

# AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

## PRESS RELEASE 929

### STUART ROBERT'S 'DUD TEACHERS' REMARKS

**Stuart Robert is Acting federal Minister for Education, filling in for Alan Tudge. This Minister is chilling out on the backbench after an investigation found insufficient evidence he breached ministerial standards.**

**Robert's suitability for the job however, came into question in the last week when he went to speak to his friends in the private school sector. Referring to the PISA test results which have slipped in the past 20 years from fourth to 16<sup>th</sup> in reading and from eighth to 17<sup>th</sup> in science and 11 to 29<sup>th</sup> in maths, he - blamed the teachers. See his full speech at [Independent Schools Australia National Education Forum 2022, Canberra | Ministers' Media Centre \(dese.gov.au\)](#)**

**But not Independent school teachers. Oh no. Public school teachers are the problem. He said:**

*I look at what the Gates Foundation and others have done, and they've all found out that if you knock down the bottom 10 per cent of dud teachers, you will actually get our PISA results back to where they should be. The point being, if we can take the bottom 10 per cent quality of teachers and turn them into the average quality within the teaching profession, we will arrest the decline. No silver bullets, that one comes screaming out. Now I don't think it's a problem in your schools because frankly, you can hire and fire your own teachers, I'm talking to the heads of your schools here. And there's no way they will accept a dud teacher in their school like, not for a second. So for your school, you just don't have them, you don't have bottom 10 per cent of teachers dragging the chain. But for every teacher you don't have in your organisation is where they go? When we look at the bottom 10 per cent if you take out your system, which I think is excellent and move to other systems, you start to see not just the bottom 10 per cent. So why don't we face the brutal reality that we have got to arrest the quality of our teaching, if we are going to make a difference when it comes to it and stop pussyfooting around the fact that the problem is the protection of teachers that don't want to be there; that aren't up to the right standard; that are graduating from university or have been for the last 10 years and they can't read and write. They can't pass the LANTITE test.*

Robert's remarks have stimulated a great deal of commentary, including comments about a 'Dud' Minister. DOGS are interested in one of these comments.

Referring to the principal of his alma mater, Rockhampton grammar, Robert said there was ‘no way....Dr Moulds would accept a dud teachers in his school, like , for a second.’

What Robert has illustrated, sadly, is the social, political and even economic result of a segregated, privatised education system held up and given preferential treatment by our current Australian governments.

Stuart Rowland Robert appears to have very limited knowledge of public schools which educate two thirds of Australian children, with extraordinary results given the paucity of their resources and funding. His education and experiences are limited by his background and somewhat questionable Parliamentary career.

He was born on 11 December 1970 in Victoria but grew up on the cane fields of Queensland where he attended Rockhampton Grammar School. He secured a scholarship to the Australian Defence Force Academy and attended the Royal Military College Duntroon. He obtained a Masters in Business Administration at Central Queensland University and a Masters in Information Technology at QUT and a BA from the University of NSW. He worked in military intelligence and after leaving the army in 1999 founded the IT service firm GMT Recruitment.

As a Minister in various portfolios in the Morrison Government, with his background in IT, Robert appears to have been implicated in some of the messes involved in the implementation of the NDIS, the ROBODEBT matter, and the COVID vaccine strollout.

As Minister for Education Robert appears to have very definite but limited views on curriculum, teacher training and testing procedures, not to mention university research funding. If he keeps up the kinds of public statements he made to the Independent School sector, he will no doubt prove a Godsend for the Opposition in the coming election. Teachers have long memories and are voters in swinging electorates.

If the media commentary of the past week is any indication, Robert has alienated teachers, parents and supporters of the public education sector.

The commentary on Robert’s ‘Dud’ teachers’ side-crack has been extraordinary. The report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* prompted at least 630 comments . The following commentary on John Menadue’s Pearls and Irritations blog by Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor was perhaps the most interesting:

## Dud minister blames dud teachers

By Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor at <https://johnmenadue.com/dud-minister-blames-dud-teachers/>

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*Federal ministers often reveal their inability to deal with complexities in their portfolios, none moreso than Coalition education ministers. Acting minister Stuart Robert has just demonstrated how things can easily unravel.*

The ideological preferences of the federal Coalition are on their best display when their luminaries address independent or Catholic school conferences. After all, it is at such events that Tony Abbott declared that funding private schools was in his party's DNA, and Christopher Pyne denied that Australia had a school equity problem.

