

Severe shortage of casual teachers in disadvantaged Australian schools

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A survey of almost 100 primary and secondary public schools in Sydney's working class western suburbs has revealed that thousands of students are missing out on classes each week because of an acute shortage of casual teachers to replace teachers who are ill or on leave.

The survey of the Mount Druitt region, an area of extensive public housing, was conducted in April, during the first term of the school year when staff shortages are traditionally at their lowest. It found that students were often left in the library, set to watch videos, grouped with other classes or left unsupervised in the playground.

Specialist classes, such as those for students with learning difficulties and English as a Second Language, were commonly cancelled because their teachers were needed to supervise other classes. The survey recorded many complaints of classes being split, disrupting the learning of students in the split class as well as the other classes affected.

In one case, hundreds of students in a single school suffered in the course of a week. Teachers reported a total of 97 uncovered classes in a week, approximately one in 10 of all classes. Other schools reported up to 44 classes without teachers. Every school surveyed was affected, with at least three classes missed.

According to teachers, the shortage of casuals extended to all subject areas, despite frantic efforts by individual teachers to find replacements. It was not uncommon for a teacher to make 20 to 30 phone calls in order to find one casual. Comments made to the survey included: "I could not fill a vacancy at 5pm on the evening before, despite making 18 calls ... therefore, the class was split", "Teachers who are sick have to ring casuals", "We don't have a casuals list" and "Casuals, both in quality and quantity, aren't

there".

This situation is expected to worsen during the winter months, when teacher illnesses and other absences are usually more frequent.

The survey, carried out by the New South Wales (NSW) teachers' union during April, follows a report published earlier in the year by the Australian Education Union (AEU) on staffing levels in government schools throughout Australia, except South Australia and the Northern Territory. It found shortages of both casual and permanent teachers were such that:

- * Only two of 18 schools surveyed in NSW managed to cover all absences with casual teachers in a sample week. One school needed up to 15 spare teachers on any one day and had as many as 10 classes uncovered. One resorted to putting 100 students into the playground under the supervision of a casual teacher with support from a head teacher.

- * Teacher shortages in most curriculum areas, including math, science, English, other languages and industrial subjects, left classes to teachers unfamiliar with the subject.

- * Schools in rural Western Australia were looking to recruit final year undergraduates, who had not yet qualified as teachers, to fill some vacancies.

- * One in four principals surveyed in Queensland were employing unregistered teachers or considering doing so.

Both surveys pointed out that the casual teacher shortage was most severe in disadvantaged areas, particularly Sydney's western and southern suburbs, and in rural areas. Commenting on the results, one teacher told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "It's demoralising from my perspective ... but if you go further out west, it gets worse. Those schools are in grave danger."

The poorest schools are most affected because the state government no longer employs casual teachers centrally but requires schools to hire them out of their own budgets. Schools with the least funds and in the most oppressed areas, where sub-standard facilities prevail, find it difficult to attract casuals.

There are reports that government schools increasingly have to pay private agencies to hire casual teachers. By one estimate, some 10 percent of schools are now using such recruiting agencies, which charge up to \$30 a day for each casual teacher.

Bill Feld, the NSW education department's acting director of personnel services, bluntly defended the state Labor government's policy. Commenting on the survey findings, he told the media: "Principals control funds for short-term relief and make decisions how to spend their money ... we don't dictate the precise strategy they would use to meet demand."

The author of the NSW Teachers Federation survey did not challenge the government's stance, proposing instead that the education department merely employ someone to organise casuals, using a database of those available on any given day. This proposal, however, could not possibly overcome the huge shortages, and would leave the underlying causes untouched.

Successive state governments have undermined public education. Two decades ago, government schools were predominately staffed by permanent teachers employed through a centralised staffing system. Similarly, state education departments paid for casual relief teachers according to the schools' requirements. One of the first changes inflicted on NSW public schools was to give them the "choice" of paying for casual teachers out of a block grant, putting pressure on them to save on staff costs so that they could spend their grants on other areas of need.

Over the past 20 years, public schools have been increasingly required to function like businesses. To survive, schools have had to find additional sources of funding from fees and sponsorship. They have also had to attract enrolments—usually at the expense of other schools—because student numbers determine the base level of funding and staffing. Both factors have led to widening differences between schools in better-off and disadvantaged areas.

As a result, schools in poorer areas often begin each year with falling enrolments and staffing cutbacks,

throwing teachers and students into turmoil. Selected teachers are forcibly transferred out, entire school timetables are rewritten, and students face changes of teachers, exacerbating learning and behaviour problems. According to the AEU, the 18 schools surveyed in NSW had an annual turnover of permanent teachers of between 8 and 20 percent—that is, up to one in five teachers left the school.

Working class schools find it increasingly difficult to retain experienced permanent staff as they acquire reputations for being "problem" schools. This, in turn, makes it harder to attract casual teachers.

The April survey also reported 75 long-term vacancies, less than half of them filled by "mobile" teachers—teachers with permanent status but not employed at a specific school. The remaining vacancies were filled by casuals, seriously depleting the pool of casual teachers available to cover short-term absences.

Under the guise of tackling the teacher shortage, the government recently allowed schools to apply for extra "mobiles", over and above their staffing entitlement, to cover vacancies. Schools must pay 26 percent of their daily salary, however, further enhancing the advantages of wealthier schools while increasing the financial pressure on poorer schools.

While it expresses concerns about the lack of teachers, the NSW Teachers Federation has effectively rubberstamped the policies of successive governments that have led to the present situation. The latest award pushed through last year with the assistance of the union permits the introduction of fixed-term teachers, effectively opening the door for contract teachers to replace permanent teachers.



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