ISSUEANALYSIS

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Teachers and the Waiting Game: Why Decentralisation is Vital for Public Schools

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- On the most important aspects of education policy, state governments are in the grip of teacher unions. Public school staffing systems work for the benefit of teacher unions rather than students or even the majority of teachers.
- With the exception of Victoria, public school principals and school communities have very little say over who is hired to teach in their school, who stays and who goes. These decisions are made by government bureaucrats and merit is typically at the bottom of the list.
- New South Wales has one of the most rigid systems of public school teacher allocation but it is indicative of centralised systems in other states where teachers are allocated to schools using a hierarchical pecking order.
- Centralised staffing systems are the bastion of teacher unions, which fiercely protect regulations that shelter poor teachers and privilege longevity over performance.
- Despite recent changes to disciplinary policy it can still take up to 12 months to get rid of an incompetent teacher and principals have little authority over the final outcome. Poor teachers are more likely to be shuffled between schools than disciplined or dismissed, with serious repercussions for the teaching profession as well as students.
- Centralised staffing delivers neither quality nor equality, and many teachers and principals are deeply dissatisfied with it. It puts the least experienced teachers in some of the most challenging schools, creating the added problem of high turnover rates. Put simply, students who most need quality teachers and consistency are least likely to get them.
- Evidence from the largest and most credible international studies indicate that one of the hallmarks of effective schools is the ability to self-govern and to make important decisions that impact on the quality of education they can offer.
- Schools should be given their entire personnel budget, which should be proportionate to the school's needs, to recruit the mix of staff they require. Often it is not a matter of convincing teachers to move to a country town but rather to move out of their comfort zone.
- Many teachers want flexibility and self-determination in their career paths and to be rewarded for hard work. Strategies to ensure an adequate supply of quality teachers for Australian schools into the future routinely fail to address this.
- If public schools are to thrive and flourish into the future, the power nexus between teacher unions and state governments must be broken. Decentralising teacher employment allows teachers to make professional career choices. It allows schools to employ the teachers that are most suitable for their students, rewarding excellence over patience.

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Introduction*

Although much has been made about the poverty of educational standards in Australian schools lately, it is surprising that things are not a good deal worse. On many important aspects of education policy state governments are in the grip of teacher unions. This has created a situation where public school systems are not being run first and foremost for the benefit of students.

With the exception of Victoria, public school teachers in all states and territories are appointed by a centralised teacher allocation system. There are variations from state to state but essentially public school principals and school communities have very little say over who is hired to teach in their school, who stays, who goes and how they are paid. These decisions are made by government bureaucrats and merit is typically at the bottom of the list.

A career in teaching is a waiting game

Ironically, in a centralised staffing system, teachers themselves have little control over the terms of their employment. They cannot apply directly to a public school with a vacancy and be hired on their suitability for the position. Instead they wait in a queue until the people ahead of them resign or retire. A career in teaching is a waiting game.[1]

New teachers are sent to the most difficult-to-staff schools. These schools are difficult to staff often because their students are difficult to teach. Centralised teacher allocation systems put the least experienced teachers in the most challenging classrooms or send them to small isolated towns away from their support networks. Turnover in the early years of teaching is excessively high—one in four teachers leave in the first five years.[1]

Centralised staffing systems are the bastion of teacher unions and are aggressively defended by them, despite the fact that they prioritise the needs of certain teachers over others and have little regard for students.

Teacher unions masquerade as public education advocacy groups and professional teachers associations. They run million dollar advertising campaigns promoting public education and hold public education forums and rallies. But underlying all of these activities is the goal of preserving the status quo and protecting teachers' jobs. Teacher unions only support causes that advance their own interests. If an education reform will potentially destabilise the power of the union, they will use all their influence to block it.

The right of teacher unions to exist is not the issue. Teachers are entitled to form and join an organisation that represents them on industrial matters. Such an organisation ought to have teachers' salaries and employment conditions as its main concerns. Problems arise when unions extend their reach into political and professional issues where there are often conflicting agendas. In a review of teacher education in NSW in 2000, *Quality Matters*, Gregor Ramsey wrote, 'The industrial and professional identities of teachers are not separated in New South Wales … As a consequence, too often professional matters are turned into contentious industrial issues.'[2]

The unions' dominance is partly attributable to the lack of a strong alternative and unified voice for the profession. A national teacher's institute, Teaching Australia, was established in 2004 to provide a non-union, non-partisan professional voice for teachers, but it is yet to achieve the public prominence and influence of the Australian Education Union and its state affiliates.

Public school teacher unions expect to be involved in all public education matters, regardless of their relevance to the union's raison d'etre. The result is a failure to recognise that what is good for teachers is not necessarily good for students, and vice versa.

For example, over the last two decades, the NSW Teachers Federation has stymied numerous attempts by NSW state governments to implement reforms and policies that would help schools, students and parents, and has successfully pressured the government to increase spending on things that are likely to have few lasting benefits to students.[3] For instance:

- There are two representatives of the NSW Teachers Federation on each of the curriculum committees of the NSW Board of Studies. They are not there as

independent experts on the subject discipline but as union nominees.

