

Primary school principal commits suicide in Australian country town

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Just weeks before the end of the school year, Doug Godwin, a 50-year-old father of four and the principal of a local primary school, was found hanged at his home in the small rural town of Moruya, several hundred kilometres south of Sydney.

Described by locals as a "pillar of the community" and a "role model", Godwin was treasurer of the Moruya Lions Club, involved in the local scout troop and the Apex club. He had been principal of Moruya Primary School for five years. His wife also taught at the school.

Reportedly working 60 hours each week, remaining at the school until 7 or 8pm most nights as well as on weekends, Godwin was popular with both students and teachers. According to reports, he was known for "spending recess and lunch playing handball with his young charges." On the day of his suicide he had apparently worked at the school all day, farewelled students travelling to Sydney for a Schools Spectacular, then returned to his Moruya home. He was found dead at around 8pm.

Embittered co-workers blamed his suicide on the public education system.

"They are forcing the most dedicated teachers out of the system which [the government] is determined to destroy," a colleague, Bruce Waters, told Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*.

"More than 90 per cent of [Godwin's] concerns were related to education and the total lack of support and interest which the government and the media place in the public education system."

Christine May, a Moruya school parent representative, reported that she had worked with the principal the week before, trying to find enough funds to teach the school's disabled students.

"Doug wanted to be an educational leader but his

everyday existence was full of administration. What happened at Moruya is symptomatic of pressures facing teachers across the state. Doug was very concerned about how much funding was to be allocated to the school."

According to another report in the *Telegraph*, chairman of the Public Schools Principals Forum, Brian Chudleigh, said there were "300 to 400 schools in the state facing bankruptcy and principals are driven to distraction trying to make ends meet. Increasingly principals are required to be more and more managers than educators." Chudleigh added that principals were working longer hours under tremendous pressure.

The Carr Labor government's official gag on further public discussion of the principal's death only adds to the impression that this is not an isolated case. Beverly Baker, president of the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations said, "Every year we lose a number of principals in this position." One source, who wanted to remain anonymous, told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that six principals in New South Wales (NSW) schools had committed suicide in 1999.

High on the list of contributing factors is the general climate surrounding public education. On the one hand, individual schools, competing for enrolments and funding, are forced to project the most positive of images. Yet public education funding in NSW has been cut slashed by some 20 per cent in real terms over the past two decades.

John McMillan, President of the NSW Primary Principals' Association, told the WSWS that principals felt increasingly isolated: "More and more on our own, the support that we had years ago doesn't exist."

Locals at Moruya, which has a population of around 3,000, commented to the press that the school was underfunded and facing a further \$15,000 cutback

because it no longer qualified for the government's Country Assistance Program (CAP). According to education officials, CAP funding has not declined overall, but locals say there is growing competition for funding grants. Moruya Primary School, in one of the hundreds of rural communities hardest hit by unemployment and government cuts, was no longer considered "isolated", one of the government's criteria for awarding CAP funding.

One way schools attempt to get around budget cuts is to increase class sizes. Official figures released last year showed that in the state of NSW class sizes were increasing and more than one in three children in government primary schools studied in a composite class—a class made up of two or more grades and taught by the same teacher. In 1998, more than 7 percent of Year 2 classes exceeded the limit (29 students), 13.6 percent of classes in Year 3 (30 is the official limit in Years 3 to 10), and 14 percent of classes for students in years 4, 5 and 6.

On top of this, the Education Department has been demanding sweeping changes to a range of subjects taught in primary schools, without providing teachers with the necessary time or resources to deal with them, adding to their already crowded school timetable.

According to a survey undertaken by the NSW teachers' union in August, "71.9 percent of respondents 'indicated that there have been new syllabi or departmental policies in the last 12 months for which they felt inadequately trained, while 76.8 per cent reported feeling inadequately prepared to implement current changes as well as future changes in the next 12 months.'" One teacher commented in *Education*, the NSW teacher union's journal: "There's so many syllabuses that it's got to the stage that when one arrives you only have the chance to take a quick look at it and then you put it aside... All the curriculum changes make you feel really overwhelmed."

Two studies, hardly reported in the media, quantify the cumulative effects on teachers' morale. A 1997 national study of work-related compensation reported that teachers took more time off for stress-related illnesses than any other group of workers—1.7 weeks longer than the average. Commenting on the report, an Australian Education Union spokeswoman remarked that "nation-wide budget cuts have caused workloads and stress to soar."

Another study "Beyond the Limits", conducted in 1999 by the Australian Council of Trade Unions found teachers were "carrying huge loads, working long hours, receiving little or no overtime payments and suffering increasing health problems."

Twenty-seven percent were found to work more than 50 hours a week, 52 percent worked more than 45 hours. Seventy-three per cent worked more than 40 hours, exceeding the 35 to 38 hours allowed in the award.

According to the report "employer cost-cutting and a lack of funding has caused widespread overwork and job dissatisfaction."

At the time of Doug Godwin's suicide, NSW teachers were in the middle of the most protracted industrial campaign for a decade, striking against the government's proposed new teachers' award. The award, designed, according to the NSW director-general, to enable public schools to compete with private schools in "a fully contestable environment" would deregulate working conditions, requiring schools to remain open from 7am to 10 pm, Monday to Saturday, 50 weeks a year.

Commenting on the tragedy, NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations president, Beverly Baker, told the WSWS that the new teachers' award would seriously impact on principals, who would be put on five year contracts and have four weeks cut from their annual leave. Baker said she "had never seen principals and teachers this angry. This is a different sort of anger" than in 1988 when 100,000 parents, students and teachers demonstrated against the state Liberal government's sweeping public education restructure and the axing of 2,000 teachers' jobs. "People are throwing in the towel. There's a final realisation that public education has no friends. There are only a few voices being raised against (Labor Party Premier) Bob Carr's determination to turn schools into sweatshops. There's a feeling that all is hopeless."



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