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# New breed of teacher is going bush

By **MIKI PERKINS**  
EDUCATION REPORTER

LAURA Dortmans is about to start a teaching career at Stawell Secondary College, identified by the Education Department as one of the most disadvantaged schools in the state.

But Ms Dortmans, 23, isn't apprehensive, she's elated.

She is a new breed of teacher, one of 45 top-ranking university graduates who have had six weeks of intensive training and today begin a two-year teaching stint in government schools.

"Teachers are a really powerful influence on young people's lives," Ms Dortmans said. "I wanted to be a teacher to address disadvantage and I wanted to work in a town where I could immerse myself."

The Teach for Australia program, modelled on similar initiatives in countries such as Britain and the US, recruits graduates who teach for 80 per cent of their time and complete a postgraduate diploma of teaching in the remainder.

At the end of their two years in the classroom they emerge with a teaching qualification and have the costs of their diploma covered.

Ms Dortmans grew up in Buffalo and Leongatha, in Gippsland, and said the sense of community inspired her to apply for a regional placement.

But rural students face several hurdles — distance, a lack of subject choices, ageing teachers and limited resources, she said.

After studying arts and visual art at Monash University Ms Dortmans decided education was the way to provide young people with a future.

Her journey began on Monday after she left Melbourne in a car loaded with her possessions for the three-hour trip to Stawell, in western Victoria.

"It was strange driving west, I've never lived out this way before and it was a feeling of setting out . . . into the unknown," she said. She spoke of introducing her students at Stawell Secondary to studying art and encouraging them to expand their horizons beyond the Wimmera plains.

The six weeks of training at Melbourne University was intense but valuable, focused on teaching theory and practice, she said. But she had not foreseen the program's high-profile nature: "I certainly didn't expect to be meeting with Julia Gillard."

The Government believes the program will help tackle a teacher shortage and lift quality, but critics say new teachers are only a stop-gap measure.

Stawell Secondary College principal Peter Hilbig said he

was excited about gaining Ms Dortmans and two other Teach for Australia associates.

The program alone would not solve the teacher shortage but added to the options for future teachers and exposed students to quality teaching, he said. "One of the things we try to do is convince our students that they can go anywhere. The opportunities are limited only by their commitment and tenacity."

Teachers return to school today and students will follow on Monday.

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Laura Dortmans is looking forward to teaching at one of Victoria's most disadvantaged schools, Stawell Secondary College.

PICTURE: JUSTIN McMANUS