- When common literacy and numeracy testing was introduced in NSW schools, the Teachers Federation undermined their effectiveness by forcing the introduction of legislation prohibiting the publication of any student results in a way that allowed comparative analysis. Consequently, parents in NSW have less information about public schools than parents in any other state, and schools and teachers are protected from scrutiny.
- In 2003, the NSW government introduced an expensive class size reduction programme after the Teachers Federation ran a high-profile campaign extolling the benefits of smaller classes in the lead up to the state election. Evidence on the benefits of minor reductions in class size is inconclusive but smaller classes create a need for more teachers (and more union fees) and make teachers' jobs easier.
- This year, when the NSW government moved to provide parents with 'plain English' report cards that clearly state their child's level of achievement, the Teachers Federation encouraged teachers to boycott the reports and then implemented a 'professional ban' against them.[4] The Teachers Federation claims their opposition to the reports is because they are 'educationally unsound', but a large part of the campaign has been to push the NSW government to 'amend relevant legislation to protect student report data from being publicised in school league tables'.[5]

If public schools are to thrive and flourish into the future, the nexus between the unions and state governments must be broken

The most serious influence of the teacher unions, however, is their stranglehold over teacher quality. They fiercely protect regulations that shelter poor teachers and privilege longevity over merit.

But the real culprits are those who have handed power to the teacher unions. Unions have no real authority. They cannot make education legislation. They do not employ teachers or run schools. The only power they have is political—the way they influence their members to vote and behave.

State governments must stand up to teacher unions. Over the past decade, Labor governments have continually capitulated to the teacher unions on major policy decisions even when they have politically been in a position to make bold moves. Unions consistently support Labor parties at state and federal elections. There are few instances of unions supporting a Coalition government.

In theory, the actual power lies with voters. An unsatisfactory government will be voted out, and polls show that education is among the top priorities of voters. Unfortunately, the theory fails when there is no real alternative to the government. In Queensland, there are only five Liberal party policies on education, but they do include important issues such as literacy and numeracy and religious education in schools. In Western Australia, firm policy detail is not available, however the Liberal opposition spokesman on education, Peter Collier, has been outspoken on the WA curriculum.

Yet again, NSW offers the most extreme example of the lack of vision for education. The NSW Liberals are practically an education policy free zone. They have only three offerings on schools: providing 47 small country schools with an extra teacher; giving schools money to make their playgrounds 'environmentally friendly'; and installing flashing roadside lights in school zones.[6] In comparison, the NSW Greens have clear and comprehensive policy principles and detail on education.

If public schools are to thrive and flourish into the future, the nexus between the unions and state governments must be broken. Teachers employed by a remote and faceless state government department understandably feel as though they need the security of a strong and politically active union. The union, in turn, uses its clout to aggressively and publicly pursue its agenda against the government.

The vital first step in a decentralisation process that would reduce both union and government bureaucratic influence over public schools is to give greater staffing autonomy to schools.

Hiring public school teachers

Each state and territory has their own policies, and public school staffing and teacher appointment procedures vary across Australia. Researchers Neville Hatton and Alan Watson from the Universities of Sydney and New South Wales found a range of difference between states as great as they found comparing countries across the world.

However, in no Australian state has there been full decentralisation of staffing authority. In a 2002 policy paper, Brian Caldwell and John Roskam write that in an international context, the 'Australian government school system exhibits an extraordinary degree of centralisation.'[7]

The appointment process serves neither students nor the majority of teachers well and is predominantly concerned with ensuring an adequate quantity of teachers rather than quality

New South Wales is one of the most extreme examples, and is therefore the focus of this paper. However, the NSW system is indicative of centralised systems in other states, and the problems and criticisms identified apply to them as well.

This paper will not detail the policy in all states and territories, as most are variations on the centralised system, but certain aspects of teacher employment in the ACT also deserve special mention. For example, in the ACT, a teacher that refuses an offer of employment may not be made another offer for 12 months. Not only are teachers expected to take whatever position is offered, the ACT has a policy of forced transfers. Teachers are initially appointed to a school for a maximum period of four years, after which they are transferred to another school for a maximum of six years, with subsequent appointments to different schools for up to eight years.[8] It is not hard to see how this makes life difficult for teachers, students and principals. Turnover is artificially increased as teachers have an incentive to seek new positions before they are transferred.

The state that has progressed furthest down the path of decentralisation is Victoria, where principals have much more decision-making authority about the teachers in their school. South Australia is moving in the same direction.

New South Wales

Explaining to people outside the NSW education system how teachers are appointed to NSW public schools is no easy task. The process is convoluted and there is nothing quite like it in any other sector. It serves neither students nor the majority of teachers well and is predominantly concerned with ensuring an adequate quantity of teachers rather than quality.

A NSW Department of Education and Training policy document attests to this agenda:

> Classroom teacher positions not filled through priority transfer, service transfer, the Permanent Employment Program, special fitness appointment or through a mix of resumption of duty from leave, the Graduate Recruitment Program, scholarship holders, teachers completing targeted training programs, or from the employment list, will be externally advertised and filled by merit.[9]

All teachers are appointed to NSW public schools through a central recruitment office of the NSW Department of Education called the School Staffing Unit. Teachers seeking permanent employment in a NSW public school must do so through the School Staffing Unit. Likewise, schools with a teaching vacancy must inform the School Staffing Unit, which will usually then supply a teacher to them from those registered with the Unit as seeking a position. Only as a last resort is the position advertised.

