

**Submission
No 146**

INQUIRY INTO TEACHER SHORTAGES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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I only taught in China from August 2019 until July 2020, but stayed in Australia to teach online for 6 months. Afterwards, I went on to get a job at the Sydney Childrens Hospital School, a school for specific purposes, then a one-year contract with Glenwood High School. Luckily, I received a permanency at a north shore high school just before my contract expired.

It was a long time coming, over a decade, getting a permanent position at a metropolitan school that would not destroy my love of teaching. What has helped over the past 2 years was the realtor I managed to find. This realtor prioritised frontline workers with a 20% reduction of market value on an apartment I am renting close to my school. If it was not for that, I would be living in Blacktown with my parents. Currently, my daily commute is approximately 50mins, to and from school. It was "promised," I think back in 2014, that the NSW government would provide new apartments that would be built for teachers, nurses and police officers. They would be cheap and built specifically to help live closer to their employment, but this never eventuated. The shared equity scheme was just announced 2 weeks ago by this new government, but since my profession has been burned in the past, I see little hope this time around.

This diatribe might reveal some new information as to the whys and hows of teaching in NSW. There are grandiose ideals held by a lot of university lecturers and tutors who may or may not have been in a classroom for a long time, but are leaders in their fields of research. These ideals bleed into what a university education student believes it will be like in a classroom. During the last two years in the degree, usually, there comes a time when these ideals are tested. Students are sent to schools as a “prac teacher” for relevant experience. Luckily, mine held firm, but that did not stop me, and others like me, from resenting the university administration for making me travel unnecessary distances. During these times, uncertainty come into play.

“Will there be a guaranteed job after my degree?”

“Is teaching really for me?”

Short answers: Not really and yeah, it probably is, if you have made it this far.

The first answer is based on supply and demand, as most schools in the metropolitan areas need teachers with experience to uphold their standards (whatever those standards may be). Out of sixty graduating students teaching English in 2012 at UNSW, only four students were given a full-time start in their desired suburbs (one of them being a targeted graduate/super teacher).

Teaching is not for the weak. As a point of reference, the “average” student, in a public school, would like to learn. In fairness to that statement, students usually like to learn from somebody they like and respect but this does not come built into the job, it must be earned. Baptism of fire, climbing Everests, absurdities in executive policies, looming accreditation or other bureaucracies and number crunching activities do not help with the actual “teaching” section of this profession.

Knowing how to navigate relationships with students matters more in the first year out. [First, know the content. Second, deliver the content in a way that’s not boring to you or the students. Third, learn to compromise with what you are able to achieve in the classroom (discipline, at least one skill/thing learned per lesson, engagement with the topic/s, etc).]

Now to address the income issue in its totality: teachers do not get paid enough unless they are willing to bear the brunt of negative stereotypes in outback/rural NSW has to offer. Rural teachers get paid over \$100000 because of several allowances. What the recruitments drives fail to mention are the isolation factors, which turns out to be a sink-or-swim situation. Rural teachers that live at least five hours away from larger town/city centres do get paid more, but at what cost to them? Social life. Loneliness. Forms of entertainment reduced to alcoholism ... I admit, these are extreme but not out of the norm. So the simple answer to address the overall income issue is to raise salaries for teachers, which seems impossible because lobbyists cannot make money from education but can totally do so with politicians, which is in accordance with capitalism. Most politicians graduate with degrees in law, economics or politics, so it is no surprise that the people chosen as a Minister for Education in NSW have never been actual educators in a classroom trying to teach Pythagoras, dove-tail joints, circle of fifths, the Domino Effect and other content to students.

Now to teachers within our society and how they are seen. A majority of Australians know what school is or was like. As a generalisation, someone who has been born and bred within Australian, who have had a lot of privileges handed to them, will most likely show more respect to the profession if they know a relative who is a teacher. Immigrants, however, know not to take education lightly. There are thirty-four pages in a government document called “A Class Act” that outlines what the majority thinks teachers are to Australian society. It is quite grim. There are some main reasons as to why and they are mostly rooted in trust. Parents want more transparencies as to the goings on in a school setting. Fair enough. Most students are not told adequate reasons as to why they are studying what they are studying and that frustrates them. Fair enough. Politicians have

used issues in education to get votes and then discard their commitments after skim reading the central issues of teacher status. Not fair. But things should work out for them, they were voted in and got what they wanted.

Pathways for teachers to get a substantial job once graduated and still starry-eyed: stay in Australia or leave. I chose to leave for two years because that is how long the UK visa lasted. Kids are kids everywhere you go but some communities know better than others that education can break the cycle of poverty. As an Australian, apparently, I was “so far removed from what they hate” that I was a novel addition to their school, which would usually work to an advantage. The cycle most freshly graduated teachers, in metropolitan areas, have to deal with is casual work and uncertainty; university does not prepare you for this. All the while this is happening, friends your age have started towards a home loan deposit with their full-time jobs, engagements/marriages and enjoying their chosen careers that are not at all related to teaching.

After having those two years experience in the UK, it was time to come home and then move again for a school that would have me, a rural coastal town where the spirit of the seventies still live on (van life, shoulder length hair on ten year old boys, casual drug usage and bong bushes all around). Moving with a partner who does not have the same job opportunities will be extremely difficult, though not impossible. Attaining property is somewhat achievable if both parties are working full-time, either in a full-time or permanent-part-time position, so renting is the way to go. How can a teacher get a permanent contract? By jumping through metaphorical rings of fire. A majority of contracts are yearly and teachers are hired on a permanent-part-time basis, both in public and private schools. How many loans can be approved with a financial situation like this? Car and personal (up to \$20,000) come to mind.

