Australian research exposes mental health crisis among teachers

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Two significant studies this year have revealed a mounting crisis within the education sector in Australia, with teachers facing severe mental health challenges.

The research shows the toll being taken by crushing workloads and prolonged exposure to student and family trauma. The studies paint a grim picture of a profession under immense strain, with dire implications for teacher retention and student outcomes.

The first study, entitled *Teachers' workload, turnover intentions, and mental health*, was conducted by a research team from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the Black Dog Institute, a renowned mental health research institution. Surveying nearly 5,000 Australian primary and secondary teachers in 2022–24, it is one of the most comprehensive investigations into the mental health of educators to date.

The study found that teachers were experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress at levels three times the national average. For instance, the average score for depressive symptoms on the Depression, Anxiety & Stress Scale (DASS) among teachers was 15.40, compared to a population norm of 5.02. Anxiety symptoms were at 12.12 versus 3.36 and stress at 21.80 versus 8.10.

The research said 90.7 percent of teachers reported moderate-to-extremely severe levels of stress. Furthermore, nearly 70 percent of participants reported moderate-to-extremely severe symptoms of both depression (70.5 percent) and anxiety (68.9 percent).

A central cause was unmanageable workload. The research made a distinction between the "core" work of teaching—planning and delivering lessons—and the ballooning "non-core" tasks that now dominate teachers' time. These included administrative duties, excessive data collection and tracking, and compliance with various policies and accountability frameworks.

Some 68.8 percent of teachers surveyed rated their workload as "largely unmanageable" or "completely unmanageable." The study's analysis established a clear chain reaction: a higher, unmanageable workload was positively correlated with greater levels of depressive symptoms, which, in turn, were strongly correlated with higher intentions to leave the profession.

Lead researcher Dr. Helena Granziera noted that teachers were not overwhelmed by teaching itself, but by the mounting load of non-core tasks, driving burnout and disillusionment. The consequences were severe: clinical-level depression and anxiety that diminished quality of life, impaired daily functioning and, in the schools, reduced performance, increased absenteeism, and worsened teacher shortages. This also undermined classroom quality and student outcomes, creating a ripple effect that threatens an entire generation.

The second study, published in May, *The Silent Cost: Impact and Management of Secondary Trauma in Educators*, revealed another serious threat to teacher mental health: secondary traumatic stress (STS). Led by Dr. Adam Fraser in collaboration with Deakin University, this research surveyed almost 2,300 educators and collected over 1,000 detailed trauma stories.

The study said educators had effectively become the "social workers of society," yet the education system was dramatically under-prepared and under-resourced to support educators. STS occurs from repeated exposure to the traumatic experiences of others. For teachers, this involves consistently hearing students' distressing personal stories, witnessing their struggles, and carrying the emotional burden of their challenges.

The report explained that this exposure is qualitatively different from that experienced by other frontline professionals. As research collaborator Christine Armarego explained, the prolonged nature of the teacher-student relationship is a crucial factor. Unlike a paramedic's brief interaction, a teacher knows a student and their family context for an entire year or longer, leading to a deeper and more sustained emotional investment.

The study found that teachers are not only supporting students but often entire families, as parents turn to them for guidance on complex issues, further expanding their emotional labour. Educators reported STS levels 21 percent higher than psychologists, 23 percent higher than mental health nurses and 34 percent higher than paramedics.

Despite the intensity of this impact, most educators received no formal support or training to manage STS.

Statements from educators are scattered throughout the

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report. One educator who had worked in a language centre for refugees stated: “War, murder, trauma, deaths at sea of siblings, violence, despair, self-harm, racism… there was so much these kids had to deal with. I didn’t realise the impact until I took leave. I have anxiety and more self-doubt than previously.”

Another, working in a Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP) setting, dealing with children with disabilities, autism, mental health and behavioural disorders, said eight students had passed away since she began working there. She said:

“Another hard part of working in an SSP is seeing student self-harm. Working closely with students that hurt themselves is so hard to do. You feel helpless when it happens and it happens multiple times a day, hitting themselves, hitting their head on the floor, pulling out their fingernails, picking at their cuts to make them worse. It is mentally exhausting and physically draining.”

The study found that STS accumulated over an educator’s career, contradicting the belief that experience builds resilience. Nearly 40 percent of the participants were considering leaving the profession due to overwhelming STS.

“When we started this research, no one in education was talking about STS—it was all about burnout and general wellbeing,” Fraser explained. He said STS was deeper than burnout, combining with it to lead to compassion fatigue, a debilitating state that drains empathy and leaves educators emotionally disconnected.

“It’s the cost of witnessing student trauma day after day, with no buffer, no outlet, and no support,” he explained. One of the most pressing difficulties was the lack of accessible services to support traumatised students—leaving teachers to shoulder the burden alone.

Research found that only one undergraduate program in Australia addressed STS, leaving new educators unaware of its emotional toll.

Taken together, the two studies show that teachers are being crushed by an ever-expanding administrative workload, while also being asked to deal with the increasing and complex social and emotional traumas of their students and families, a role for which they are largely untrained and unsupported.

The UNSW research also reported that rural and remote teachers reported far higher levels of depression than those in metropolitan schools. These communities, already disadvantaged by distance and scarce resources, were those where teachers struggled most.

The studies did not directly link traumatic stress to school socio-economic status, but in working-class communities teachers carry a heavier emotional load. With little systemic support, these schools are hit twice—by the hardships they face and by the erosion of the workforce.

The studies show that these conditions are worsening under the Albanese Labor government and its state counterparts. They continue to cut public education funding in real terms while funnelling billions into elite private schools and pouring billions more into military programs like AUKUS.

The teacher unions have played a pivotal role in enforcing these conditions. Through sell-out agreements on wages, workloads, and class sizes, they have not only suppressed resistance but also been complicit in exacerbating the crisis facing teachers. Other than advising that teachers report their conditions to the Education Department, they encourage teachers to take courses on classroom management—placing at the feet of individual educators the responsibility of dealing with the myriad social conditions of their charges. While posturing as defenders of educators they function as enforcers for government and corporate demands.

The problems go deeper, rooted in a capitalist system that prioritises profit over social need. While the studies call for reforms, what is required goes far beyond policy adjustments. The struggle for decent public education—and for healthcare and other essential rights—inevitably collides with the dictates of big business and finance capital.

To overcome the crisis and break the stranglehold of the Labor and the union bureaucracy, new organisations must be built. Rank-and-file committees (RFCs) of teachers, education support staff, parents and students are needed to share information, formulate demands and organise genuine collective action.

The fight for a free high-quality public education system, full resourced with trained staff, psychologists and health professionals, creating a positive and nurturing environment for all, cannot be separated from the fight against the capitalist order itself. That requires the development of a socialist leadership in the working class, uniting educators with broader layers of workers in the struggle for a society based on human need, not private profit.

To discuss these critical issues and how to form RFCs, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators’ rank-and-file network:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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