

Submission
No 125

INQUIRY INTO TEACHER SHORTAGES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission in response to the inquiry into teacher shortages in New South Wales

NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee NO.3 - Education

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Thank you for the invitation to provide research-based insights to the issues of teacher shortages across NSW schools.

We are researchers from the Faculty of Education at Monash University who have been involved with the research program *Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching in Australia*, which has been ongoing since 2019. This research program has included two surveys of over 8000 teachers in total as well as two representative surveys each of 1000 members of the Australian public. This submission will draw primarily from survey data collected in the 2019 and 2022 teacher surveys.

This submission focuses primarily on the following items from the **terms of reference** in relation to teachers' experiences of their work in Australian schools:

(b) future teacher supply and demand

(e) teaching workforce conditions

(i) the status of the teaching profession

Preamble

Excessive workload and resulting burnout are the most significant contributing factors to staff shortages across Australian schools. Our research has shown that the working conditions in many schools are driving passionate and highly effective teachers to leave their careers at great cost to students, communities, and governments.

Given this, the current crisis in teaching is unlikely to be solved by a focus on attraction strategies, but rather needs to focus on retention. Increased investment and innovative programs to attract "quality" school graduates, or those seeking to change careers into teaching, will not resolve the pressures that in-service teachers are facing. To secure the long-term staffing needs of schools in NSW, attention and resourcing need to be directed toward making the teaching profession an appealing and sustainable long-term career. If this is done with some haste, it might help slow the loss of the significant proportion of exhausted teachers who are currently considering leaving their jobs.

Policy responses to crises in education have commonly involved solutions that imply that teachers are the problem. The prevailing discourse advocates for improving 'teacher quality', often by way of increasing measures of performance and surveillance of teachers' work (Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022). The result has been a significantly increased workload, particularly on administrative tasks that require teachers to document their decisions and quantify teaching and learning in their classrooms. Current policy conditions are not sufficiently acknowledging or supporting the crucial and complex aspects of teachers work, such as, developing strong relationships with students and families, managing the emotional burden of supporting children and young people through life's difficulties, and, ensuring that the educative experiences of students in schools are broad and rich so that the future citizens of NSW are diversely skilled and capable to meet unknown challenges.

Our research

The Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching research program started in 2019. In that year, we surveyed 2444 Australian Teachers and a representative sample of 1000 members of the Australian Public (see the [full report of this project here](#)). In 2022, we revised the 2019 survey and invited teachers to complete it between May and June. The report of this project will be available in October 2022. This submission draws from the data collected from these two surveys.

Specific findings for NSW teachers

Table 1 shows the representation of NSW teachers who responded to the survey.

Survey	Total responses	NSW teachers
2019	2444	658
2022	5497	1176

In the 2022 survey, teachers from NSW who responded were diverse in terms of their background and their teaching context. A total of 42% reported they were in primary schools and 32% in secondary schools. 66% of NSW respondents worked in public schools and 15% in independent schools. 54% had been teaching for between 10 and 30 years and 36% for less than 10 years.

Preliminary findings from the 2022 data for teachers in NSW show:

- Only **20.8% of NSW teachers felt that the Australian public respects teachers**
- 94.3% of NSW teachers felt that **politicians do not respect teachers**
- 85.6% of NSW teachers felt that the **media does not respect teachers**
- Only **18.3% of NSW teachers indicated that they planned to stay in their careers until retirement.** 32.1% planned to leave within 5 years and a further 9% within 10 years. The remaining 37.5% either were unsure if they wanted to stay or selected the “other” response category. Analysis of the responses in the “other” category is not yet available, but we anticipate that it will follow similar trends to our 2019 survey where the majority of responses here indicated either plans to leave that did not fit in the provided category (e.g., “as soon as I can”) or that they would like to leave the profession if they could.

We have been able to do some initial comparisons of changes in response rates between 2019 and 2022 for NSW teachers. Preliminary findings indicate:

- **NSW teachers are less satisfied with their work** with 62.9% reporting satisfaction in 2019 declining to 35.5% reporting satisfaction in 2022
- **Notably fewer NSW teachers are finding their workloads manageable** with only 8.5% agreeing that workload is manageable in 2022, down from 21.9% in 2019. Further the intensity of concern about workload has increased. In 2019, 30% of NSW teachers strongly disagreed that their workload was manageable but in 2022, 50.5% strongly disagreed that their workload was manageable.
- The proportion of NSW teachers who would **recommend teaching as a career has fallen from 44% in 2019 to 24.5% in 2022.**

Comparisons of the two surveys show a strong alignment between the findings of NSW respondents and those in other Australian States and Territories. Thus, all further findings reported in this current submission will be drawn from data collected Australia-wide.