For example, a school requiring a maths teacher for Years 11 and 12, with the ability to work effectively in a school with a high proportion of non-English speaking students, has to notify the School Staffing Unit of the vacancy and submit the relevant codes. The Unit then identifies suitable candidates through a computer code-matching process and notifies the school of the method by which the position will be filled.

Teachers are allocated to schools using a hierarchical system negotiated by the NSW

Teachers Federation. Preference is given to certain teachers over others, regardless of merit. In the case of priority and service transfers, the principal and school community have no say in the teacher allocated to the school.[10] The School Staffing Unit appoints a teacher based on codes and priority rankings. When filling classroom teacher vacancies, the following pecking order is used.[11]

* *Priority transfers*. Teachers who have been displaced by school closures or staffing changes; teachers eligible for compassionate transfer; teachers who have spent the required number of years working in a listed 'incentive transfer school', juvenile correction facility, or special school.

If there are no eligible teachers seeking priority transfer for a vacant position, the School Staffing Unit may select a teacher from one of the following two groups. In neither case is the school involved in the appointment.

* *Service transfers*. Teachers accumulate transfer points with each year of teaching. Some schools award more points than others. For example, teaching at Clare Public School in Western NSW earns eight points a year while teaching at Katoomba Public School earns only one point a year. Teachers who have been at their current school for at least three years (or two years in selected schools) can apply for a service transfer, and applicants with the most points are given preference.

* *Permanent Employment Program*. Up to 300 teaching positions each year are open to registered teachers who are not currently employed in a NSW public school. They are advertised through the NSW Department of Education's job network.

If the position cannot be filled from the above groups of teachers, the next groups of candidates are considered.

Preference is given to certain teachers over others, regardless of merit

* *Scholarship holders and teachers completing targeted training programmes.*

* *Graduate Recruitment Program.* Up to 1000 positions are available to high quality recent teacher education graduates by application to the NSW Department of Education. According to the NSW Public Education Council, in practice the annual number of appointments is usually between 400–600.[12]

* *Employment list*. Teachers ineligible for any of the above schemes are on the employment list. If a school's teaching vacancy is to be filled from the employment list, all teachers on the list with the relevant codes are identified by the School Staffing Unit and either the top candidate or the five candidates with the highest 'priority dates' (those who have been unemployed the longest) are then offered to the school as candidates. A selection panel convened by the school principal can choose among these five candidates.

After all other avenues have been exhausted, if no suitable teacher has been found to fill a vacancy, the school is allowed to advertise the position externally, select its own candidates and appoint a teacher on merit.

**Merit selection*. A school-based selection panel which includes the principal is formed. Even then, however, it must make detailed reports to the School Staffing Unit about short-listing decisions and the interviewing process and the Unit must approve the final appointment.

Data on teacher appointments from the School Staffing Unit shows that almost all teacher 'employment transactions' are non-advertised. Of the non-advertised appointments, one quarter was priority transfers.

Classroom teacher appointments: NSW public schools (Feb 2004–Feb 2005)

Mode of appointment	Number
Advertised	185
Non-advertised	5066
Priority and service transfer	*2692*
*Other appointments**	*763*
Employment list	*1611*
Total	5251

** Graduate Recruitment Program, Permanent Employment Program, Scholarship and Accelerated/ Targeted appointments.*

Until May 2005, NSW public school principals had no say whatsoever in the staffing of their schools

The two components of the teacher recruitment process that offer very limited choice to schools—being able to choose among five pre-selected candidates from the employment list, and the (last resort) merit selection which includes candidates outside the NSW teaching service—are recent additions to the 1980 Teaching Service Act. Until May 2005, NSW public school principals had no say whatsoever in the staffing of their schools. The NSW Teachers Federation described the new arrangements as 'effectively the same' as the old arrangements and claimed victory in the negotiations with the NSW Department of Education, which attests to their minimal practical impact.[14]

Much has been made by the NSW Department of Education and Training of the number of teachers appointed from the employment list. In the twelve months to 2006, 1182 teachers were appointed by school selection committees.[15] If there are in excess of 5000 teacher appointments each year as previous figures suggest, this represents a minority of classroom teacher appointments. Furthermore, most cannot accurately be described as merit selection. In the vast majority of cases, the school selection committees are given only five candidates to choose from, all of whom have been selected because their 'priority dates' are the highest, not because they have been judged the best people for the job.

It is important to note that the amendments made in 2005 were not at the behest of the NSW government but as a result of pressure from the federal government, which tied funding grants to the condition that school principals be given a greater role in teacher appointments. This perhaps explains the narrow scope of the changes.

The same sorts of procedures and criticisms apply to the appointment of executive teachers and school principals. Principals who need a job (priority transfers) are given first preference, followed by current principals who have accumulated the most points or have worked in 'special fitness' schools. Merit selection is again at the end of the list. The school has a say in the appointment only if the School Staffing Unit decides merit selection is the suitable course of action.

School communities have been objecting strongly to this system. Prominent recent cases include:

- In March 2005, more than one hundred parents attended a protest meeting about the procedures for appointing a new principal to the Newtown High School of Performing Arts.

- Also in March 2005, parents from Greystanes High School lobbied NSW Minister for Education Carmel Tebutt to allow the formation of a selection committee to choose a replacement for their principal who was about to retire. The Department of Education and Training chose a principal for the school without consultation.

