

# Challenge is to lure best and brightest to teaching

A forum of educators canvassed teachers' image, standards and pay. **Bethany Hiatt reports**

The teaching profession suffers from an image problem and schools need to do more to help teachers improve their skills, some of WA's top education leaders say.

Sixteen educators discussed the challenges of boosting teacher quality at an education leaders forum hosted by the Australian Institute of Management WA and The West Australian last week.

AIM WA chief executive Gary Martin said increasing emphasis had been placed on improving teacher quality in recent years, with solutions put forward ranging from linking teachers' pay to students' results, seeking the "bottom" 5 per cent, providing bonus payments for top teachers, raising university entry standards and implementing exit tests for teaching graduates.

He said though it was easy to attribute any drop in students' standards to poor teacher quality, he did not agree with a general perception it had declined.

"Ongoing professional development is the key to enhancing teacher quality," he said.

**IMAGE PROBLEMS**  
St Hilde's Anglican School for Girls principal Joy Shephard said teachers had more public respect when she first started in the profession. But teaching now had an "image problem".

"Today some in the community see us as childcare minders or social workers who have short working hours and very long holidays," she said.

Increased societal expectations heaped on schools had also placed a heavier burden on teachers than in the past.

"Our brief has grown to include resilience, self-compassion, values education, healthy eating — obesity is now our fault too — not to mention social skills and driver education," she said.

Schools were rebuilding their playgrounds to include natural settings "because mums and dads don't let them run around barefoot and climb over trees".

Guildford Grammar School headmaster Stephen Webber said "exceptional" teaching graduates had told him they were discouraged from entering the profession by family and friends because it was seen as a "waste of talent".

Mr Webber said people were motivated by having a purpose. "We've got to do better at selling the purpose of teaching," he said.

**UNDERACHIEVERS**  
Education Department workforce executive director Cliff Gilliam said though the majority of teachers did an "extraordinary job" in the face of an increasingly demanding social environment, WA had a problem with "underachievers".

"It's not a teacher quality issue in the sense that we have in WA poorer teachers and more of them than anywhere else, that's not the issue at all," he said.



Aiming to meet Peter Booth, Joy Shephard, Gary Martin and Cliff Gilliam. Picture: Gill Hunt

past because we have not had adequate standards established," Mr Gilliam said the adoption of professional teacher standards and better performance management in schools would help ensure poor teachers did not remain in the system.

Principals at the forum said they had no problem recruiting excellent teaching graduates.

But former University of WA head of education Bill Loudon

said that country schools had more difficulty finding well-qualified staff.

And he warned those present not to lose sight of looming problems associated with fewer able people — particularly women — choosing a teaching career.

"The future is not quite as rosy in terms of young people entering teaching," he said. "I think we do have to pay attention to who is coming in, not just who is coming in to the best schools."

Bruce Matthews, a member of the School Curriculum and Standards Authority board and former Bunbury Cathedral Grammar School principal, said he had often struggled to find good teachers who wanted to work in Bunbury.

Donella Beare, director of the St Stephen's Institute, which provides professional development for teachers, said the quality of new graduates was not the issue.

"I actually think we've got more of a concern with those members of our profession who have been around probably 10 to 15 years," she said.

**UNI ENTRY STANDARDS**  
Educators call to raise the minimum Australian Tertiary Admission Rank for trainee teachers were too simplistic, because only a small proportion entered university straight from high school. But few principals were prepared to take on a teach-

er or who left high school with an ATAR of 60.

Catholic Secondary Principals Association president and Sacred Heart College principal Peter Booth said he disagreed with the view that the way teachers finished a degree mattered more than how they started it.

"Would you say that about your doctors and your lawyers and accountants," he said.

Wilkeson Senior High School principal Chris Booth said some with high ATARs did not make good teachers because they required more than good subject knowledge. "It's about being able to communicate, having interpersonal skills, having empathy," he said.

Emeritus Professor Loudon said though it was important for teachers to have people skills, "what you want are smart people who can deal with people".

"I'm concerned about the possibility that people who were in the bottom half of their primary school class are going to be teachers," he said. "That's where the numbers are going. My preference would be for the top half of the class."

He favoured strengthening standards at the end of a teaching qualification.

WA Secondary School Executives Association president Janette Go said many principals supported the concept of requiring prospective teachers to sit an

aptitude test to assess their suitability for the profession.

But training should not be left only to universities because schools had to take on trainees and provide mentors for them.

"If schools are refusing to take practising teachers and give them the expectations they need to do a good job when they leave university, then that's our own fault," she said.

**LEARNING ON THE JOB**  
The leaders agreed that efforts to boost teacher quality should focus on coaching teachers while they learnt their craft and giving them time to reflect.

Westley College headmaster David Geo, who chairs the WA branch of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, said schools needed to allow teachers to focus more on improving their teaching than on meeting accountability requirements.

"Rather than saying 'you've passed your permanency, you'll do your appraisal every year' and allowing some teachers to go back into their box and be complacent... without having that fire that lights students' capacity and desire for learning," he said.

**U** We have to pay attention to who is coming in, not just who is coming in to the best schools.  
**Former UWA head of education Bill Loudon**



Bill Loudon



Study: Michael Morgan with students. Milla Munnery, Tyler K. Elkins, Milla Munnery and James Lathin. Picture: Gill Hunt

## Ask the students what they think

One way to help teachers improve their skills is to ask for the opinions of those most likely to benefit — students — according to Shenton College principal Michael Morgan, who has won a Churchill Fellowship.

He will travel to the US next year to examine ways to improve teachers' effectiveness using classroom observation, evaluation and reflection.

As part of his study Mr Morgan also plans to look at the value of surveying students on what they like or dislike about classroom learning programs.



David Geo



Garth Wynne



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