The write stuff

By KIM COTTON

Four NSW public high school teachers have been recognised as exceptional English teachers by an inaugural award designed to honour one of the department’s most prolific educators.

The English head teachers – Joanne McPherson (Dorrigo High), Stephen Henry (Cherrybrook Technology High), Susan Stevens (Gosford High) and highly commended winner Rachel Devlin (Rooty Hill High) – became the first recipients of the Paul Brock Awards for Excellence in the Teaching of English held earlier this term.

Paul Brock is the department’s director of learning and development research, and adjunct professor in the faculty of education and social work at Sydney University. The awards celebrate Dr Brock’s remarkable contribution to teaching, research, policy development and advocacy of English during 40 years – the past 12 of which he has also been engaged in a personal battle with motor neurone disease.

NSW education minister Verity Firth, who made a surprise visit to the ceremony, told the gathering it was her love of English and reading that supported her in her role as a political leader.

“What my English teachers gave to me, which is something that I think is probably the greatest gift you could bestow on any child, is a lifelong passion for reading and a passion for continuous education through that reading,” Ms Firth said.

“And never more so does that become obvious when you go off and do a job like mine in politics ... because it provides you with a greater scope about the world.

“I would not have had a love of reading if it were not for the amazing teachers who inspired me and the teachers we’re recognising today are doing that same thing.”

In another surprise, Ms Firth recognised award recipient Ms Stevens as her Years 7 and 8 English teacher when she attended North Sydney Girls High.

Ms Stevens, who was equally overwhelmed at the discovery, said even as a student Ms Firth was “fantastically bright”.

Ms Stevens said receiving the award had made her reflect on her role as a teacher and “how you can still after many years of teaching, continue to learn yourself”.

The award is a joint initiative between Sydney University’s Arts, English and Literacy Education Research Network of the Faculty of Education and Social Work and the NSW Secondary Principals’ Council.

The council’s president Jim McAlpine said the award was an opportunity to identify authentic, hard-working teachers in their field of expertise.

“We’re recognising real people who are making a difference in their classrooms and staffrooms and schools and their profession every day,” he said.

The English head teachers Joanne McPherson, Susan Stevens, Stephen Henry and Rachel Devlin.

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Wordsmiths ... Paul Brock (front) and from left English teachers Joanne McPherson, Susan Stevens, Stephen Henry and Rachel Devlin.

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Dr Brock described the eponymous award as “moving” and “humbling”.

I’ve spent 40 years of my life working primarily in the field of English literature and language so it’s a deep honour and I’m thrilled to bits,” he said.

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To apply for the 2009 awards go to: http://www.educ.usyd.edu.au/research/networks/valuate/resources/Brock%20award%20form.doc

“We study English language and literature to live fully.”

Read Michael Coutts-Trotter’s Paul Brock Awards speech, page 22.