- In September 2005, angry parents from Maroubra Junction Public School were evicted from the NSW Parliament for noisily protesting the Department of Education's decision to replace a well-liked acting deputy principal with a Departmental appointment. A *Daily Telegraph* article stated that 'Hundreds of parents across the state have been calling for involvement in the appointment of teachers and principals.'[16]

In addressing these issues in NSW Parliament, Labor MP (and former NSW Teachers Federation official) Pam Allen pointed out the disparity between the government rhetoric on parental involvement in schools and the reality: 'We encourage our school communities to become vitally active in their schools; we need their involvement, yet we are not prepared to give them the authority when it comes to the crunch in their vital decision to choose a school leader.'[17]

Victoria

In Victoria, responsibility for hiring classroom teachers was devolved to individual schools in the 1990s as part of the Schools of the Future reforms. Schools with a teaching vacancy advertise both on the Victorian Department of Education and Training job network and externally, and teachers apply directly to the schools. A selection committee convened by the school principal interviews candidates and makes the appointment. The school is responsible for its staffing budget.

In Victoria, responsibility for hiring classroom teachers was devolved to individual schools in the 1990s as part of the Schools of the Future reforms

According to a Victorian Department of Education and Training policy document:

> In this context schools are able to progressively build, or maintain, a staff team that can provide the best possible teaching and learning in the school. Schools have the capacity to select the best available staff and to meet the ongoing employment opportunities in Victorian government schools. Local selection arrangements provide the most effective way of matching the talents and aspirations of staff with the specific needs of individual schools.[18]

Furthermore, selection of staff for advertised positions is determined solely on the basis of merit assessed in relation to the selection criteria of the position to be filled. There are still restrictions on eligibility, such as registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching, but it is difficult to imagine a more stark contrast to the situation in NSW. In Victoria, merit and suitability are the priority, while in NSW the needs of teachers seeking employment or a transfer are the main concern rather than the needs of the school.

Schools are also responsible for the selection of principals. Applicants for an advertised principal position are interviewed by a selection panel established by the school council. The Secretary of the Department of Education and Training is then notified of the school council's recommendation and, if approved, the appointment is made.[19]

South Australia

South Australia has traditionally used a centralised staffing system but is about to undergo significant changes to teacher placements. From 2007, South Australian public schools will be able to advertise a significant proportion of classroom teacher positions, giving them more freedom in staffing decisions. Like New South Wales, teachers in the 'priority pool', that is teachers who effectively have tenure, get first preference, but all other teacher appointments will be made by individual schools, which have responsibility for their own staffing budgets and therefore a measure of control over the staffing mix.[20]

Firing teachers in public schools

New South Wales

It is extremely difficult for a teacher in a NSW public school to get the sack. Only a tiny proportion of teachers ever face any kind of disciplinary procedure. A report from the NSW Auditor General's office found that only 174 (0.4%) public school teachers underwent

'performance management' procedures in 2001.[21] Over the past three years, 35 teachers were dismissed each year on average, out of a workforce of more than 50,000 teachers.

The Daily Telegraph in Sydney reported these figures as though the number of teachers sacked was shockingly high.[22] In reality, these teachers are only the worst of the worst—teachers guilty of serious misconduct—and there are likely to be many more teachers who would, and should, be removed from the teaching service if it was not so difficult.

Under the procedures in place up to 2005, it took an average of 18 months to dismiss a teacher for poor performance and up to two years to dismiss a teacher guilty of misconduct. Changes to disciplinary policy for teachers brought in this year are supposed to make the process quicker. NSW Education Minister Carmel Tebbut said the new procedures 'cut red tape while continuing to ensure that employees receive procedural fairness'.[23] This remains to be seen.

Poor teachers are more likely to be shuffled between schools than disciplined or dismissed, with serious repercussions for the teaching profession as well as students

There are three reasons that a teacher might be disciplined or dismissed from a NSW public school—misconduct, unsatisfactory performance, or conviction of a serious criminal offence (an offence that can attract a prison sentence of 12 months or more).

The only circumstance in which a teacher will be immediately removed from teaching is if they are convicted of a serious sexual offence or violence against a child. They are then considered a 'prohibited person'. Otherwise, there still seems to be an awful lot of red tape.

In the case of unsatisfactory performance, it can still take up to 12 months to sort out the problem. If a principal believes that a teacher is incompetent, they must first contact the 'Staff Efficiency and Conduct Team' at the Department of Education and Training. Delegates from the department will then decide if the teacher should go through a Teacher Improvement Program. This takes between 10 and 16 weeks, depending on the progress of the teacher's performance. If there is no improvement at the end of the programme, a review team appointed by the department is called in.

If the review team decides that the improvement programme (they make no assessment of the unsatisfactory teacher, just the programme) was not implemented properly, no further action is taken against the teacher. However, if concerns about the teacher's performance are expressed again down the track, the teacher can do the improvement programme all over again in another school.

If the review team determines that the initial improvement programme was correctly implemented, the still unsatisfactory teacher's case is referred to a 'decision-maker', who may or may not decide to dismiss the teacher.

