

Good teachers quitting over casual contracts



Emily McNamara, left, Stacey King and Jasmine Riri-Duscher. at Mabel Park State High School in Logan.
Picture: Glenn Hunt

STEFANIE BALOGH THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM December 1, 2016

Australia is facing a crisis in maths and science education, exacerbated by a revolving door of graduates on casual contracts and an increase in out-of-field teaching.

The release of global science and maths rankings for students in Years 4 and 8 has refocused attention on the urgent need to overhaul education standards, including revamping teacher training, lifting teacher retention rates and inspiring students to stick with maths and science.

The Australian Council of Deans of Education president Tania Aspland highlighted the way teachers, especially graduates, were employed on contracts.

She said employers needed to step up if they wanted teachers to commit to a career for more than five years. “Today governments save two months of salary if they put a teacher on in February and put them off in November,” Professor Aspland said.

“It’s an economical decision; it’s not a vocational decision.

“What employers, and the government in particular, have to do is guarantee these people who have a passion for a vocation a lifelong career with opportunities for promotion.”

Since 2011, Australia’s Year 4 maths results in four-yearly Trends in International

Mathematics and Science Study has seen the nation plummet 10 places to be ranked 28 out of 49 countries and outperformed by the likes of Kazakhstan and Lithuania.

Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute director Geoff Prince called for immediate action in the classroom, including addressing the longstanding problem of out-of-field teaching.

This involves a situation where a physical education, drama or English teacher, for example, may be filling shortages and teaching maths and science classes. Professor Prince said at least 26 per cent of Australia's secondary maths teachers were not fully equipped to teach the subject.

AMSI and the BHP Billiton Foundation are working together to reverse the public perception of maths through a five-year national program called Choose Maths.

Stacey King was recognised this year for her inspirational work at the Mabel Park State High School in Logan, outside Brisbane. The head of department for maths and science, she has been at the school for 16 years and went there to make a difference.

“Schools where there are more challenges ... need people who have that drive and also have that love of teaching, and want to be that champion to get students to where they need to be,” she said.

Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham said the debate had focused for too long on how much money was spent, rather than how it could be used to improve student outcomes.

Federal and state education ministers will discuss a new schools funding deal in a fortnight, with Canberra tying funding to reforms including breaking the industrial stranglehold on teachers to reward performance instead of time served.

Australian Education Union president Correna Haythorpe said: “Shortages of qualified teachers have a direct impact on student performance — yet we have a flawed teacher training system which is producing too many graduates, but too few with maths and science skills.”

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