

ACER-led delegation



investigates US teacher quality practices



By Dr Elizabeth Kleinhenz

Elizabeth is a Research Fellow in ACER's Teaching and Learning research program.

ACER recently led a delegation of representatives from Australian education systems and organisations on a study tour to Washington DC to observe the work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). The aim of the visit was to find and share answers to questions on teacher quality in Australia such as: What do we mean when we talk about teacher quality? and how do we know it when we see it? Dr Elizabeth Kleinhenz, reports on the observations made during the visit.

The issue of teacher quality is at the heart of all major efforts to improve educational opportunities for students. It has become a hot topic of discussion among various education stakeholders including teachers, administrators and teacher unions.

Some see the phrase 'teacher quality' as threatening, saying that it provides a basis for teacher bashing. But, for most people who are concerned about school education, the concept poses some serious questions: Just what do we mean when we talk about teacher quality? How do we know it when we see it? How can it be demonstrated?

Research has confirmed our intuitive understandings about the positive relationships between good teaching and improved student learning, but what complexities underlie these relationships? How can we make sure that our children are receiving the best possible teaching? How can teachers be encouraged and helped to improve the quality of their work?

In an attempt to find and share answers to questions such as these, ACER invited representatives of various state and independent education systems and organisations, including teacher unions, to participate in a week long study tour to Washington DC to observe the work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and to meet with representatives of several peak bodies that accredit university teacher preparation

courses and make decisions about teacher licensure. Visits were also arranged with senior staff of the two major US teacher unions and George Washington University, an institution recognised for the quality of its graduates in teacher education and its work in cooperation with NBPTS.

The tour took place in mid July 2003. The delegation of eleven included senior policy officers from Commonwealth, state and Catholic education departments, representatives of the Australian Education Union and Independent Education Union of Victoria and of the independent schools sector.

The NBPTS was founded in 1987. Its mission is threefold: to establish high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do; to develop and operate a national voluntary system to assess and certify teachers who meet these standards; and to advance related education reforms. Board certification is highly prized among American teachers. Each year, thousands of teachers voluntarily submit for assessment comprehensive portfolios of evidence of the quality of their teaching that include lesson and unit planning, examples of students' work and videos that demonstrate the quality of their teaching. The evidence is assessed by trained peer teacher assessors against Board professional teaching standards that were established by teachers, teacher educators and subject matter experts in up to thirty-one teaching fields. The assessment is rigorous, but successful teachers are rewarded in a variety of ways, including substantial pay rises and bonuses.

Members of the visiting delegation spent the first two days at Howard University, Washington DC where groups of 'assessors' were being trained to conduct assessments for NBPTS certification. A notable feature of the sessions was that all participants – trainers and assessors in training were practising teachers. The sessions were field specific. In separate rooms groups of up to 20 assessors in training learned how to assess portfolios of evidence of quality teaching submitted by teachers of music, art,

languages other than English and physical education.

Observing selected 'benchmark' training videos of teachers' classroom performance from high to low levels, in conjunction with the teachers' own commentaries, was enlightening. For those teachers whose performance was benchmarked as 'high,' there was a strong correlation between their written reflections on the video lesson and the video performance itself. These teachers understood the standards, were able to demonstrate the standards in their teaching, and could reflect on their own performance in relation to the standards. The written reflections of the lower benchmark samples that clearly did not demonstrate the standards tended, on the other hand, to show the teachers' lack of insight into their own teaching and the effects it was having on the students. All of this had powerful implications for teacher professional development, as well as identifying the quality of professional practice.

Even more interesting was the observation, made by one tour group member, that some of the teachers in the less successful video examples could have been representative of any teacher considered to be 'good' in any school. These teachers looked good, they appeared to have good classroom control and they were articulate. But, according to the profession-defined standards and the assessment of their peers, these people were not pedagogically competent and their students were probably not learning much. This posed the questions, how many such teachers do we have in Australian schools and what is being done to recognise them and help them improve?

As well as observing the training sessions of the NBPTS, the tour group visited various influential education organisations, including the two major US teacher unions. Although these organisations differed greatly in their functions and purposes, the glue that appeared to bind them together was their commitment to high teacher quality. The degree of consensus on the meaning of 'teacher quality' among these diverse

groups of people was remarkable.

However, members of the tour group were told that fifteen years ago, when the work of the NBPTS began, things were very different. 'It was like the Cheshire Cat,' said Joan Baratz-Snowden of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) 'When you don't know where you're going, any path will take you there. In 1987, the unions were highly suspicious of the motives of the Board and there were many competing agendas with people caucusing all over the place. Gradually though, as the Board, with its majority of teachers, led the standards, a professional consensus around issues of teacher quality was built, and the various stakeholders, unlike poor Alice, became empowered to follow a common path to a worthwhile destination.'

'How has the National Board managed to achieve so much over the past fifteen years?' a member of the group asked Professor Mary Futrell, the African-American former National President of the National Education Association who is now Dean of Education at George Washington University. But Mary was not to be drawn into looking back. 'Don't think about the past,' she advised. 'Don't work in the reactionary mode. Stop saying what you're against. Start saying what you're for. I have big serious challenges right here, right now, never mind what's gone on before. My energy is all directed towards encouraging my staff to meet those challenges in the strongest, most pro-active ways possible.'

There are lessons in those statements for all of us who care about teacher quality in Australia. Teacher unions in particular need to recognise that defensive rhetoric alone will not allow teaching to make the transition from an occupation to a true profession in the eyes of the public. Current state and national initiatives to codify the knowledge and expertise of teachers and to find means of recognising those teachers who are able to demonstrate their expertise and knowledge deserve full and active support. ■



Photo Peter Solness

Online assessment program aids learning in the home

ACER's expertise in test development has been combined with the latest advances in internet technology to develop Australia's first online assessment program for use in the home.

The *iAchieve at home* program provides a series of web-based multiple-choice tests in English and Mathematics for students in Years 3-10 with detailed feedback. It has been developed to complement school-based testing and to help parents become more involved in their children's learning.

Students who enrol in the *iAchieve at home* program can complete an online test in English and/or Mathematics at the beginning of the year and another at the end of the year and receive an indication of how they have progressed over time.

Tests are available for different ability levels. When a student completes a test, it is marked online and immediate feedback is provided in the form of three reports. The first report provides a break down on which questions were answered correctly or incorrectly. It also indicates how the student performed relative to a national sample of students. A second report shows what a student knows and can do in relation to the abilities being tested. The third report shows where a student is along a continuum of growth in the subject. These reports are designed to help students and parents understand areas in which a student has

struggled and help to identify potential strengths and weaknesses.

A team of 15 test writers, IT specialists and teachers worked throughout 2003 to develop *iAchieve at home*. All test items assess a nationally important learning outcome; have been reviewed by experienced teachers and test developers; and trialled on samples of Australian students. In addition, *iAchieve at home* is unique in Australia. There are no other programs available in Australia that address national curriculum outcomes and have been tested Australia-wide.

In 2004, English and Mathematics tests are available for students in Years 3 to 10. The program will eventually include all subjects across Years 1 to 10. The first suite of test items for *iAchieve at home* became available in January. It is possible for students to join the program at any time. The second suite of test items will become available in November.

To register for *iAchieve at home* or find further information, you can visit the website at www.iachieveathome.com.au ■