Apart from the fact that it is so time-consuming, the biggest flaw in this process is that the principal is not the 'decision maker'. Once the principal has identified a teacher as 'experiencing problems with their performance' the rest is pretty much out of their hands. If the teacher demonstrates that they are capable of doing their job during the period of the improvement program, they get to keep their job regardless of the opinion of the principal. Lazy teachers can go back to being lazy as soon as the heat is off. For over-worked principals, the effort of going through the whole process again is often too much trouble.

According to *The Daily Telegraph* education editor Maralyn Parker, the discipline process is 'just too all-consuming and stressful for fellow teachers, school executive and students'. Parker says 'every principal I have spoken to who has used it will never use it again … It is much easier to use other methods to move the teacher on.'[24]

This means that poor teachers are more likely to be shuffled between schools than disciplined or dismissed, with serious repercussions for the teaching profession as well as students.

Victoria

In Victoria, the process of managing teacher performance and removing incompetent teachers from public schools is still time-consuming but there is one major difference—the principal plays a major role.

When there is a problem with a teacher's conduct or performance, the principal contacts the Conduct and Ethics Branch of the Victorian Department of Education and Training

for 'advice and assistance'. Any investigations or performance management procedures are undertaken by the principal, except in exceptional circumstances. Monitoring and feedback aimed at improving performance can take as little as four weeks (compared with the ten week minimum in NSW), after which the principal can either extend the monitoring period, take no further action, or provide a recommendation for disciplinary action to the Secretary for the Department of Education.

The final decision—dismissal, demotion, a fine or reprimand—is taken by the department Secretary. Even though the principal's advice is fundamental, they still don't have the final say. This requires principals to commit to a long-winded and unpleasant process with an uncertain outcome. Just like in NSW, the teacher may end up retaining their job despite the principal's concerns about their competence, creating an uncomfortable situation and an experience that principals would be unlikely to repeat.

Teacher employment in non-government schools

Catholic schools are owned and operated by the Catholic church and form a system of schools that has traditionally had many features in common with the public school system. There is a hierarchy of bureaucracy—federal, state and diocesan—that makes decisions about funding, curriculum and governance.

Principals feel that they are at times held hostage to the requirements of the system to the detriment of their individual school

Until recently, teacher employment in the Catholic school sector has been at the diocesan level, making it much less centralised than the public sector. For example, the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle in New South Wales manages the employment of 1650 teachers, as compared with the more than 50,000 teachers employed by the NSW state government. Although limited local input is already a feature of the teacher appointment process, many dioceses are making a transition to an even more decentralised system where schools select most of their staff. A transfer system based on length of service is being phased out and all teachers will be selected on merit.

Independent schools are the only schools that operate autonomously. They determine their own personnel budgets and recruit and select their own staff. Independent schools are governed by an elected school council, which also selects the school's principal.

Although Catholic and independent schools have more freedom in hiring teachers, like public schools they have difficulty dismissing bad teachers, largely because of the protection of non-government teacher unions like the Independent Education Union and the courts.

This means that the decentralisation process for public schools must be accompanied by better legislation that provides natural justice but does not shelter incompetent teachers.

The need for reform

New South Wales' central staffing system was ostensibly created to ensure an equal distribution of teachers across the state. The evidence is that it has not been successful in this goal and many teachers and principals are deeply dissatisfied with it.

Although the NSW state government seems to have no interest in reforming teacher recruitment and appointment procedures, there is evidence of dissatisfaction in schools. The report of the 2002 Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW chaired by Tony Vinson revealed that many principals were unhappy with central staffing allocations.

'The Inquiry heard frequent complaints from principals about the operation of the statewide staffing system. Principals feel that they are at times held hostage to the requirements of the system to the detriment of their individual school. They argue that in order to be managers of their schools, they should have the ability to select the mix of staff that they feel will best meet the needs of their school.'[25]

Other survey data support this sense of dissatisfaction among teachers. A 2004 report for the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs found

that 'many teachers feel that they are being marshalled and not treated like individuals' and are also 'unconvinced that the system works equitably'.[26] Teachers in focus groups criticised the public school transfer points system for putting beginning teachers in areas where teaching is hardest, and because it is at odds with their self-perception as autonomous professionals and denies them the freedom to make choices.

Neville Hatton and Alan Watson are among the few researchers who have written extensively on the topic of staffing policies, including papers for the 2002 NSW public education inquiry and the 2003 federal review of teaching, but even their analysis of the NSW system is incomplete. According to Hatton and Watson, 'For class teachers, the staffing unit receives a job description from the school needing a teacher with the aptitudes and areas of expertise specified. A computer match of these requests is made with eligible teachers' applications, which set forth specific qualifications and interests, and the best available individual is then offered the position.'[27] This is not an accurate depiction. In reality, the best available individual is offered the position only if they happen to be at the top of the pecking order.

In reality, the best available individual is offered the position only if they happen to be at the top of the pecking order

Hatton and Watson see 'no workable alternative to the existing points system' despite agreeing with the criticism that it rewards patience rather than excellence.

Likewise, the 2002 Vinson inquiry into public education in NSW identified major problems with teacher allocation procedures and provided evidence of widespread dissatisfaction among teachers, yet it endorsed the system nonetheless. 'The Inquiry unequivocally accepts the fundamental justice of the current system that combines "codes" and "points" and believes it should continue to account for the majority of classroom teacher appointments'.[28]

Although there have been numerous reports and inquiries into teaching in the last decade, scant attention has been paid to the issues of staffing decisions and teacher placement, but where it does take place the verdict is generally in favour of devolving more authority to schools.

