

Wrong place WRONG TIME

The new Teach for Australia program may be good for corporate Australia, but it doesn't make sense in terms of educational outcomes. **Toni O'Loughlin** reports.

→ Briefly

- **Teach for Australia will fast-track university graduates into disadvantaged schools after six weeks of teacher training.**
- **Research into similar programs overseas indicates that students of the fast-tracked teachers may be further disadvantaged.**
- **Critics of the programs say they demean the teaching profession.**

Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard is preparing a logic-defying remedy for Australia's most disadvantaged schools. Under the Teach for Australia banner, she is recruiting "high-achieving" university graduates for a six-week crash course in teaching, then dispatching them to schools, claiming they will kick-start a "revolution".

Gillard and other supporters of Teach for Australia say it will improve student performances and rejuvenate teaching as a high-performing profession. Yet simple logic, as well as international research into the program, which was pioneered in the United States, suggests that Gillard needs to review her plan.

"Teach for Australia say they are concerned about student disadvantage," says AEU federal women's officer Catherine Davis. "[If so], their model shouldn't be

about putting the least prepared teachers into the most challenging classrooms."

Teach for Australia, which is being trialled in Victoria before a proposed rollout to willing schools in other states, has been modelled on Teach for America (TFA). In a desire to eliminate educational inequality, Wendy Kopp developed the idea in 1989 while writing her thesis at Princeton University. She founded the not-for-profit TFA organisation the following year.

Kopp's initial budget was US\$2.5 million (\$2.8 million). With a growing tendency to blame teachers for poor student outcomes under the former Bush administration's No Child Left Behind legislation, her organisation has rapidly expanded in the past 10 years. In 2008 TFA's operating revenue from government contracts and private donors was US\$120 million and it is expected to reach US\$150 million this year.

Kopp started exporting her organisation's model around the globe in 2007. Its international arm, Teach for All, has sold the model to Britain, Chile, Estonia, Germany, India, Latvia and Lebanon.

In Australia, it was initially touted by Noel Pearson's Cape York Institute as a way of recruiting "the brightest" graduates as teachers for disadvantaged Aboriginal communities. Teach for Australia is a charity set up with the assistance of Boston Consulting Group.

Ninety graduates are being recruited to undergo six weeks of training at the University of Melbourne. Next year they will be dispatched to the participating disadvantaged Victorian schools where they will carry an 80 per cent teaching load.

The aim is to place several recruits together in one school and to install a network of business and teaching mentors to help them through the ensuing two years. At the end of their placement, they will be awarded a teaching qualification equivalent to a postgraduate diploma in teaching, which they will have been paid \$45,000-\$50,000 a year to obtain.

There is no expectation for the recruits to stay beyond the two-year period. Gillard, who hails Teach for Australia as an "exciting entrepreneurial" program, has made clear it is a recruiting ground for the corporate world. Boston Consulting Group

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says the program is "one of the best leadership development experiences in the country".

The real question is whether the Teach for Australia experiment will benefit disadvantaged children as much as business. Proponents of the model point to several studies, including one by consultants at Mathematica Policy Research in 2004 which indicated that recruits were as effective as their peers in under-resourced schools.

Australian parents are yet to be convinced. The AEU's latest poll found that 59 per cent of people in general, and 69 per cent of parents with children in public schools were opposed to unqualified teachers in classrooms.

Parents are right to be sceptical. Education experts such as David Berliner, Regents' Professor of Education at Arizona State University, say studies such as Mathematica's are "a con". Of the 98 teachers Mathematica tested, 41 were TFA staff and 57 were mainstream teachers, many of whom were not certified.

Berliner found that children taught by the recruits achieve 20 per cent less academic growth compared to peers taught by fully qualified teachers. His findings are supported by Stanford University Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, who ran one of the biggest studies, analysing the records of 132,000 students and 4400 teachers across six tests. In five of the six tests, the recruits' pupils performed worst. Further, their pupils' achievements lagged behind students taught by qualified teachers by up to three months.

In Britain, where the scheme is called Teach First, a 2005 study by two universities found many reported benefits to students, teachers and schools. But that's in a system where disadvantaged schools are already staffed with unqualified teachers. In addition, the study warned that Teach First was at risk of giving mainstream teachers a bad name, regardless of their training. It promoted messages "implying that teachers currently working in challenging schools are not doing a good job".

AEU president Angelo Gavrielatos says governments, having neglected investment in teachers and teaching continue to demean the profession. "To suggest that someone can be adequately prepared to confront the realities of a modern classroom within six weeks is an insult to the profession." ●

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