
Thinkers, take up the chalk

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IN his National Press Club speech, Kevin Rudd called on talented young graduates to try teaching. He believes this will raise the prestige of the teaching profession, and he is right.

Last year, 25,000 American university graduates applied for a teacher employment program that had only 3700 positions to fill. Applications came from the most prestigious universities in the country. Eleven per cent of Yale's graduates applied, as did 9 per cent of Harvard's. In Britain, a similar program attracted applications from 5 per cent of Oxford's entire graduating class.

It is hard to believe, but these high-achieving graduates are eschewing jobs with merchant banks, law or consulting firms and opting instead to be teachers, not in prestigious private schools but in poorly performing institutions in low-income neighbourhoods.

Two innovative programs, Teach for America and its British equivalent, Teach First, have managed to do what once seemed impossible: they have transformed school teaching from an unexciting career into a sexy form of public service for elite graduates. In the process, these programs have changed the lives of low-income students and their teachers.

Teach for America began in 1990. It was the brainchild of Princeton graduate Wendy Kopp. She wanted to do something to close the persistent achievement gap that blighted the opportunities of children from low-income families. Recognising that teacher quality was the most important ingredient of student success, she sought to convince the brainiest graduates from the best universities to devote at least two years to working in troubled schools.

Teach for America recruits can come from any discipline -- science, law, medicine -- and they need not have studied education. Recruits are given intensive training in the summer before they are placed in schools.

Kopp's scheme relies for its success on elite students being idealistic enough to postpone their careers and give back to the community. But idealism is not the only reason graduates participate. Their willingness to take responsibility for a classroom, the skills they acquire and their positive social attitude is attractive to employers in and outside education. Kopp's program capitalises on the psychology of high achievers. They like to compete, and Kopp has succeeded in making selection for a place in Teach for America highly competitive.

Teach First, which began in Britain five years ago, has tapped into the same combination of idealistic and practical motives. The organisation's mission, and the interest shown by employers who value Teach First experience in their employees, has attracted thousands of outstanding graduates.

Not only are graduates rushing to teach, the principals of low-performing schools are delighted to receive them. This is not surprising because their schools are receiving the best brains available. More important, the scheme works. The test results of school students taught by Teach First recruits are good and getting better.

Although many recruits leave their schools at the end of the two years, more than half of Teach First teachers have stayed beyond their two-year commitment. The outcome is even better in the US, where two-thirds of Teach for America teachers have remained involved in education as teachers, principals, policymakers or school board members. One has become the chief executive of one of the nation's toughest systems, the public school system in Washington, DC.

Teach for America and Teach First are examples of how to reform the delivery of public education. They are non-profit organisations. They are not part of, or held back by, the state educational bureaucracy. In place of the present teacher-training system, which requires teachers to complete a university course before they can take over a class, these programs conduct their own training, placement and support services. Also, by encouraging graduates to help those less privileged, participants develop a commitment to community service.

Of course, not everyone is delighted to have young and inexperienced teachers take over a class. Graduates who have spent three or four years at university studying education may resent working side by side with those whose training lasted only five weeks. This is understandable and it is the reason Teach First teachers are given time off to pursue their studies while on the job. Completing teacher education is a prerequisite for staying on past the first two years. In other words, Teach First does not devalue the teaching profession; it works to support and value it.

Earlier this year, The Australian described how Noel Pearson's Cape York Institute, Macquarie University and Boston Consulting Group were working on plans to introduce Teach for Australia, a home-grown version of the British and US programs. Their aim is to revive the idea of public service among young people by encouraging the brightest Australian graduates to spend two years teaching disadvantaged students in urban and remote areas.

In addition to the Prime Minister, there are welcome signs of support for similar initiatives in Victoria and other states. Like any new idea that upsets the established order, there will be resistance. Still, if thousands of top American and British university graduates can be convinced to apply for teaching jobs, so can the brightest Australians. Just think what a difference this would make to the lives of disadvantaged students and what a boost it would give to the teaching profession. A true education revolution.

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