

How to get quality teachers in disadvantaged schools – and keep them there

Written by Suzanne Rice, Senior Lecturer, Education Policy and Leadership, University of Melbourne



Remote schools often struggle to recruit and retain great teachers. Alex Ellinghausen/AAP

In [this series](#) we'll explore how to improve schools in Australia. Some of the most prominent experts in the sector tackle key questions, including why we are not seeing much progress; whether we are assessing children in the most effective way; why parents need to listen to what the evidence tells us, and much more.

Quality teaching is one of the [largest influences on student learning](#). Yet, not all students have access to a great teacher.

As in other countries, some Australian schools are [harder to staff](#) than others.

Hard-to-staff schools are usually located in remote, rural or poor urban areas. School and local facilities may not be as good in these schools as those in middle class urban schools, and students may have additional learning needs.

For these reasons, such schools are not as popular with teachers and often have high levels of staff turnover.

Students in these schools have [lower average achievement](#) than those in middle class urban schools.

Given that teachers have a huge impact on student learning, making sure students in hard-to-staff schools have quality teachers is vital.

To reduce the achievement gap, policymakers need to design staffing policies to attract and retain high-quality teachers in the schools that need them most.

How can we support hard-to-staff schools?

What policies are in place to attract and retain teachers and maximise quality in hard-to-staff schools?

Most government systems use a range of incentives to attract teachers into these schools; some have incentives to retain them.

Incentive schemes mostly focus on remote and rural schools. But some systems also offer inducements to teachers to take up a position or remain in hard-to-staff urban schools.

Many state school systems use transfer benefits, which allow teachers to transfer to a preferred location after a period of service in a less preferred setting.

Some systems give preference to teacher transfer applications according to the time teachers have served in a hard-to-staff school, potentially increasing teacher retention in those schools.

Systems often provide travel, housing and relocation benefits for teachers in remote schools.

Some systems provide leave for teachers in remote schools to travel to major centres for business, family or health reasons. Some provide extra pay to teachers in remote areas, immediate permanency, and targeted scholarships designed to attract quality people into teaching.

A condition of these scholarships is [accepting appointment](#) to a hard-to-staff school.

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The [Teach for Australia program](#) is supported by some systems to place high achievers in less attractive districts and schools.

Such policies have tended to emphasise attracting teachers into hard-to-staff schools, with less emphasis on keeping them there.

Benefits for teachers in remote schools mostly compensate for the extra costs and challenges involved, rather than acting as a serious incentive. Policy initiatives tend to target beginning teachers, who have the least experience to draw on in a demanding setting.

What works?

Tailored courses to prepare teachers for these settings

Hard-to-staff schools place additional demands on teachers - from isolation through to challenging student behaviour. Providing tailored courses that build the skills required to teach in these settings could increase retention.

The [National Exceptional Teaching in Disadvantaged Schools program](#) is a good example. This program selects high-quality teacher trainees, and provides them with targeted coursework and practice placements in disadvantaged schools. 90% of these trainees go on to accept a teaching job in a disadvantaged school.

Additional promotion positions

Effective teachers are more likely to [seek out responsibility](#) and leadership roles. Providing extra opportunities in hard-to-staff schools may help attract and retain them.

Increased professional learning opportunities

Well-designed professional learning can improve the quality of teaching.

Specialised professional development opportunities, such as sponsored places in postgraduate courses, may help attract and retain effective staff. Online courses now make this easier.

Recruiting quality principals

Effective teachers value good school leadership and seek to move away from schools where this is lacking. Effective principals are also [better at identifying quality staff](#) and assisting teachers' professional development.

Reduce emphasis on school choice

[Research shows](#) that school competition and choice policies increase inequity in systems. Over the last 20 years in Australia, we have seen [an increased concentration of more advantaged students](#) in some schools, and less advantaged students in others, as more advantaged parents seek to surround their children with high-achieving peers. This can make poorer schools even less attractive to teachers, and, as a consequence, harder to staff.

What policies should systems avoid?

Prescriptive curriculum

In some overseas settings, schools with low achievement (which are more likely to be hard-to-staff) may be given very prescriptive curricula, such as [Success for All](#). These are used to “teacher-proof” instruction. Policies like this are likely to drive out those teachers most able to improve student learning.

Pay benefits

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Simply adding a [pay loading](#) for challenging schools means that ineffective teachers may be just as likely to be attracted as effective teachers.

Ensuring that students in these settings have equitable access to effective teachers is a critical challenge for Australian principals and policymakers.

Quality teachers provide benefits for those students who depend the most on school for positive life outcomes. Improving their learning helps us become a more equitable and cohesive society.

- The authors explore this theme further in a new book called [Educating Australia: Challenges for the Decade Ahead](#)

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