

INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF TEACHERS

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Theme:

Summary



English Teachers Association NSW

English Teachers' Association Response to Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into Teacher Recruitment and Training

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The English Teachers' Association of NSW (Inc.) is a professional teaching body, representing and acting as an advocate for the professional interests of secondary English teachers in NSW. ETA has over 2000 members, making it the largest professional teaching association in the country. ETA members working in government schools and members who are student teachers have welcomed the opportunity to contribute to this very important Inquiry.

This response was compiled by executive members of ETA council from feedback received from members working in government schools and student teachers on the terms of reference.

This is a general submission.

1. The best means of attracting quality teachers to NSW Public Schools and meeting the needs of school communities

The recruitment and retention of 'quality' teachers is a complex and fraught issue. It is the English Teachers' Association's (ETA) firm position that, in considering the secondary school context, the use of teacher in this term of reference needs to be accepted as being synonymous with 'subject specialist'. Every NSW student studying English has a right to be taught by a quality teacher who has been trained in the content *and* pedagogy of the subject and who, moreover, has a deep understanding of NSW English syllabuses and their theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings.

Feedback to ETA council from members in difficult to staff areas of NSW

(eg the outer western suburbs of Sydney and regional areas in the far west of the state) indicates that the recruitment and retention of English teachers is in a parlous state. The widely mooted and imminent teacher shortage in Australia suggests the existing state of affairs will most certainly become more drastic in the immediate future.

ETA members report that a day-to-day reality for many schools is the impossibility of placing a qualified English teacher – regardless of their ‘quality’ – in front of every secondary class. Members have communicated to ETA council that it is now quite common for teachers trained in other subjects to be teaching English to Years 7 – 10. Moreover, increasing numbers of overseas trained teachers, whose undergraduate studies and teacher training have not adequately prepared them for NSW syllabuses and who have been given only the most cursory orientation program by the NSW Department of Education and Training, are filling vacancies in difficult to staff areas of the state.

ETA members who have responsibility for supporting new teachers in secondary schools, as well as teacher education student members, have highlighted the deplorable resourcing of government schools, the patent failure of the NSW government to provide adequately professional working conditions that match those in the private sector and poor teacher morale as interrelated and crucial factors in the retention of early career teachers. It is a sad reality that early career teachers currently begin their careers in schools that are poorly maintained, lack computers (meaning they will have to share with other colleagues in their staffroom, with a ratio of 3 computers for every 10 teachers being common), in school buildings and classrooms that are generally not equipped for the demands of the 21st century. (For example, government school teachers in schools built before the late 1980s typically do not have ready access to ‘spaces’ that enable class and year groups to be quickly reconfigured or brought together. As such, school architecture has all sorts of implications for teaching and learning, and not least for timetabling, as fixed classes of fixed numbers, all receiving the same number of lessons becomes the norm by dint of a school’s inadequate design. Further, the vast majority of government school teachers do not have access to ICTs within their actual classroom for use in ‘short bursts’ and without the need to book a dedicated classroom- which will be rarely available.)

In recent years secondary teachers have been faced with great curriculum change and the introduction of new syllabuses. At the same time, successive restructures within the DET and inadequate government funding of professional support have stripped teachers of adequate and ongoing support.

ETA members remain outraged by the fact that the DET does not employ

7-12 English consultants given the fundamental changes new syllabuses have brought about in how English is taught in NSW schools. The government's failure to provide such 'on the ground support' to teachers has meant that teacher workloads have increased – and their good will stretched - as they have had to form and work through networks – including the ETA - to support each other, with much of this work being done in teachers' own time.

Support from the Department of Education and Training and Board of Studies has been described by English teachers as being partial and short-term. ETA members have found the Local Interest Group (LIG) model of training and development, which has been used by the DET during the implementation of new syllabuses, to be patently inadequate. It allows only two teachers from each school to receive training, and then requires them to return to school to share their learning with their colleagues in whatever time they can subsequently find to do so. In the past year, HSC English teachers have been concerned by the decision by the BOS, apparently as a result of a lack of funding, to cease the production and distribution of Standards Packages for their subject. Teachers had found these resources to be very useful in supporting their students leaning and in adjusting their teaching in line with the demands of a standards framework assessment regime.