Gregor Ramsey's review of teacher education in NSW in 2000 looked at the related issue of teacher quality and the role of staffing and recruitment. Ramsey's analysis of the transfer point system in NSW was that it rewards 'waiting rather than quality and development'.[29] He recommended that the waiting list for teacher employment be abolished (making the point that it would be strange to see such a list in any other profession).

Ramsey does not go into the possibility of delegating staffing decisions to schools but does provide a good case for replacing the current procedures, which focus on filling vacancies rather than quality, with policies that allow the best available applicant to be selected.

The 2003 federal government review of the status of teaching, *Australia's Teachers, Australia's Future* says relatively little about teacher placement but does note the tendency for certain schools to have high turnover rates and more than their fair share of 'both inexperienced and transitory teachers.'[30] A large number of studies have shown that, within limits, more experienced teachers tend to produce better student achievement,[31] putting schools with disproportionate numbers of early career teachers at a disadvantage.

The review also notes that although a period of service in hard-to-staff schools is seen as a normal part of the teaching career in states where staffing decisions are made centrally, such as in NSW, in areas where there is more devolved staffing responsibility, there is an opportunity to focus attention on recruiting teachers whose attributes make them more suitable for teaching in rural or challenging schools and developing incentives that make them more likely to stay. The report concludes that 'it would be highly beneficial to confer greater authority and responsibility for decision making on the school principal'.[32]

An Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report on teachers endorses the international trend toward providing schools with more responsibility for teacher employment and management. The report makes the point that successful enterprises often say that personnel selection is one of their most important decisions

because it impacts strongly on their success, and that this is no less true for schools. But the report says that in the case of teaching, 'the evidence suggests that all too often the selection process follows rules about qualifications and seniority that bear little relationship to the qualities needed to be an effective teacher.'[33] The report also notes that impersonal systems of teacher appointment work against teachers making a commitment to a school and the school to them.

National survey data on principals' support for decentralisation of staffing responsibility to schools is not readily available, but there is evidence principals would embrace it given the opportunity. A 2004 report by Malcolm Skilbeck and Helen Connell found that school principals in all states were almost uniformly of the view that greater principal responsibility for staff appointments was the way ahead.[34]

In a survey of Victorian principals after the implementation of Schools of the Future reforms, 84% indicated that greater school autonomy had had a positive effect on academic outcomes.[35] Ted Brierley, former president of the Australian Secondary Principals Association, confirms that principals in Victoria were satisfied with their new responsibilities, regardless of the challenges. Brierley wrote that 'there is no doubt that despite the increased workload for school leaders, the new policy was very popular with principals'.[36]

Underperforming teachers also affect other teachers by damaging morale and dampening the overall culture of a school

Giving principals discretion in the hiring of teachers is only half the story. They must also have more power to remove poorly performing teachers. Poorly performing teachers create a number of problems for schools and school systems. The most obvious ramification is for students. Too much emphasis on preserving the rights of teachers subjugates the right of students to a quality education. Procedural justice is important when livelihoods are at stake but in the case of teacher incompetence, students' needs should not take a back seat.

University of Western Sydney academic Peter West recently wrote, 'Schools are meant to serve children and parents, not be nice places for teachers to work'.[37] Ideally, of course they should be both, and allowing incompetent teachers to remain in their jobs does nothing to help achieve either goal. Underperforming teachers also affect other teachers by damaging morale and dampening the overall culture of a school. Protecting them occurs at the expense of their more dedicated colleagues.

Victorian public school teacher Chris Wheat wrote in a newspaper article that tolerance of poor teachers 'fosters cynicism among professionals who want to do better.' He explains that '… in depressed government schools poor teachers find a niche because administrations can't get replacements and fellow teachers—the most powerful influence for behavioural change—are silent, sensing nothing can be done.'[38]

Research in New Zealand suggests that the image problem plaguing teaching is in part due to the way the profession tolerates poor performance. Based on interviews of 800 teachers and principals, Ruth Kane and Mary Mallon of Massey University say that it is 'clearly highly frustrating to good teachers to see those who are incompetent or getting tired not being challenged to "shape up or ship out"'.[39] Judith Wheeldon, former head of Sydney independent schools Abbotsleigh and Queenwood supports this, making a connection between the failure to weed out poor teachers and the teacher shortage, suggesting that incompetent teachers undermine the credibility of the profession and discourage potential teachers.[40]

NSW state Labor MP Linda Burney has described the wide-ranging damage done by a poor teacher. She laments 'just how difficult it is if students, particularly primary school students, have an underperforming teacher for an entire year. What sort of difficulties does that create for any subsequent teacher in trying to catch up on all the things that have not been taught properly? If there are discipline problems in the classroom because the teacher is not good at keeping control of the class that causes enormous distress for the children, which they take home. The ripple effect of poor teaching is enormous. As I said, potentially hundreds, if not thousands, of students are affected. It is not restricted to the individual child; it also affects their family and the rest of the school staff.'[41]

International evidence on decentralisation of personnel decisions provides support for reform

International evidence on decentralisation of personnel decisions provides support for reform. Studies of the relationship between school decentralisation and educational outcomes rarely examine the effect of personnel management alone. Decentralisation typically involves a number of changes, the effects of which are difficult to separate, and findings therefore tend to vary from no apparent impact to a statistically significant positive effect.

