

Bishop cops a caning

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No one but Julie Bishop was surprised to see performance pay for teachers rejected, writes Christopher Bantick

Every child deserves to be taught by the best

BY any measure, last week was not a good one for Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop. With state and territory ministers to the left of her, Bishop rode into the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in Darwin well armed with her performance pay proposal for teachers.

Bishop, unsurprisingly to all but herself, was defeated.

More than this, Bishop was also rolled on the plan for states and territories to provide the data from the national literacy and numeracy tests in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 on a school by school basis to the Commonwealth. The Bishop plan had the whiff of national school league tables about it which continues to be unacceptable to the states and territories.

Besides the Bishop initiative for school-based data to be managed by the Federal Government being objected to, so too was the level of funding proposed being \$6 million with the Federal Government meeting half. The states and territories sought a one-off payment of \$35 million to cover the costs of the testing implementation.

The so-called "win" that Bishop had over a national curriculum was a pyrrhic victory at best. Before the Darwin meeting, the states and territories had already worked out their preparedness for more national consistency in the key subject areas of mathematics, science and English.

Queensland Education Minister Rod Welford suggested that a core curriculum was already in train at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 with the National Statements of Learning.

But it was in the unanimous rejection by the states and territories of the Bishop model of performance pay that her defeat was most keenly felt. It is hard to think of a more comprehensive collective expression of will against a plan that had struggled for traction since Treasurer Peter Costello would not agree to its funding.

In late March, Costello effectively ended the plan by ruling out any further funding for increased teacher wages. This was for an extra \$9 billion on top of the \$33 billion the Federal Government already gives to schools. On the funding question alone, performance pay would struggle to mount a convincing case.

Leaving aside the funding question, critical as it is, why the Bishop performance pay initiative failed was pithily summed up by Tasmanian minister David Bartlett. "It was poorly thought out," he said.

The three criteria of assessing teacher performance: examination results, peer review and the judgments of parents and students, were palpably short on detail or without sustained and persuasive research to support it.

The release of research from Bishop's own office on the eve of the Darwin meeting which highlighted the damning point that "few merit schemes have survived when applied to teaching" was hardly helpful.

Even so, although the Bishop plan was roundly rejected there remains the question of how to reward teachers adequately. The need for change has been flagged by Welford, who has asked Education Queensland to improve the career paths of Queensland teachers who contribute to their schools "beyond the call of duty". This is a sensible idea and reflects the Federal Opposition's position of rewarding teachers adequately.

Opposition education spokesman Stephen Smith is considering a pre-election policy of rewarding top teachers with \$100,000 a year -- remembering that the ceiling in Queensland for teachers is \$60,000 -- to work in hard-to-staff schools and subjects, with \$10,000 if they met rigorous professional standards.

The key point to this proposal is that it is worked out with the profession. Something that the Department of Education and Science Report, released in conjunction with Research on Performance Pay for Teachers compiled by the Australian Council for Education research, found was essential. The report noted that performance pay would work "if it was developed with, rather than for, teachers".

Moreover, in a policy paper, *The Future of Children*, prepared by Brookings Institution and Princeton University in the US this year, it was found that to enhance teacher performance, higher salaries should be paid to teachers who work in disadvantaged schools and in curriculum areas where there are shortages such as mathematics and science.

It is now up to the states to determine how they are going to pay the best teachers, let alone retain them in the classroom.

Every child deserves to be taught by the best. Queensland and the other states and territories need to make it happen.