It is a sad reality that the generally deplorable working conditions of government school teachers, and the lack of adequate professional support and resourcing during a time of extensive curriculum change, have done little to promote teacher morale. Student and early career teachers have suggested that they often find themselves in staffrooms that are less than happy places to be. Reflecting on her recent experiences as a student teacher, one ETA member put it in the following terms: "It is very difficult for beginning teachers to have to enter an environment in which their enthusiasm is seen as a type of dangerous naïveté!"

In response to the issues raised with regard to this term of reference, ETA recommends that the recruitment of quality teachers to NSW public schools be:

- a. understood in the secondary school context in terms of the recruitment of subject 'specialists', who have a highly developed understanding of the content and pedagogy of their subject specialisation
- b. considered in the context of, and with reference to, broader considerations of the professional status and appropriate remuneration of teachers, teacher morale, and the resourcing and ongoing maintenance of government schools. To this end, the Social Issues Committee should

address the recommendations of the (Vinson) Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW, sponsored by the NSW Teachers Federation and the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations.

2. The effectiveness and efficiency of current means of recruiting teachers to NSW Public Schools

ETA members who are teacher educators, student teachers, Head Teachers and Senior Executive continue to express alarm at the inefficiency and inflexibility of the staff recruitment processes of the DET relating to the employment of new graduates.

It is a sadly all too familiar tale now that the most able graduate teachers, many of who begin with an express desire to teach in government schools, take up positions in private schools because of the DET's failure to provide them with a firm and timely offer of employment. With a sizeable HECs debt and rent to be paid, many new teachers have no choice but to take up an early and guaranteed offer of employment in the non-government sector, as their only alternative would be to wait for an offer of employment from the DET that they have no guarantee of receiving by any given date.

The 'targeted graduate' scheme has not been wholly successful in addressing this issue, as graduates have reported in recent years that they have still been waiting uncertainly for notification of a position in the days before schools return for the new year. The DET's tardiness is, in effect, giving very able and enthusiastic teachers that they are not particularly valued by, and wanted, in the public system.

The ETA recommends that the government works with relevant stake holders such as the Department of Education, universities and the New South Wales Teachers' Federation to ensure that structures and processes are in place to ensure the timely employment of new graduates.

3. Differences and similarities between primary and secondary school recruitment needs

It is the position of ETA members that secondary school teachers are first and foremost subject specialists.

The Association would condemn any move towards 'generalist' teachers as a solution to teacher shortages in secondary English classrooms. This is a 'band aid' solution that is not in the best interests of students, particularly given the demanding nature of Stage 5 and HSC English. Teachers of English must have sound knowledge and understanding of the K-12 continuum of learning in the subject, and the implications this has

for how they teach and program English.

4. Existing initiatives and programs of the Department of Education and Training, including

(b) scholarships for undergraduates

ETA is supportive of scholarships for undergraduates.

(c) accelerated training courses

ETA members have indicated that every secondary English student has the right to be taught by an English specialist. This specialisation encompasses, within the requirements of the NSW English Syllabuses, broad and deep understanding of the content of the subject, as well as a sound grasp of the pedagogy of English as it is incorporated into the syllabuses, and a demonstrated ability to implement said content and pedagogy. Moreover, a quality specialist teacher will efficiently and effectively program subject content and modify pedagogy to meet the particular needs of individual learners in particular school contexts.

Accelerated training courses cannot provide teachers with the sort of subject and pedagogical knowledge necessary to be a true subject specialist. As such teachers who have been through an accelerated training course are not as well equipped to support the learning of their students within the demands of a k-12 continuum, and the lack of breadth of their training they cannot be adequately prepared to meet the demands of teaching in a particular school context.

For these reasons ETA rejects the notion that accelerated training courses are any sort of solution to existing problems in the training and recruitment of teachers.

5. The role of the NSW Institute of Teachers and its accreditation and endorsement requirements

ETA members have welcomed the formation of the Institute as a crucial step in raising the professional standing of teachers in the general community.

ETA would, however, point out that different responses by employers to the Institute has the potential to establish inequalities in employment conditions and to mitigate against efforts to attract quality teachers to the public system. The apparent move to have DET 'new scheme' teachers

undertake accreditation within their probationary year does not allow these teachers the same time to demonstrate 'competence' against a demanding set of standards as their colleagues in the non-government sector, who are likely to be given the full three years allowed by the Institute. Such a difference creates an unnecessary difference in the working conditions of teachers in different sectors.