Evidence from the largest and most credible studies, however, indicates that one of the hallmarks of effective schools is the ability to make important decisions that impact on the quality of education they can offer. William Ouchi and Lydia Segal compared the governance structures and academic outcomes of 223 schools in six school districts in the United States and Canada and found that decentralisation yielded benefits in both efficiency and performance.[42]

The OECD's international comparison of literacy and numeracy standards also examines characteristics of schools and school systems. An analysis of results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that schools with greater autonomy, particularly in relation to staffing and school budgets, tend to have higher performance. This was the case both for the 2000 PISA, which focussed on reading literacy, and the 2003 PISA, which focussed on mathematics.[43]

Further analyses of the PISA data by economists Thomas Fuchs and Ludger Woessman found that students in schools that have autonomy in hiring their teachers perform significantly better in maths and reading. The findings on the educational effect of schools being able to fire teachers were mixed, however, and the authors give reasons for these data being more difficult to interpret.[44]

Some of the most persuasive evidence of the potential benefits of school autonomy comes from charter schools in the USA. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are independently managed. In order to receive public funds they must meet the conditions of the charter agreement set by the chartering authority, which can be the school district or another organisation. Charter conditions vary from district to district, with some authorities giving more operational freedom to schools than others.

In the state of Michigan, charter schools can be authorised either by the school district or by a university chartering committee. These schools operate in similar conditions with one major exception: schools chartered by the school district typically have little autonomy in personnel management, whereas schools authorised by the university chartering committee have more independence in hiring, firing and remuneration of staff. Harvard University economist Caroline M. Hoxby's comparison of these schools revealed that the schools with more independence performed better: they were more likely to have remained open and they had greater gains in maths scores.[45]

Steven F. Wilson, founder and former CEO of Advantage Schools, a private company that manages charter schools, has written an in-depth evaluation of the successes and failures of charter school management by private companies in the US. One of the clear messages from this evaluation is the importance of schools being free from the constraints of industrial regulation in the public school sector. Companies that gained the power to hire and fire teachers and to design their own salary and promotion systems were much more likely to succeed, both in terms of educational outcomes for students, and as businesses.[46]

Where charter schools had this authority, they paid careful attention to hiring staff that were a good fit to the school's culture and developed a committed and coherent faculty. They also made employment much more conditional on performance and merit. According to Wilson, teachers in charter schools that abolished tenure and introduced merit pay schemes felt secure in the knowledge that they would remain employed and be financially rewarded as long as they worked hard. Not all charter schools are success stories, but they show that alternative models of school governance can and often do work for both teachers and students under the right conditions.

Decentralisation and hard-to-staff schools

The main line of defence of centralised staffing, and particularly the transfer point system, is that it is the only way to ensure a supply of teachers to hard-to-staff schools. But is that true?

The transfer points system in NSW delivers neither quality nor equality in teaching. It is well-known that in NSW the least experienced teachers are concentrated in the most challenging schools, creating the added problem of high turnover rates. The NSW Public Education Council reported in 2005 that 'this results in a situation where those students growing up in communities affected by social and economic hardship and geographical isolation are at risk of having less than their fair share of the teaching resources of the system than those in more advantaged areas'.[47] In other words, the kids who most need quality teachers and consistency are least likely to get them.

In 2004, 85 schools in NSW received 506 beginning teachers. That is, 3% of schools took on 30% of beginning teachers. Most of these schools have between 10 and 20% of their staff made up of beginning teachers. This is often a pattern repeated over many years, compounding the disadvantage.[48] Many teachers that do not leave teaching altogether because of the difficulty of beginning their career in hard-to-staff schools stay there just long enough to accumulate sufficient points to transfer out to a more desirable school. The NSW Public Education Council claims that 'complex market forces' are to blame for the fact that some schools are harder to staff than others but concedes that high rates of teacher turnover in these schools is due to incentive transfers.[49]

After interviewing teachers, executive staff and principals at schools around Australia, Connell and Skilbeck concluded that 'School principals would generally like to have more authority in making appointments and mediating incentives to attract teachers to individual schools. The issue is seen to be most pressing in respect of high turnover rates in the hard-to-staff schools, but appointing their own staff is what most principals would prefer to do, regardless of school'.[50] This suggests that principals believe that, given the resources, they would be able to make suitable appointments, even when their schools are not the most popular.

It is useful to look more closely at schools identified as hard-to-staff. They fall into two broad categories—metropolitan schools with challenging students, and remote schools. Of the 85 public schools that received disproportionate numbers of beginning teachers in 2004 (discussed above), 54 were Sydney schools. Only 12 were in Western NSW, the area most people would consider relatively remote.

If the majority of hard-to-staff schools are not remote country schools, it reduces the scale of the problem somewhat. It means that it is not necessarily a matter of convincing teachers to move to a country town but rather to move out of their comfort zone.

The transfer point system works only up to a point. It is useful currency for teachers who are hoping to eventually secure a position in a more popular location but holds no inducement for mid-career teachers already in their preferred school. It also offers no reward to teachers who want to work in a challenging environment, rather than use such schools as a stepping stone.

