

Australian Labor government's plan to address school staffing crisis set to further undermine public education system

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The federal Labor government recently issued an “action plan,” outlining 27 policy measures that will supposedly address the teacher shortage crisis wracking the public education system across Australia. In reality, the measures will do nothing to address staffing shortages and will only serve to undermine the teaching profession and the public education system.

Schools across the country are grappling with serious difficulties flowing from the inability to appoint the required number of teachers. Previous government forecasts anticipated a shortage of more than 4,000 teachers across Australia by 2025. However, the situation is already worse than that.

In New South Wales, latest available figures show 3,300 vacant positions, and in Victoria, there are 1,100 teaching positions still vacant for 2023. Some schools are desperately offering sign-on bonuses of \$10,000, with this spending offset by cuts to other parts of the school's budget.

The situation is fuelling higher class sizes, cuts to curriculum programs, and extra pressures on the existing teaching workforce.

The Labor government's plan—endorsed by state education ministers, Labor and Liberal alike, and by the Australian Education Union (AEU)—amounts to less than a band-aid response to the crisis. It involves just \$328 million of additional government funding, spread over *nine years*. This amounts to \$36 million a year. For comparison, this is equivalent to 0.07 percent of annual military spending committed by the federal government.

Titled the National Teacher Workforce Action (NTWA) plan and issued last month, the government's document lays out five “priority areas:” improving teacher supply, strengthening teacher education, keeping the teachers we have, elevating the profession, and better understanding

workforce needs. The limited spending measures include \$159 million for 4,000 additional university places for teachers, \$56 million for bursaries, \$68 million to triple the number of mid-career professionals shifting to teaching, and \$30 million for a Teacher Reduction Workload Fund.

A central part of the NTWA plan aims to undermine teacher qualifications and erode the professional status of teachers. As part of “improving teacher supply,” student teachers will be given permission to teach before they have completed their teaching degree.

This measure was proposed by the AEU bureaucracy in August last year. Under-trained student-teachers will as a priority be rushed to remote and rural areas, which are suffering from critical teacher shortages and are often among the most impoverished in Australia. This is also the purpose of the bursary program, which will be accompanied by a “commitment to teach” obligation on all those offered a subsidy towards their teaching degree.

Linked with this, the NTWA plan also contains measures to bring teachers' aides and mid-career professionals into teaching with just a one-year secondary teaching qualification.

Within ruling circles, reducing the duration and complexity of teaching qualifications has been a long-standing goal. There is no concern regarding having less knowledgeable, less skilled teachers—the agenda is to rapidly expand the workforce in order to avoid having to invest money in retaining experienced teachers. The Labor government's “plan” recalls the cynical political adage of never letting a good crisis go to waste.

A further measure envisaged by the NTWA plan is the recruitment of international teachers by expediting visa application processes. This will likely have limited impact, as the teacher shortage is not confined to

Australia, but is an international crisis.

The NTWA plan contains no genuine proposals to address the large numbers of teachers denied the right to permanent employment and employed instead on precarious casual contracts.

Under the hypocritical banner of “elevating the profession,” the NTWA plan proposes that members of the public be encouraged to nominate teachers for an Order of Australia medal. This farcical initiative underscores the gulf between the ordinary teachers and the Labor government and its trade union bureaucrat advisors. Teachers did not enter the teaching profession for public glory but in order to educate and inspire young people, to foster within them a love of learning and confidence in their ability to cognise the world around them.

The government has attempted to present the teaching shortage crisis as a highly complex problem with no clear solution. Education minister Jason Clare last year declared there was no “silver bullet” to the issue.

Teachers and school workers have little confusion on what needs to be done. One survey of educators, conducted by Monash University researchers last year, reported the response of three teachers who were asked what they needed:

“Fewer students in each class and more preparation time.”

“Hiring of additional qualified specialist staff to assist teachers by diagnosing students, helping to create support plans, helping to design manageable adjustments, etc.”

“Fewer classes and more preparation time. I have to use my sick leave to mark!”

Such basic measures will not be implemented to address crushing workloads, one of the key issues confronting burned out teachers, because lowering class sizes and providing teachers with more time for planning, preparation, and assessment requires significant new spending. The Labor government is instead heeding the demands of finance capital and big business for lower debt and deficits by curtailing public spending.

Australia now has one of the world’s most privatised school systems, with 46 percent of secondary students attending private schools. The public school system has been systematically underfunded by successive Labor and Liberal governments, and school staff in working class communities are provided with grossly inadequate resources to deal with the impact of the social crisis expressed within classrooms through childhood trauma, undiagnosed disabilities, and related behavioural issues

that make teachers’ work even more challenging and stressful.

A staggering proportion, 50 percent, of students who start initial teacher education (ITE) courses drop out before completing them. Many take one look inside a classroom as part of their course and decide to change profession. Somewhere between 30 percent and 50 percent of graduating teachers are quitting after their first, second or third year.

The full reopening of schools in January–February 2022 by all state governments, in collusion with the AEU bureaucracy, led to prolific student and teacher absences as COVID-19 infections raged through the schools. Classes were merged, teachers were expected to teach additional students on behalf of their sickened colleagues, as well as providing extra tuition for students needing help to catch up with the curriculum. The Monash University survey, involving 5,500 teachers, found that 25 percent of teachers said that they felt unsafe at work. One of the main reasons mentioned was lack of effective measures within schools to protect them from COVID infection.

None of the government’s new measures related to the teaching crisis touch on the risk of further COVID infections, consistent with its false assertion that the pandemic is over.

The right to fully staffed, properly resourced public schools that are freely accessible to all young people can only be established through the development of a political fight against the Labor government and its accomplices including the AEU bureaucracy. Teachers and school workers ought to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and develop the discussion on this and the urgent need to form rank-and-file committees in every school.

Committee for Public Education

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