

Australian research reveals deep crisis in public education

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Monash University researchers recently issued two discussion papers highlighting untenable working conditions in public schools in the Australian state of Victoria. The papers were based on a survey of more than 8,000 Australian Education Union (AEU) school-based members, including teachers, principals and education support staff, combined with other educational research.

Both reports expose a public education system in profound crisis, with educators suffering from poor wages, deteriorating conditions, unsustainable workloads, lack of resources and growing staff shortages.

Victoria's public education system is the second largest in Australia, consisting of 85,246 educators, supporting 654,000 students across 1,566 schools. It has been deteriorating for decades, including under a state Labor government since 2014.

The first discussion paper focused on employment arrangements, intentions of educators to remain in the education system, workload, salary and conditions.

Only one in three educators plan to stay in public schools until retirement, with mid-career educators most likely to leave. Excessive workloads and inadequate pay are the main reasons. Most educators report working up to 60 hours weekly, including 12.5 unpaid hours, and up to 14 hours in regional schools—equating to more than 1.5 extra unpaid days each week.

Seventy-six percent of those planning to leave aim to exit within four years, 83 percent cite workload, 70.5 percent inadequate pay and nearly 65 percent student behaviour.

State-wide, about 1,500 teaching positions remain unfilled, particularly in secondary schools. Projections show a shortage exceeding 5,000 teachers by 2028. Applications per teaching vacancy dropped from 10.6 in 2020 to 2.8 in 2022, with high graduate attrition rates worsening the crisis.

Inadequate salary was the second most common reason for leaving. Despite educators' work becoming more complex and demanding, teachers' salaries in Australia have declined relative to other professions over the past two decades. The situation for education support (ES) staff is particularly

appalling, with their work undervalued and poorly paid.

A new graduate teacher in Victoria begins at \$73,499 per annum and a leading teacher \$111,221. ES staff wages start at \$60,000 if full-time, but most are part-time, existing on the lowest wages.

To afford a median-priced house in Melbourne, the state capital, which costs \$767,000, educators would need an annual taxable income of around \$147,000, far beyond any teacher. Teachers' real earnings are now equivalent to what they were a decade ago, highlighting a stagnation in wages when adjusted for inflation.

As one teacher commented in the survey: "Choosing to be a teacher means choosing to not be able to afford buying a house in this day and age."

A similar situation confronts teachers in other states. A recent study of public school teachers in New South Wales found that 90 percent were unable to afford the median cost of renting or buying a home in the local government area of their schools.

Other major concerns include the growing complexity of student behaviour, with a severe shortage of psychologists, mental health experts and resources to address the issue. Teachers report a rise in the intensity and variety of student needs since the COVID-19 pandemic began, along with other economic and social stressors.

One teacher commented: "I've been a teacher for a long time—I've never worked so hard in my life—I simply cannot cater to all the students and their individual needs."

Another said: "We can and should be expected to make reasonable adjustments. However, some behaviour is outside the scope of our professional skills, and children do need to know that some behaviours are not tolerated as they wouldn't be tolerated in any other profession. The department also needs to have clear policies around this and support teachers to be safe in schools."

Both Monash papers point to the critical issue of class size that affects a teacher's ability to address individual student needs, including both behavioural and learning challenges.

One teacher commented: "It's simple, really. Fewer

students per teacher (both class sizes and number of classes) means better outcomes for students and teachers who don't constantly feel stretched to breaking point."

The second paper focussed on funding, facilities, curriculum and supporting diverse learners, documenting the lack of adequate state and federal funding for public schools. The private school system receives the highest government expenditure in the OECD, more than double the average.

Recent research shows that two private schools in Victoria, Haileybury College and Caulfield Grammar, spent more on capital works (\$391.8 million combined) from 2012 to 2022 than the entire Tasmanian state public school system, consisting of 190 public schools.

One teacher commented: "I teach in a horrible portable classroom, freezing in winter, boiling in summer, rats under the boards, leaking and dripping each time it rains and generally a shitty place to teach."

The Monash paper highlighted that Australian schools are among the most segregated in the OECD, ranking in the bottom third for equity in primary and secondary schools—30th out of 38 nations.

The report explained that public schools are doing the "heavy lifting" for diverse learners, with funding and resources not keeping up with enrolment growth. Public schools enrol 80 percent of students deemed disadvantaged, 80 percent of low SES (socioeconomic status), 84 percent of Indigenous, 86 percent of extensive disability and 82 percent of remote area students. Nearly 80 percent of teachers reported insufficient support for students with additional needs, including shortages of ES staff.

Both papers concluded with recommendations for a vast increase in government spending on public education, advocating for 100 percent Schooling Resource Standard funding. In reality, this inadequate federal Labor government funding model has proven to deepen inequality (see: "Australian Labor government's school funding model entrenches underfunding and inequality").

The Monash research, commissioned by the AEU itself, significantly fails to address the trade union bureaucracy's role in worsening school conditions through decades of sell-out agreements with governments, both Labor and Liberal-National. (See: Australian Education Union's record of agreement sell-outs)

In 2022, the AEU in Victoria pushed through a wage-cutting deal with the Labor government, providing less than a 2 percent nominal pay rise despite teacher opposition amid the soaring cost of living. The agreement provided no reduction in class sizes and only a pittance of workload relief, quickly consumed by school meetings and extra activities. As a result, over 40 percent of teachers voted "no" to the sell-out, with thousands resigning from the union in

protest.

If educators' wages and conditions are left to union bureaucrats, negotiating with governments behind teachers' backs, further sell-outs aligned with budget cuts will be imposed and the crisis in schools will deepen.

To overcome the crisis, the Committee For Public Education (CFPE) calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every school. These are democratic organisations, independent of the union bureaucracy, sharing information and planning united industrial and political action. We propose the following initial demands:

- An immediate 40 percent pay increase with salaries indexed against inflation, and automatic cost-of-living adjustments, to ensure all school staff are no worse off.

- Maximum class sizes of 15-20. End administrative burdens so teachers can focus on teaching. A minimum of 8 hours weekly during school hours for planning, assessment, and collaboration.

- Abolish NAPLAN and other regressive standardised testing measures that legitimise funding cuts for "underperforming" schools.

- Hire thousands of teachers and support staff to end punishing workloads. At least one ES member must be employed full-time per class. Re-employ experienced educators driven out of the profession.

- Fully funded support services for all students, including those with diverse needs. Employ psychologists in every school.

- Initiate a high-quality school construction program in working-class communities. No public funds for elite private schools. Invest billions in public education, and expropriate the billionaires, for a free, high-quality education for all.

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