Schools should be given their entire personnel budget to select and hire the mix of staff they require. Schools that have traditionally had difficulty recruiting and keeping staff should be given budgets proportionate to their needs so that they can offer the types of incentives packages they believe to be most effective. Such incentives might include highly competitive salaries, reduced teaching load, or professional development opportunities. Different incentives will appeal to teachers at different stages in their career.

Hatton and Watson found that one in four mid-career teachers would be influenced by professional development opportunities and two in five mid-career teachers would be influenced by the offer of a promotion position when considering changing schools. They conclude that these sorts of incentives would induce sufficient numbers of experienced teachers to take up positions in hard-to-staff schools.[51] Country posts may still need the added inducements of subsidised housing and guarantees of return to the teacher's

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original position, but these lifestyle 'sweeteners' would be in addition to the professional incentives.

Recommendations made by the NSW Public Education Council are consistent with this idea. While the Council does not endorse decentralising teacher appointments per se, it makes a good case for doing so. Its comments on the NSW Graduate Recruitment Program are telling. According to the Council, the programme is labour intensive, does not always succeed in placing targeted graduates (creating frustration and disillusionment) and does not always make a good match between graduate and school.

The Council proposes giving school principals more involvement in the appointments of beginning teachers, and suggests all graduates should be able to apply and be evaluated on their merits. Benefits listed include the promotion of a stronger working relationship between teachers and principals, because they have chosen to work with each other rather than being thrown together, as well ensuring the teacher's interest in the school. It would also facilitate the appointment of new graduates into schools in their own communities, making them more likely to stay.[52]

Furthermore, the Council recommends that schools with large numbers of beginning teachers become 'Professional Practice' schools and be able to appoint their own staff. On these bases, why should the same principles of recruitment and appointment not apply to all schools?

One common concern is that good schools with good principals will get even better, while other schools will lose out. This could be portrayed as a philosophical dilemma—is it acceptable to have variable quality in schools, or is it preferable to have uniform mediocrity? However, these are not the only options. To claim that decentralisation would lead to greater inequality in schools is to assume that teacher supply and school organisation are static, which is not necessarily the case.

With more career freedom and opportunities, more and better teachers may enter public schools. With the opportunity to offer more flexible and innovative staffing solutions, schools may make better use of their budgets and utilise quality teachers in a more effective way. For example, it might take a salary of more than $100,000 to attract a great senior high school physics teacher to the Western suburbs of Sydney but to earn that they may have to teach in a number of schools.

Conclusion

Only 34% of new teachers surveyed in 2004 reported that they had definitely chosen teaching as a lifelong career. Just over 50% had made a conditional commitment—they would stay in teaching as long as it suited them.[53]

Yet strategies to ensure an adequate supply of quality teachers for Australian schools into the future routinely fail to address this major challenge. The transfer point system appeals only to new teachers who have definite plans to stay in the public system long enough to take advantage of the points they have accrued. It has no appeal to talented young graduates who have not made such a psychological commitment, and who would be more likely to take on a challenging teaching role for immediate professional and financial reward.

Decentralising staffing responsibility to schools offers this prospect for teachers. It allows teachers to make choices about where they will work, and allows schools to seek and employ the teachers that are most suitable for their students.

A professional body for teachers like Teaching Australia has a major role in this process. It should develop standards by which teacher performance can be judged and provide support for principals as they undertake their new responsibilities. The enforcement of professional standards are important not just so that schools can rid themselves of poor teachers but at the same time help all teachers to be more effective.

Decentralised teacher employment is an integral aspect of school-based management. In the past, school-based management (also known as self-managing or self-governing schools) has been associated with various ideologies. The view taken of school-based

management often depends on the language used to describe it (and, regrettably on the person or organisation advocating it).

Caldwell and Roskam make the important point that 'In the context of schooling, policies of either centralisation or decentralisation are not the province of any particular ideology. The assumptions motivating the policies might be, but not the policies themselves. Conservative governments around the Western world have both centralised and decentralised curriculum development, and left-wing and labor governments have both centralised and decentralised school management. Political parties in Britain and the United States have been more willing than those in Australia to appreciate this.'[54]

Local management of schools could easily be viewed as a left-wing or 'grass roots' concept, allowing school communities to participate in the education process. However, it has more lately tended to be characterised as market-driven or as 'corporate managerialism', which seeks only to increase economic efficiencies.[55]

Teacher unions have used this tactic to demonise the idea of giving schools and principals more autonomy. They have been the major obstacle in the path to many important reforms that would make schools more responsive to students, and make teaching a more dynamic and rewarding career for good teachers. Not all teachers have the same interests—for example long-serving teachers have different interests to starting teachers—and these often differ from the priorities of the union.

Decentralisation makes sense for teachers and students. Fortunately, those states yet to realise that it is possible have the benefit of Victoria's experience. School staffing in Victoria is imperfect but it has much to offer and can be improved upon.

If teaching is to be considered a profession, teachers must be given more professional autonomy and responsibility. Public school principals, who are increasingly being held accountable for the performance of their schools, need to have control over their school's most important resource—teachers. Policies that prevent principals from hiring the best and removing the worst teachers do students, and ultimately public education, no service.

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Endnotes

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