

Australian teacher staffing shortage exacerbates schools' crisis

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Numerous reports have recently detailed the impact of Australia's national shortage of school teachers. Thousands of positions remain unfilled across the school system, creating enormous workload pressures within the schools and exacerbating the crisis of the public education system (see: "Australian teachers detail impact of school staffing shortages in inquiry submissions").

A detailed survey of the teaching workforce was issued by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) on September 20. Its Australian Teacher Workforce Data project involved the regular surveying of tens of thousands of teachers—the latest edition polled nearly 32,000 school workers, which AITSL characterised as "by far the largest ever sample of teachers for research purposes."

The survey showed a growing divergence between rapid growth in the student population and slowing enrolment and graduation from teaching degrees.

The existing workforce is ageing, with AITSL reporting that more than one-third of all registered teachers, 38 percent, are older than 50 years. The report underscored one of the main reasons for younger teachers quitting the profession, crushing workloads and expectations of delivering unpaid overtime every day. AITSL's survey found that full time teachers typically worked 55 hours a week, 45 percent more hours than they are paid for.

The situation in the schools is undoubtedly even worse than indicated in the Australian Teacher Workforce Data, given that the published survey results date from 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in that year has since wreaked havoc in Australian schools, especially in late 2021 and this year. State and federal governments, both Labor and Liberal, have worked closely with the teacher unions to keep schools open amid record rates of infection, with even minimal precautions such as mandatory mask wearing jettisoned.

Numerous, though as yet not properly quantified,

reports have emerged of teachers quitting the profession over fears of being repeatedly infected with the dangerous virus.

Federal government projections anticipate a shortfall of around 4,000 secondary teachers by 2025. This is likely to be a gross underestimate. In each state in Australia, there are already hundreds and sometimes thousands of advertised teaching positions that are being unfilled.

In Victoria, an Australian Education Union survey of public school principals was released last August. It found that every secondary school principal has had to readvertise teaching vacancies due to no appointments being made when positions were first listed. Across both secondary and primary schools, more than 80 percent of principals reported that it had become "much harder " to fill staffing vacancies in the last twelve months. Finally, the survey reported that the top two reasons teachers gave for leaving the profession were stress/burnout and workload.

A research report conducted by several academics at Monash University and published in the Australian Journal of Education last August found that of nearly 2,500 surveyed teachers, 59 percent planned on quitting the profession. The survey was conducted on the eve of the pandemic, so, again, the real situation is likely even worse than reported.

The majority of those surveyed reported the impact of excess workload, especially non-teaching requirements including administrative duties and data entry demands. This impact includes mental and physical health problems.

One teacher explained: "I am an extremely hardworking person, but excessive workload, constant emotional and mental fatigue plus a young family at home have all brought me crashing down this year. Even today I am on sick leave because I just can't be f***ed. I can't get out of bed and put on my teacher face and be responsible for

200 students every day. ... We are being knocked down one brick at a time and it's taking its toll on me."

A steady influx of young graduate teachers has long propped up the Australian school system. Their passion for teaching and for the wellbeing of children is cynically exploited, with schools happy to employ graduates, typically on insecure 12 month contracts, with the expectation that they will run themselves into the ground for a few years before burning out and then getting replaced by a new young person desperate for their first position. The staffing crisis is partly due to that influx of graduates drying up.

Recent federal government statistics have outlined that annual completions in initial teacher education declined by nearly 20 percent between 2017 and 2020. Whereas 17 percent of students across undergraduate courses drop out before graduating, an extraordinary 50 percent of students in teaching degrees do so. This is because courses involve trainee rounds—after young would-be teachers see what conditions are actually like in the schools, half of them quit.

The impact of the staffing crisis falls most heavily on working class communities. Within the Australian school system, among the most privatised and unequal in the world, wealthy private schools can draw on their enormous cash reserves, bolstered every year by vast injections of federal government public funding, to pay higher salaries as required to attract staff.

Public schools in outer working class and rural and regional areas find it most difficult to attract and retain teachers. The impact of family poverty and financial distress generated by the profit system is expressed within classrooms through childhood trauma, undiagnosed disability, and related behavioural issues that make teachers' work even more challenging and stressful.

One teacher at a working-class primary school in Melbourne's northern suburbs told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "We have had numerous teaching positions go unfilled this year. Some didn't get even a single applicant, which was unheard of until recently. Because of the shortage, there is now one less Year 4 classroom than was initially planned, with those children spread across other classrooms, increasing class sizes.

"Also, the school frequently can't hire enough relief teachers, so when teachers are ill or absent their students are split across other classrooms. I frequently have up to six additional students placed in my room when this happens; some days feel like a circus. This adds to my workload and stress levels. I have needed to call in sick

because I just can't make it through the week. This is a tough choice as I know it impacts my colleagues who are feeling the same."

The political establishment and the education trade unions are responsible for the staffing crisis. The situation within the schools has not emerged accidentally—this is a consciously engineered crisis. What has emerged are the entirely predictable consequences of bipartisan Labor and Liberal party policy, of underfunding public schools while pouring billions of public funds into the private system, continually increasing teachers' responsibilities and workloads while failing to provide the necessary support services, and tying every level of education to standardised test scores, including the regressive NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) tests.

At the same time as all this, the teacher unions have collaborated with state governments in undermining teachers' salaries. Most recently in Victoria earlier this year, the Australian Education Union bureaucracy rammed through a three-year industrial agreement that increased nominal base wages by less than 2 percent a year, far lower than the inflation rate.

The ruling class is now proceeding in line with the old political adage of never letting a good crisis go to waste. Under the guise of addressing teacher shortages, new measures are being prepared to undermine the public education system and tailor it ever more directly to the needs of the corporations.

State and federal education ministers met last August for a "round table" discussion on the staffing crisis. Amid warm bipartisan agreement between the Labor and Liberal politicians, they resolved to issue a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan by December. Already flagged measures include watering down initial teacher training and education requirements and allowing university students to work as "interns," measures serving to undermine the teaching profession. The New South Wales state government has also announced plans to introduce a new "performance pay" regime, potentially tying teachers' salaries to standardised test results.



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