Currently, my two-year stint in the UK has allowed me to successfully apply for an international school in the Middle Kingdom/China where teachers are revered, gifts are given regularly enough and students do as they are told immediately without much back-chat. This has its disadvantages: long way from home, isolation due to the language barrier, culture shock, different bureaucracies involved and different executive expectations. This type of move is not for everyone because the quality of life is so different, however, the school pays over 70% of your annual rent, food is a lot cheaper and you only pay around \$8500 in taxes for the whole year.

So then, quick maths based on the \$70,000 average teacher salary, which in itself is a damning indictment of how well Australian society values its teachers.

26 fortnightly payments a year

\$550 = tax taken per fortnight

\$200 = superannuation payment

Average = typical for a single person, not cohabiting or living as a single-parent

$70000 \div 26 = \$2692.31$ (rounded to the second decimal point)

$2692.31 - 550 - 200 = \$1942.31$ after tax into your bank account

Weekly rent “average” = \$290

$290 \times 52 = \$15080$

Rent deposit is four weeks and two weeks of payment in advance.

$$290 \times 6 = \$1740$$

Yearly car registration (\$1000), fuel (\$50 per week) and maintenance (\$300 three times a year).

$$1000 + (50 \times 52) + (300 \times 3) = \$4500$$

Yearly bills (internet & phone, water and electricity “average”).

$$150 \times 12 + 150 \times 4 + 150 \times 4 = \$3000$$

TOTALS

$$1942.31 \times 26 = \$50500.06$$

$$15080 + 1740 + 4500 + 3000 = \$24320$$

No medical bills/insurance, car insurance/emergency maintenance, home upkeep necessities, HECS debt repayments, food or hobbies/interests/activities/clothes are included in these calculations, but just to make a case, let us all assume that a single person will be able to save \$15000 a year on “average.” These equations also assume that this person already has a fully paid off car, no personal loans or credit cards to pay off at the end of every month.

Despair not, however, for once proficiency accreditation, after “graduate status” out of university, is out of the way, which is government code for “just good enough,” the pay jumps up by \$10000. People in the old step system, like me, make \$2500 a year extra on top of the base salary and then caps out around \$95000 a year, even after getting that just good enough proficiency status. Males are dropping out of the profession quickly because of this kind of salary and the perception that since working with children seems strange, the label/fear of the word “paedophile” is always a concern. Imagine a twenty-two year old male teacher calling a girl in her mid-teens “sweetie,” even in the most encouraging and appropriate contexts, young men won’t be able to pull this off as well as a female counterpart at the same age. It will just feel *off*. That is most likely the perception they are seen as.

Why are test results so low? It is not because the quality of teaching is down, this has been obvious for years but teachers are usually quite polite and will not say much on the matter, it is because students fail to engage themselves with the schoolwork. They see very little benefit in putting effort towards learning difficult abstract concepts that have very little real-world, day-to-day use. Mathematics as an example: average students’ eyes start glazing over when letters are introduced into equations at the end of year 7. What those students do not realise enough is that basic mathematics paves way for higher order thinking, other higher paying careers. Fast-forward a few years to their important exams and suddenly the teacher is to blame for “not teaching them enough.”

The solution to a lot of these problems I have come up with is already being undertaken, but only at a small scale and only in the outback. Centrelink payments are forestalled in some schools once the principal reports that students are not achieving sufficient attendance. Now imagine a small school with 500 negative reports in their system, from low level disruptions and up to serious incidents, like cyber bullying or physical harm. Teachers and students bear the brunt of most of that. Teachers because they have to rectify the problems caused and the actual time for teaching is severely reduced. Now it has been written and said many times before, those in this profession love teaching, once a majority of that is taken away and replaced with something else, like number crunching, red

tape administration or behavioural management, which includes report writing, what is there left to love at school? Students bear the brunt because their time and learning has been taken away.

Now think of how helpful parents are in actually raising their children to behave properly. Combine where all this is going and I propose that parents are now to be held accountable for the learning that is *not* taking place. Have they done their best at disciplining? To be a real community, consequences should be felt by all the stakeholders involved. If one student is responsible for 100 negative reports out of the earlier example of 500 (and I have seen students go up to 200+ in a span of two terms at school), I propose that the parents have not shown their child how responsibilities/respect works in the real world or at least in a family situation, in the same way that the students in the outback are not disciplined into raising their attendance/learning at school. It is either forestalling of payments or a single digit percentage deduction of annual wages on the parents' part that goes to the school. That is how some of Gonski should be funded. I do not see lobbyists wanting to save education any time soon nor the military budget dropping. If someone is a parent of a decent student that causes, for example, less than 5 minor disruptions in a year, they would have nothing to worry about when their next pay arrives because nothing will be deducted, either they have raised their child correctly or their child is not causing any time-wasting in class.

Is this ethical? Maybe. Will this make students behaviour more cohesive? Most likely. Do I have any peer-reviewed and concrete evidence that this will work? No, but at least this answer comes from a teacher, not a politician. Real talk. No politician has fought the same battles I have in classrooms full of teenagers, none of them have the same scars, too. As an aside, I have taught classrooms (plural and during the same scholastic year) where students had racked up a total of 350 or so disruptions throughout the school year (throwing objects, excessive talking and eating in class, graffiti, fighting, swearing at other teachers, not returning library books, skipping detentions, incomplete classwork nearly every day – lots of homework not submitted, too). But also, no politician has had the same victories and it is in those victories that I still keep on teaching to this day.