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Labor's maths teaching promise doesn't add up, says expert



Opposition Leader Bill Shorten at Domremy College in Sydney on Friday. He promised to solve the maths and science teacher shortage by 2020. Alex Ellinghausen



by Tim Dodd

A leading maths education expert has questioned if the Labor Party can meet its promise to ensure all high school classes in maths and science-related subjects will have qualified teachers by 2020.

On Friday Opposition Leader Bill Shorten repeated a policy announcement, originally made a year ago, that a Labor government would pay for 25,000 recent graduates in science, technology, engineering and maths over the next five years to do extra study to become trained teachers.

"A Shorten Labor government will make sure that by 2020, all secondary STEM [science, technology, engineering and maths] teachers are qualified in their discipline," Labor's statement said.

The head of the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute, Geoff Prince, said the plan was not enough to ensure that all high school classrooms had trained maths and science teachers.

Professor Prince said the problem of teacher shortages in maths and science was not simple to solve and called on Labor to supply more detail.

The major shortages of maths teachers was in regional Australia and in poorer areas of the major cities, and many qualified teachers did not want to move there, he said.

"We do have out of work maths teachers," he said. "The current problem is so large I don't believe it can be solved in that period."

Professor Prince is one of the foremost experts on the shortage of maths teachers in Australian schools and his institute has strongly urged government action to solve the problem.

Currently about 40 per cent of teachers in maths classes in years seven to 10 in Australian high schools are not taught by trained maths teachers.

Professor Prince said that Labor's policy was a start.

"It's in the right direction. While I applaud the sentiment it's not a silver bullet. I'm concerned about whether its viability has been scoped," he said.

Mr Shorten said Labor would spend \$393 million to subsidise STEM graduates to become trained teachers.

"If you provide the teachers with the sort of support and training they require, then the sky is literally the limit," he said on Friday at Donremy College in the Sydney marginal Coalition-held seat of Reid.

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He said that Labor's plan to fund graduates to train as teachers should be linked to a commitment to teach in a school which was short of science, technology, engineering and maths teachers.

Professor Prince said that, because the promise was spread over maths and other science-based disciplines, the number of extra teachers would not be enough.

"Whatever share of the 25,000 STEM teachers are maths teachers it will be completely inadequate," he said.

A spokeswoman for Opposition education shadow minister Kate Ellis said that Friday's announcement "set clear goals but was not the be-all and end-all" of Labor's strategy to improve teaching skills in schools.

She said Labor would work with state and territory governments and schools systems to ensure the policy worked.

Labor's published policies also say that it will spend \$127 million in the next four years to support up to 5000 existing primary and secondary teachers improve their skills in science, technology, engineering, and maths subjects.



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