people are talking about is these rotten, evil 23-year-olds.

“This emphasis has been incredibly convenient for education unions who do not want to see innovation and improvement rolled out through the entire population of teachers.”

Piccoli bristles at any suggestion he’s too close to the unions. “Why, because we haven’t had any strikes? It’s actually because we’ve negotiated with them and we’ve brought them in, and on teacher quality they are as supportive as anybody.

“Sometimes conservative ministers think the way they earn their stripes is to take on a combative, industrial relations approach, whereas this is a quality teaching approach, not an anti-union agenda,” he says. “Their members don’t want the reputation of their profession tarnished by the people who do the wrong thing.”

Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham has flagged through his Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes blueprint that future policies should involve changes to state industrial relations agreements to link pay progression for teachers to the nationally agreed professional standards because “teachers ought not to be able to automatically move from one pay increment to the next without demonstration of their teaching ability and effectiveness against these standards”.

NSW Secondary Principals’ Council president Chris Presland says he doesn’t “believe there are principals out there who would lack the morality to say ‘you know, I’m going to turn a blind eye to an incompetent teacher’ ”.

He applauds reforms in NSW to support principals in managing underperforming teachers, including introducing fair warning, fair action, a type of “three strikes and you’re out” system, that empowers principals to issue warnings for disciplinary issues.

“There are always ... going to be people we come across and say, ‘Well, they are not up to scratch’, but the truth of the matter is our schools do a fantastic job.”

Currently, the states are locked in a battle with the federal government over its plans to strike a new schools funding deal from 2018 to replace the patchwork of 27 deals done under the Gonski needs-based arrangements.

Australian Education Union federal president Correna Haythorpe says “lifting the quality of teaching in our schools has to start with offering teachers the support and professional development they need. Teaching is a complex and difficult job, and we need to make sure our school systems are helping teachers improve their skills throughout their careers.

“I know a lot of schools are using Gonski funding to invest in professional development or increase the amount of time teachers have to collaborate. But we need state education departments to take the lead and give schools the resources to invest in improving their teachers,” she says.

