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press clip

Give good teachers a gold star and put the bad ones out to pasture

Behind the furore over school league tables, the criticism of standardised testing, the self-interested screaming of neanderthal teachers' unions and the remarkable steel in Julia Gillard's spine, is a very important fact. More than anything else in education, it is teachers who make a difference.

Research by Professor Bill Loudon, of the University of Western Australia, and from overseas, increasingly points to the instinctively obvious: regardless of how many school halls or archery fields, regardless even of a child's socio-economic background, teacher quality is the key to success.

The most valuable information standardised testing can provide is the difference good teaching makes, allowing the lucky child with a good teacher to improve at a greater rate than her contemporaries stuck with duds or mediocrities.

This kind of information is, of course, anathema to a union culture hell-bent on preserving a false "see-no-evil" egalitarianism among its membership, where longevity of service is rewarded over excellence, ingenuity is crushed, and children, especially those without involved, competent parents, suffer.

To her great credit, Gillard, the federal Education Minister, is determined to empower parents and policy-makers with as much information as possible about the performance of schools and teachers. Her



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My School website, launched last week, includes the results of national numeracy and literacy tests for years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in each of the nation's almost 10,000 schools.

"We would expect parents to have robust conversations with teachers and principals," she said. "This should put pressure on people."

The extent of the pent-up demand from parents for such information was revealed in the fact the site crashed under the weight of 9 million hits in its first day. People started using it at 1am.

The Australian Education Union, purportedly representing 180,000 teachers, under its militant federal president, Angelo Gavrielatos, has been fighting the website on every front, and threatens to boycott supervision of this year's tests. Gillard, admirably, is standing her ground. "If they don't reconsider, we will get it done by whatever means it takes."

While some parents have reportedly been pulling their children out of schools that rated poorly on the website, the school is in fact less important than the individual teacher.

As an article this month in *The Atlantic* titled "What makes a great teacher?" puts it: "Parents have

always worried about where to send their children to school; but the school, statistically speaking, does not matter as much as which adult stands in front of their children.

Teacher quality tends to vary more within schools – even supposedly good schools – than among schools."

The problem is how to identify the qualities of great teachers. This is where Macquarie University's joint project with the Cape York Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, "Teach for Australia", comes in.

Based on an American program, "Teach For America", the non-profit organisation, with such sponsors as Boston Consulting Group and Stockland, operates outside the

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education establishment, but is now championed by Gillard.

It recruits non-teachers – high achieving university graduates – to parachute into a disadvantaged school for two years, bringing enthusiasm and a fresh approach.

They are given six weeks' intensive training, 70 hours a week over the Christmas holidays, and will receive a postgraduate diploma in teaching.

Last week the first crop of 46 TFA associate, as they are called, began teaching in Victorian schools. The



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program has been popular, with 750 applications for 50 places.

The average UAI score of the applicants was 97. TFA cites an American study that found Teach For America teachers are "more effective, as measured by student exam performance, than traditional teachers".

Of course, teachers' unions have been hostile, with claims TFA "demeans" the profession. But they are increasingly irrelevant, and in a speech to the new TFA teachers two weeks ago, Gillard said she expected they would be welcomed by established teachers "because I believe the best people aren't afraid to be surrounded by the best people".

The idea for TFA came from a seminal paper by Pearson for the then Cape York Institute in 2007: *Teach for Australia. A practical plan to get great teachers into remote schools*. The idea was championed by Professor Steven Schwartz, vice-chancellor of Macquarie University, whose Professor Kevin Wheldall already had been working with Pear-

son on successful phonics-based reading programs in Cape York.

In the US this year 7300 Teach for America teachers will teach almost half a million children, almost all of whom are poor and African American or Latino, reports *The Atlantic*.

The American TFA found a pattern among exceptional teachers – those whose students achieved at least 1½ years' growth in a year. They "set big goals [and] constantly re-evaluate what they are doing... frequently check for understanding; [established a] well-executed routine; avidly recruited students and their families into the process; planned exhaustively and purposefully; refused to surrender to the combined menaces of poverty, bureaucracy, and budgetary shortfalls [and they had] a relentless mindset".

The heartening discovery is that great teaching is not rocket science, and, as Steven Farr of Teach for America says, is "neither mysterious nor magical. It is neither a function of dynamic personality nor dramatic performance."

Importantly, great teaching techniques can be taught.

In her TFA speech Gillard laid down the philosophy behind the project: "That children from the poorest and most difficult backgrounds can learn and achieve and if they fail to do so, we the adults have let them down."

The war against teachers' unions is on – only this time it is not from their traditional conservative enemies, who have proved spectacularly unsuccessful over the last decade in breaking union control of education.

A new resolve from the unions' old allies and enablers, the Australian Labor Party, and in the US the Democrats, unable any longer to ignore the disastrous effect of progressive policies of the past 40 years, looks like finally breaking their destructive dominance.

At last we can prove that demography is not destiny.

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