

Australian teacher shortages worsen in public schools

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As the school year concludes in Australia, numerous studies have projected an even worse teacher staffing crisis in public schools in 2025. The federal Department of Education is predicting a shortage of 4,100 secondary school teachers across the country next year, with this almost certainly a significant underestimate.

A study by statistician Simon Kuestenmacher looked at teacher supply into the next decade. It estimated that by 2034, Australia's current workforce of 391,000 schoolteachers will need to grow to 414,000, an increase of 23,000 teachers. This is to keep up with the projected 6 percent increase in the number of school aged children.

These numbers, however, do not factor in Australia's ageing teacher workforce. Kuestenmacher estimated that to replace teachers approaching retirement and those working over their retirement age, 34,000 new teachers will be needed in the next decade.

"[W]e are facing an uphill battle," he explained. "Pumping out 3,400 new teachers (that actually end up teaching) every year was never an easy task but in our current economic environment, things are only getting more difficult."

Graduates are shunning teaching degrees, while registered teachers are leaving the profession in unprecedented numbers.

In 2023, graduating school students choosing teaching as their first university course preference dropped nearly 20 percent from 2022. Moreover, of those who do start a teaching degree, 50 percent drop out before the end of the course. This reflects the terrible experiences that many student teachers have during their placements in public schools, prompting half of them to pursue an alternative career. Many graduate teachers quit the profession within the first few years.

Education researcher Saul Karnovsky told ABC News: "We have seen teacher shortages in the past, no doubt. There have been moments of crisis which the media

would have called a crisis and policymakers would have as well. But the scale and the scope of this particular crisis at the moment is unprecedented."

Teacher shortages exist in every Australian state. In Queensland, 78 percent of principals said they had teacher shortages this year. Schools are reported to be struggling to staff all classes in Western Australia and South Australia. Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, reported 1,500 unfilled teaching positions in August 2024, almost double the number of vacancies that existed at the start of the school year.

The Labor government in New South Wales (NSW) has claimed that the teacher shortage in that state is easing. However, new data referred to by the state opposition minister for education, Sarah Mitchell, has revealed that NSW has 200 fewer full-time and temporary teachers than two years ago, despite increasing student enrolments. In addition, hundreds more jobs are being axed following the announcement in April by Premier Chris Minns, that public school funding will be cut by \$148 million this year and even more, \$1.4 billion, over four years.

Overwhelming workloads are one of the key drivers of the workforce crisis. Australia has some of the world's highest face-to-face teaching hours requirements, and every year teachers are burdened with additional administrative duties. While wealthy public schools enjoy lavish infrastructure and teacher supports, within underfunded public schools, teachers are provided with grossly inadequate support for student disabilities and challenging behaviours.

One primary school teacher in Melbourne told the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact in her school of the staffing crisis. "A factor of the teacher shortage that I think needs to be highlighted, is that schools running without enough teachers, are hiring CRTs [casual relief teachers], when they can, to cover all the additional tasks that may otherwise be done by additional staff members.

This exhausts budgets, meaning that inevitably in Term 4 schools can't afford more CRTs, so classes are split.

"I frequently get 6 kids each day sent into my classroom. Teachers are then catering to 30 kids of different year levels, adding to workload, stress and exhaustion. Teachers then feel guilty for taking time off when they need it because of the burden it places on their colleagues. The expectation to work at this pace is way too high."

A Western Australia teacher with 25 years working in both public and private school classrooms told ABC News that the workload and pressure became too much. "I was experiencing heart palpitations and breathing issues, it was related to stress... It's not a school, it is every sector and the pay's not the issue because there are other times when I was getting paid more—it's the work-life balance, it's having basically no life... physically I just could not keep doing it."

In an article in the *Conversation*, another teacher pointed to the gulf between the needs of the students and the demands of the government: "It's frustrating knowing what the students need emotionally, but the curriculum and administrative demands don't leave room for that kind of support."

Student learning is being badly affected by the staffing shortage. A 2023 report found that almost 10,000 lessons in NSW were being conducted without adequate educational support in public schools daily.

A high school teacher in regional Victoria explained to the WSWS that at his school, "A hundred students at a time get sent to a 'study centre' when staff are not present. They get supervised by usually one, at the most two, Education Support staff. These 'lessons,' usually online from a central lesson hub, are then counted by the school as fully delivered lessons."

The teacher shortages are intensifying the cascade of dysfunction in Australia public schools. Decades of deliberate underfunding has resulted in the country having one of the most privatised school systems in the OECD. Students classified as disadvantaged, with a low socio-economic background, indigenous, disabled or living in a remote area make up 46 per cent of public school enrolments.

Government schools are concentrations of disadvantage. Yet between 2009 to 2018 the total income of Catholic and private schools rose ten times higher than that for public schools. From 2019–2024, even under the totally inadequate official framework for school funding, public schools lost \$13.1 billion and are likely to lose a further

\$13.3 billion under the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in the next round of funding currently before the parliament.

A Secondary Principals Council submission into a senate inquiry into "disruption in Australian classrooms" held this year stated: "Our [public] schools simply do not have the resources to adequately address [the students] complex and challenging behaviours.... Staff shortages, and staff teaching out of their field of expertise, supercharges disruption and intensifies disorderly behaviour, which drives teacher departure from more challenging school settings and the teaching profession generally."

A critical factor in driving up teacher workload and stress was the introduction of the high-stakes National Assessment—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) regime by Labor's Rudd and Gillard governments in 2008. Described by Gillard as the bedrock of Labor's "education revolution," the tests were implemented to make schools accountable for student "continuous improvement." Subsequently, "poor" performance in the tests, or any other problem emerging in the schools, is sheeted home to lack of "quality teaching."

A war on public education is being waged by the ruling elite, and policed by the teachers' unions. In every state and territory, the union bureaucracy has collaborated with state and federal governments, including by delivering regressive enterprise agreements that have driven down real wages and facilitated the imposition of crushing workloads.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) calls on teachers and school workers to establish rank-and-file committees in their schools, independent of the teacher union bureaucracies, to fight for a counter-offensive that aims to secure a proper educational provisioning for all students and decent wages and conditions for educators, within a fully funded public education system that provides the highest quality schooling for all students, regardless of their family's wealth.

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