

INQUIRY INTO TEACHER SHORTAGES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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**NSW Parliamentary Inquiry
Teacher Shortages in New South Wales**

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In 1991 I emerged from Macquarie University with a Teaching Degree, full of hopeful anticipation and thrilled beyond measure to be entering such a noble profession as Teaching.

I knew then, as I know now, that the job of educating the next generation is a crucial one. I believed, perhaps naively, that my own values around education would be similar to those I would find practised in the profession I had chosen. I expected to work alongside other Teachers who were filled with the same passion and vigour as I was, all with the common goal of instilling a love of learning in our students, nurturing their natural curiosity and inspiring them to consider that their worlds were filled with endless possibilities.

For many years that is exactly what I experienced, though in a casual /temporary capacity that did not lend itself to the job security that I needed. As a sole parent on a casual Teacher's wage, I was unable to provide adequately for my family, nor live with the anxiety that insecure work is renowned for.

In the last decade of my Teaching career, there appeared to have been a seismic shift. The plethora of casuals seriously declined and permanent Teachers began leaving the profession in large numbers.

Routinely I speak with teachers who are becoming increasingly disillusioned with what they truly believed was their natural vocation. Overworked and underpaid, diminishing time for their students as they become ever more bogged down in a testing regime, and laborious administration, the inability to find secure, permanent jobs and then add to this the last 8 years or so of a steady decline in the number of students enrolling in teaching, falling by almost 30% - and we have a crisis on our hands.

In 2015 I was elected to represent the Blue Mountains electorate in the NSW Parliament and consequently, left teaching behind. It has remained an area of great interest for me. I stay informed about what is happening in the education sector and prioritise the fostering of connection with my local school community. I continue to advocate tirelessly for our local schools and the teaching profession more broadly - for increased pay and improved working conditions, for upgrades to essential infrastructure and, most relevant to this inquiry, the critical need for an adequate, ongoing supply of Teachers.

The past couple of years have been tough, not least of all on students and teachers. Navigating the pandemic has been an art form as schools, with the briefest of timeframes, set their students up to learn online. The learning environment changed, seemingly overnight, and it must be said that, despite these new demands, Teachers and students and parents arose bravely to the challenge. We know, however, that the unfolding of the industry crisis we see today began years before any of us were even giving a thought to COVID-19.

What I hope for with this Inquiry is that it delves deeply into why NSW is facing this Teacher shortage crisis and that serious consideration is given to not only recent years but also, life before the pandemic. The layers to this issue run deep and there is a myriad of reasons why our education system finds itself where it is today.

It could be argued that the overarching problem is the very model under which our education system operates. Gabbie Stroud sums it up succinctly in her Guardian article on 27 June 2022: *"Why does a teacher shortage occur? Ultimately, it is because our education system is operating under a business model which treats students and parents as customers and teachers as expendable workers expected to function as told, rather than as autonomous professionals tasked with the unique and complex responsibility of guiding young people's learning."*

Teachers have been speaking up for years. They do not feel valued, they feel their expertise is ignored and there seems to be a misleading narrative that many of the problems would simply disappear if teachers just did their jobs better.

Increasingly, Teachers are expected to care for children with a multitude of needs whilst juggling the day-to-day, overloaded curriculum. On the NSW Government Education website it states, quite simply, in the section Roles and Responsibilities for a Classroom Teacher that "Each teacher holds primary responsibility for the learning of every student in the class." This simple statement holds not even the slightest indication of an understanding of the breadth and volume of complex tasks Teachers are expected to undertake, in and out of the classroom.

In the same article a Teacher who is choosing to retire early states:

"My days are filled with behaviour management, the bombardment of emails, writing programs, marking work, giving feedback, reporting to parents, setting student goals, writing individual programs, attending meetings and professional development to remain registered. And, dare I forget, the uploading of data into the system before deadline. If only I could just teach!"

Further to unsustainable workloads, the casualisation of roles within the education sector has undoubtedly been a major contributor to a shortage of teachers. If you diminish the stability of the workforce, you diminish the incentive for those contemplating entering it. The attractiveness of a sector for future employment is undoubtedly linked to the uptake of those who choose to invest in training for that sector, therefore it is hardly surprising that we see a steady decline in those choosing to gain a qualification in Teaching.

I note in a Sydney Morning Herald published on July 28 that Minister for Education and Early Learning, Sarah Mitchell is quoted as saying, "We need to be doing a better job of promoting the benefit of a career in NSW Public Education." I agree with that statement however it leads me to point out that the NSW Government, in the first instance, needs to improve the conditions of and expectations placed on our educators before they have something they can, in good faith, promote.

Whilst I acknowledge there is no quick fix to issues that have been problematic for many years, there are steps that can be taken immediately to set about rescuing the education sector.

The restoration of respect and a sense of feeling valued can be relatively quickly restored if Teachers are given a seat at the table when any decisions are being made that affect their profession. Who better to consult than those on the frontline?

It is my hope that this Inquiry's findings will essentially shine a light on what we already know and that the subsequent recommendations will be sound, practicable and wholly supportive of a profession that deserves so much more.

I offer up the following three observations and recommendations, from my own experiences over nearly three decades as a classroom Teacher; comments from the many Teachers in the Blue Mountains (an electorate with the highest percentage of trained Teachers in NSW); and, finally supporting the call to action from my professional association, the NSW Teachers Federation, of which I am still proudly a member.

1. Structural inequities are entrenched in the Teaching profession: uncompetitive wages/salaries and pay that has stagnated. There is (and has been for decades) a lack of permanency; with a crisis looming, a heavy reliance on casual & temporary staff (who had no stability). This systemic failure must be overhauled and rectified urgently. Recruit our casual and temporary Teaching profession, those who have been the glue, holding schools together, for decades – then retain these Teachers with decent, permanent salaries!
 - Recruit and retain and incentivise Teachers, with increased pay.
2. Unsustainable workloads: the expectation to test students incessantly, to grade them and rate them and report on them detracts from time needed to teach them. This demand on Teachers, with classroom numbers growing, and some very difficult students, makes Teaching time almost impossible. Collegiality and year-groups/stages cooperating as teams sharing units of work has been replaced by the competitive, individualistic, promotional system in the Staff room. Teacher burnout has serious consequences across the profession, in the lives and mental ill-health of those teachers. Teachers, for some decades now, offering extra hours before and after school and on weekends, as a goodwill gesture – has become common practise – and must be rectified. Morale is at an all-time low, so teacher shortage is not a surprising outcome.
 - Have an independent review (or refer to the plethora of evidence in previous reviews) of administrative task allocations: slash these hours
3. Instead of undermining Teachers, unfairly criticising them for 'deficiencies of the system', Government (alongside mainstream media) must embark on an awareness-raising campaign, acknowledging the quality of educators and the many long hours dedicated to preparation, marking, gathering resources, liaising with community, colleagues and parents, and teaching.
 - The story and value and necessity of Teachers must be told, and with respect.

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