

## Teacher Quality

It is well established that teacher quality is the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and results. Research shows improving the quality of teaching is the most effective way to achieve better educational outcomes for students<sup>1</sup>.

The first step in achieving improved outcomes in education is to attract the best people into teaching<sup>1</sup>. The number of people working as teachers has grown by over 20,000 (8%) in the five years since 2001, or about 4,000 people per year<sup>1</sup>. But with some tertiary institutions entry scores for teaching set as low as 56, this has seen the quality of Australian teachers evidently declining.

A recent study by the Australian National University states that people entering into teaching degrees in 1983 were in the 74<sup>th</sup> percentile for literacy and numeracy standards - in 2003 this level had dropped to 61%. The Business Council of Australia (BCA) states that “the top 25 performing OECD countries recruited their teachers from the top third of graduates from their respective school systems”<sup>1</sup> - This is not occurring in Australia.

Content knowledge is a key component of improving quality teaching. A poor-quality teacher not only imparts less knowledge for the period they teach the student, but can leave the student worse off when they later attempt higher level work<sup>2</sup>. The BCA notes that “students achieve more with teachers who perform well on tests of literacy and liberal ability...positive relationships have also been found between teachers’ academic qualifications and student achievement”<sup>1</sup>.

Recent findings have paid credit to concerns long held by parents about the qualifications of their children’s teachers:

- An Australian Education Union survey of 1,473 Australian public school principals demonstrated 40% of SA teachers are taking classes they are not qualified to teach. Areas where this is most evident are; technology classes - 39%, maths and computer sciences - 37% and languages - 30%<sup>3</sup>.
- A Flinders University survey of more than 600 SA teachers reveals 42% of teachers teaching Year 11 and 12 Physics do not hold a university degree in the subject. Amongst chemistry teachers 28% lack university qualifications and similarly, 25% of biology teachers. 16% of Year 8 – 10 general science teachers were unqualified<sup>4</sup>.

The ‘Teach for Australia’ initiative, based on UK and US models, targets high-achieving university graduates from specialised fields such as Maths and Science, and places them to work in classrooms after accelerated teacher training. The program started in Victoria this year and such a program is keenly needed in South Australia.

According to the DECS 2008 annual report there are nearly 18,000 public school teachers in South Australia<sup>5</sup>. A re-elected Rann Government would recruit and train up to 155 specialist maths and science teachers to work in South Australian high schools<sup>6</sup>- this number is simply not enough.

### Recommendation

- To ensure the highest calibre candidates enter the profession, university teaching entry scores should not be set below the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile.
- The State Government implement the Teach for Australia program to entice top graduates into teaching.
- Inducements such as HECS reduction should be offered to attract new maths and science graduates to pursue a career in teaching.
- Significantly more than 155 science and maths teachers need to be recruited and trained. Additionally, significant numbers of current teachers require training to ensure they are competent in the subjects they are teaching.

1. Teaching Talent: The Best Teachers for Australia’s Classrooms’, The Business Council of Australia.

2. ‘Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools’.

3. Australian Education Union, 2009, ‘State of our Schools Survey’.

4. Panizzon, D, Westwell, M & Elliott, K, 2009, ‘Who’s teaching science in South Australia’, The Flinders Centre for Science Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

5. DECS 2008, Annual Report.

6. Wills, D, 2010, ‘SA Premier Mike Rann promises 155 more specialist maths and science teachers’, Adelaide Now, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2010.