

Australian teachers detail impact of school staffing shortages in inquiry submissions

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There are now numerous reports emerging from Australia's public school system on the devastating effects of staffing shortages driven by abysmal working conditions, excess unpaid overtime requirements, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (see: "Australian teacher staffing shortage exacerbates schools' crisis").

One source detailing the perspective of multiple public school teachers is a New South Wales (NSW) government inquiry into teacher shortages. The ongoing inquiry commenced in June 2022 and has received more than 250 submissions from different organisations and individuals, including numerous teachers and school workers.

The inquiry itself is a sham, convened by the upper house of the NSW parliament and chaired by Mark Latham, the former federal Labor Party leader and now member of Pauline Hanson's One Nation extreme-right party. The state Liberal-National government of Premier Dominic Perrottet is spearheading a right-wing offensive against the public education system. Under the guise of addressing the crisis in the schools, it is advancing the most regressive education policy ideas long demanded by the corporate elite, such as so-called performance pay for teachers.

The content of the inquiry submissions nevertheless reflected the sharpness of the crisis in the schools.

A principal of a regional secondary school wrote on the impact of the staffing shortage at their workplace. "We have had unfilled vacancies all year and no capacity to release staff for training or excursions because we also have no casual staff," they explained. "To ensure that students are supervised, our staff have been combining classes and changing arrangements to minimal supervision and covering vacancies and for staff on sick leave, by teaching extras in their scheduled non-teaching preparation time. Our class sizes are larger, even for our most disadvantaged students and our capacity to address equity gaps has been significantly reduced as a result."

A support teacher from a western Sydney public primary school wrote: "The impact the staff shortages have had on my job as well as other 'non classroom' teachers is insurmountable. I am constantly being called upon to replace a classroom teacher due to illness and my other programs are left desolate."

The teacher went on to detail the disproportionate impact on students with disabilities: "Students with learning difficulties are no longer given intensive lessons and as time goes on in these important early years of intervention—the opportunity is missed. Our English as Another Language or Dialect (EALD) teacher has the same interrupted expectations to drop everything and go into class time and time again. The CILSP (Covid Intensive Learning Support Program) teacher is a casual teacher who has been employed for the year to specifically work with small groups to assist with gaps that may have occurred as a result of school closures and Home Learning. There have been two days this year that the CILSP teacher has been able to work with these students."

Another theme in the inquiry submissions was the impact of ever increasing administrative work.

A teacher from a south-western Sydney public high school wrote: "Teachers are regularly swept up in endless amounts of administration, meetings and compliance/box ticking measures, instead of doing what they love—teaching students. We have reduced preparation time to create meaningful, exciting and relevant lessons, which is having a negative and long-lasting impact on the educational outcomes of young people in schools."

The treatment of teachers by the politicians and the mainstream media was also mentioned by numbers of submissions.

A high school teacher from regional NSW wrote: "Teachers have become the 'fall guy' for the failings of the education system, and governments cling on to this to

avoid any accountability for the fact that they run and fund the system and if there is a problem with it, they are ultimately responsible.”

A theme that was in almost all submissions was the impact of increasing workloads.

A head teacher at a public high school explained: “If schools cannot locate enough teachers or enough appropriately qualified teachers, then naturally workloads increase for those who are already employed within that school, and there is little to no compensation, in-kind or otherwise, offered to those who are compelled to paper over the teacher shortage crack. Every teacher I know is having to plan additional lessons or teach additional classes on a regular basis, resulting in the loss of planning and preparation time.”

Another submission, from a high school science teacher with 15 years’ experience, explained: “I usually work 50-60 hours a week and half of my holidays. In other jobs I have been able to negotiate the workload but this is not possible in teaching as they are all fixed tasks.”

Submissions from teachers demonstrated a passion for their profession and concern about the state of public education.

One senior teacher who has worked in both metropolitan and regional high schools wrote: “Put simply, my colleagues and I find ourselves in an ever deepening workplace crisis. ... I have grave concerns for the future of our fine public education system and the profession I love. This industry has run on its employees’ goodwill for far too long, and now we find ourselves in a situation where there are not enough staff with enough goodwill left.”

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