This time around, Stuart Robert managed to stick quite closely to his prepared script, but revealed his true colours in response to a series of relatively lame questions. As reported in the SMH, Robert blamed 'dud teachers' for the decline in the academic results of Australian students, while praising independent schools for employing only quality teachers and delivering a model example of education. According to Robert, a bottom 10 per cent of teachers were the key reason for Australia's plummeting performance. But he assured independent school leaders he was not talking about their schools, because they did not accept dud teachers.

In one fell swoop, Robert managed to thoroughly immerse himself into the morass of Australia's unlevel playing field of schools. Most non-government schools operate under markedly different obligations and rules to the government sector, managing to turn choice of schools into a school's choice of preferred inputs, including teachers. Even though non-government schools enjoy significant resource advantages, they can also pick and choose their students — when the going gets tough, they send the kids to the public school down the road. Even a moderately capable minister might pause to ask why this is the case and how it might contribute to the problem. A smarter one would have considered the likely wider impact of his rush to judgment.

Stuart Robert is no stranger to controversy, his string of accomplishments includes at least half a dozen own goals. This time around he ignored one piece of sage advice: better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt. Both the SMH and The Guardian reported some of the reactions to his comments. A previous NSW Minister, Adrian Piccoli, said it is factually wrong to blame 'dud' public school teachers for the decline in the academic results of Australian students. "We've got this very long underperforming tail, but the biggest decline is in high-performing students not doing as well as they used to. A large chunk of those high performing students go to independent schools and selective government schools."

There is no doubt that poor teachers can impact negatively on student outcomes, and school principals are keen to either see them improve or find a different job. But Mr Robert's bottom 10 per cent of teachers doesn't seem to affect one sector more than others. We've long known that comparisons of schools enrolling students from similar backgrounds – the only valid way to compare schools – reveal that the public and private sectors perform at similar levels. It seems that Mr Robert's bottom 10 per cent remains widely distributed. Perhaps all schools, occupations, parliaments and indeed gatherings of ministers have a bottom 10 per cent.

What's really remarkable, and deserves closer examination, is the failure of non-government schools to achieve better student outcomes despite the resource advantages they enjoy (including the ability to offer teachers more money and less challenging students).

But the good minister has a solution: improve what and how students are taught. Nothing new there: his infatuation with curriculum (aka cultural warfare), teacher training, performance and achievement doesn't differ greatly from the priorities of his predecessors. It's remarkable that such a consistent focus hasn't yielded results, but then again ministerial responsibility and accountability doesn't extend to serious and long-term evaluation of the fetishes of particular ministers. The man who wants to sack teachers will be long gone and forgotten, and within a few years another minister will do it all again.

Teachers have longer memories; they have always been in the firing line. We've had a score of inquiries into teacher training and/or performance over the last couple of decades. Each new minister acts out Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over, and expecting different results. It's easier than tackling the tough structural issues. It would be interesting to see how he might replace the ten per cent he would sack. Or how he might actually make a constructive contribution to solving the chronic teacher shortage that currently exists, and which is compounding the challenges that teachers and principals face. Ah, but that's not Stuart Robert's problem, as successive federal ministers have been keen to stress: they don't run schools!

Few education ministers see the impact of teachers in a wider context. Teachers are always critically important, but other impacts on achievement are readily apparent. The Gonski review clearly cited research confirming that the socio-economic status of a school affects the performance of individuals within that school, irrespective of their own socio-economic status. As Piccoli says, teachers are the biggest in-school factor, but parental background and socioeconomic status have the overall largest influence. The obvious implications are that efforts to improve overall student achievement should not be confined to the classroom and school. Addressing one set of impacts, to the exclusion of others, lies behind our path to failure.

Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor are the authors of *Waiting for Gonski: How Australia failed its schools* published by UNSW Press.

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