The attrition rate amongst early career teachers demands that the difficulties experienced by these teachers be acknowledged and addressed. The accreditation process, centred as it is in demonstrated ongoing professional learning, is welcomed by ETA. However, ETA members see as necessary the need to reduce the teaching loads of new scheme teachers until they are accredited as competent. Government resourcing of this initiative would provide a welcome fillip to the professional learning of early career teachers, and ensure that they feel valued by the community.

The accreditation process further highlights the significant role that effective mentoring plays in the retention of early career teachers. ETA argues that this is an area of professional support that needs continued attention and resourcing. The employment of 'mentor' teachers in certain government schools around the state has been a welcome initiative that must be continued and expanded. Proper training and ongoing professional support for all mentors to new scheme teachers is a pressing demand.

In response to the issues raised with regard to this term of reference, ETA recommends that the recruitment of quality teachers to NSW public schools will be enhanced by:

- a. the implementation of the accreditation process for new scheme teachers in DET schools across the full 3 year period allowed by the Institute
- b. the provision of increased staffing to government schools to allow reduced teaching loads for new scheme teachers
- c. the extension of the existing mentor teacher program in government schools, and the resourcing of training and professional support for all mentors of new scheme teachers in schools where the current program does not operate.

6. The role, distribution and effectiveness of university pre-service education

ETA members who are student teachers have generally reported satisfaction with the method components of their courses. However, they

feel under prepared in the area of classroom discipline. Members have reported receiving no training in classroom discipline in their secondary teaching courses. Student teacher members report that while there is a commendable emphasis on reflection in many teacher training , it's impossible to "reflect in action" when one lacks the necessary "survival skills". This sentiment has been reinforced by feedback from members who have supervised student teachers, and have found them sorely wanting in practical knowledge of classroom management strategies.

Evidently, new teachers to the state's secondary schools are not adequately prepared for the realities of classroom teaching and the management of student behaviour. Further, ETA members have reported that they are appalled by the lack of ongoing support and supervision provided by universities for student teachers. Members suggest this failing can be substantiated by the incredibly high attrition rate within the first three years of teaching.

It has been the experience of ETA members that the university supervisors inadequately support student teachers during their school placements. Often student teachers are supervised by non-specialists in their subject (eg a Science trained supervisor for English teaching). The availability of university supervisors to student teachers and their school supervisors is also problematic. The university supervisor may make only one or two visits to a school, and these will be generally at a time of their own choosing, when a school supervisor may not be free.

The length of the practicum and their number can be an issue. These seem to vary from university to university. A common model appears to be a 4 week practicum for prospective secondary teachers of a particular subject. Such limited practical experience is all a student teacher will have in a subject area before being appointed, possibly to a difficult school with a high staff turnover or in an isolated, hard to staff regional school. This is hardly adequate preparation for a prospective professional practitioner. Student teachers need extended periods of time in a number of different schools.

In response to the issues raised with regard to this term of reference, ETA recommends that the recruitment of quality teachers to NSW public schools will be enhanced by:

- a. increased investment in pre-service teaching courses to enable a more than adequate level of preparation for aspiring teachers.
- b. the strengthening and increased resourcing of links between schools and universities during this pre-service training, equipping schools to provide 'on the job' training that complements the preparation provided by the universities
- c. the provision of appropriately trained and recognised mentors (within

and external to the school) for beginning teachers during their first three years of service

d. a reduction in teaching loads for beginning teachers

e. mandatory pre-service training in behaviour management

f. more uniform practices across universities with regard to the number of practicums undertaken by students and their length

7. Any other matter arising from these terms of reference

a. ETA suggests the inquiry should address the broader issue of career paths for teachers. Presently expert teachers who wish to remain in the classroom and not seek promotion into management roles do not receive official professional acknowledgment, status, and remuneration. An expanded notion of leadership could be a crucial factor in teacher retention by allowing effective and experienced teachers to be professionally recognised by their employer and the broader community.

b. The pressing teacher shortage makes imperative that new solutions be found to evident inequalities in the staffing of government schools. Beginning teachers and teachers new to the NSW system are most likely to begin their careers in schools whose students have the most demanding learning needs and the poorest outcomes as determined by standardised tests. This is a less than desirable state of affairs on both sides, and is exacerbated by the instability that is created by high staff turnovers. A significant finding of research into successful HSC teaching was the common factor of many years of service and a lengthy tenure in the one school. All stake holders need to enter into an open and ongoing dialogue that will allow a way to be found to attract and retain experienced teachers to hard to staff schools.