Reasons to leave teaching

The following section presents findings from the 2019 survey. This section draws from a paper published in the Australian Journal of Education (Heffernan et al., 2022). Analysis of the text responses of the 59% of

respondents that indicated a desire to leave the teaching workforce provided insight into the 'push' factors of teachers feeling that they were unable to stay in the profession.

- **Workload** was the most cited reason for intending to leave the profession. Teachers referred to workload pressures as 'excessive', 'unrealistic' and 'unsustainable'. Teachers reported that their workloads were intensifying and difficult to fit into a reasonable working week. Teachers specifically noted increases in 'administrivia' – the overburdening paperwork, administration, and reporting, which was seen as a mechanism of compliance and control – representing a lack of trust in teachers.
- **Health and wellbeing** related issues were the second most frequently mentioned issues cited. Respondents described the combination of increasing workload, and the increasing emotional intensity of teaching as leading to both mental and physical health issues, often categorised as 'burnout'.
- **Status and appreciation** was the third theme evident from the analysis of the reasons teachers gave for wanting to leave. Respondents described the demoralisation that results from negative messages from politicians and the media. The respondents reflected on how the broad lack of respect for their work manifested in daily experiences with parents and students.

Solutions focused on keeping teachers in the profession

In our 2019 survey, we asked respondents to suggest possible solutions that would help to manage the challenges of teaching. Their responses, unsurprisingly, mirrored the challenges identified that were driving them from the profession, specifically in suggestions to manage workload and raise the status and appreciation of teachers.

- **Workload mitigation** suggestions included revising the expansive curriculum requirements that require prescriptive planning to demonstrate coverage and reduction in the excessive data collection and reporting requirements. Reduced class sizes were suggested as was greater support in schools for the social and emotional needs of children and young people (for example more access to psychologists and wellbeing specialists in schools).
- **Enhancing the status of the profession by trusting and respecting teachers** was the second clear theme that emerged from analysis of solutions suggested. Respondents proposed that politicians and the media take responsibility to shift the narrative from 'teacher bashing' to a more nuanced and supportive portrayal of teaching that acknowledges the complex and challenging work. Comments also reflected on the demoralising aspect of the lack of trust that is indicated by the surveillance of teachers' work and suggested that a reduction in this burden would have a positive effect on teachers.

Early scans of the 2022 data indicate that many similar suggestions have been made. These include suggestions for specific actions to reduce the excessive workload burden. The 2022 respondents also noted the need to raise appreciation for the work of teachers, and in turn, move discourses of 'teacher bashing' both in the broad public domain and at the school level, to be seen as unacceptable and unfair.

Specific comments on the terms of reference items

(b) future teacher supply and demand

Our research, and that of others who consider these issues, suggests that the most productive way to ensure the future supply of excellent teachers for NSW schools is to improve the conditions experienced by teachers in their schools. Potential starting points are mitigating their workload, increasing mental health and wellbeing support at schools, and promoting respect and support from the public, especially from politicians and the media. Immediate attention to strategies that might retain the many teachers thinking about leaving their profession are needed more than calls for better quality teacher training or attracting higher quality candidates. The exceptional, dedicated, highly trained and skilled teachers who are crucial to the

sustainability of schools in NSW need support now. Recognising, supporting, and celebrating these teachers will not only stem the flow of teachers leaving the profession, but also lead to it being a more attractive career choice for future teachers.

(e) teacher workforce conditions

Our research has demonstrated that the current conditions for teachers are untenable and unsustainable for many serving teachers and it is likely that the current teachers shortages will be exacerbated in the coming years. This is evidenced not only by our surveys, but by data that describes teacher shortages and the loss of teachers from the profession already. Improving these conditions must be the priority of any response in order to avoid a deepening crisis.

(i) the status of the teaching profession

Teachers feel underappreciated and the status of the profession is undermined by negative discourses perpetrated by politicians and the media (Mockler, 2022). Teachers enter the profession, not for high salaries or status, but because they are committed to supporting children and young people to learn, grow and live happily and healthily into the future (Watt et al., 2017). However, demoralisation from a lack of trust and respect erodes their goodwill and commitment. Purposeful attention to the ways that teachers and teaching are discussed in the public arena by high profile stakeholders is crucial. With a more positive and respectful understanding of the work of teachers, they will have the required support, freedom, and passion to do their best work. This will not only reduce the numbers of teachers who want to leave, but it will also improve the learning experiences of students and lead to the profession being more attractive for future teachers.

Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry and commend the NSW government on acknowledging and seeking to address the teacher shortage issues. Our research clearly indicates that efforts to address this issue need to focus on retention, rather than on attracting new entrants to the profession. Systemic change is needed to address the flow of teachers leaving the profession. Responses need to be considered from short- and long-term views in order to develop a sustainable teaching workforce.

Yours sincerely,

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