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A focus on learning is needed to revitalise teaching

Published in The Australian, page 12, Tuesday 30 August 2011

*It is a mistake to believe that just sacking teachers will address underperformance, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

"We must sack underperforming teachers." It is something you hear regularly in school education, and is a popular topic for opinion writers and talkback radio. But it misses the point and adds to a longstanding unproductive debate. It jumps to the negative endpoint of teacher appraisal rather than taking an approach that improves student learning.

At present, few teachers are dismissed because of poor performance, and teachers and school principals say it is an issue that needs to be addressed. Education officials are often approached by school principals seeking assistance to dismiss underperforming teachers. But the officials often find that the teacher has received minimal or no meaningful appraisal of their work. This is unfair to teachers, making a difficult industrial landscape almost impossible. It is also grossly inefficient.

It reflects a fundamental problem that plagues our education policies. We fail to distinguish between a focus on teachers, teaching and learning. Or, in economic terms, we fail to distinguish between a focus on inputs, processes and outcomes. This may sound like semantics but it has considerable policy implications.

A system focusing solely on teachers concentrates on removing those who underperform. It plays the man rather than the ball. Advocates often argue that this will be improved if schools have more power to fire teachers. I often argue for greater school autonomy as the evidence shows it is beneficial in some areas. But the evidence shows it will not solve this problem. There is substantially greater autonomy in government schools in Victoria than NSW but very few teachers are dismissed in either state.

OECD data shows that more than 90 per cent of teachers believe that underperformance won't affect teachers' pay and more than 70 per cent believe it does not lead to dismissal in their school. These are alarming figures, but there are no significant differences between non-government and government schools where autonomy is much greater. A focus on learning shifts the debate to how teacher appraisal can improve student learning. This is the focus in high-performing education systems.

In April, the Grattan Institute proposed a new system of teacher appraisal. It received support from across the political spectrum. A key reason for this was that the objective was to improve learning. Teachers would be appraised and receive feedback from their peers, their students and their school principal on the teaching and learning actually taking place in their classrooms. The evidence shows that this has a greater impact on student learning than other policy intervention.

It is a mistake to believe that making it easier to sack teachers will adequately address underperformance. In fact, greater labour-market flexibility would be achieved with a focus on improving learning in all classrooms.

To illustrate this point, let us examine the likely impact of the two approaches. Hypothetically, let's say that 10 per cent of teachers are underperforming. The real figure may be 2 per cent or 20 per cent. No one knows for sure.

If we focus only on teachers, we will continue the industrial debate about the need to make it easier to sack teachers. I cannot see the union stance changing on this point. The gridlock in this debate means only about 1-2 per cent of teachers are dismissed each year. Even if advocates of this

approach were successful in doubling this percentage, the result would be about 3-4 per cent of teachers would be dismissed.

Now consider an approach that focuses on improving learning. The evidence shows that constructive feedback on a rigorous appraisal of teachers' work can lift the effectiveness of all teachers by up to 30 per cent. This improves learning in every classroom. For the 10 per cent of underperforming teachers, this system will be rigorous and confronting. Let's say that half of the 10 per cent improve under this developmental process.

What happens to the other 5 per cent? They will have received feedback from other teachers, their mentors, the school principal and students. This will all be documented. If a teacher does not respond to this feedback, then there is a strong evidence base to remove them from the classroom. This will result in more teachers being dismissed because of poor performance. The developmental nature of a focus on learning creates a fairer process.

Not all teachers will be able to respond to the rising standards of learning and teaching. A focus on improved learning in all classrooms increases labour-market flexibility due to the increased information about improvements in teaching and learning.

We have a choice. We can continue the long stand-off in an unproductive debate about sacking teachers or we can focus on improving learning. Some call this a soft response, but it will have a great impact on all students and will address underperformance.

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