**Submission No 179**

# INQUIRY INTO TEACHER SHORTAGES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Name:** Name suppressed

**Date Received:** 19 July 2022

---

**Submission to NSW Parliamentary Inquiry**
**into the School Teacher Shortage**

I have little doubt that the scale of the current crisis has been influenced by the pandemic, in exactly the same way that many other professional and other areas of the workforce have been similarly affected. There are parallels to be drawn here between teachers, and aged care workers, nurses, doctors, university lecturers, and others. Some of the problems are identical.

At the same time, however, these problems are systemic, they are all primarily due to government neglect or policies causing rather than solving problems, they have long historical origins, and they have been widely known for many years. None of these problems has in fact been *caused* by the pandemic.

One common element in all of these is the inadequacy of employment and working conditions, and the worsening problem of job insecurity, combined with the similarly worsening disparity between incomes and costs of living – which should include everything that we are expected to be able to pay for out of our earned income, including rents and mortgages, energy bills and medical expenses, to accrue sufficient superannuation and to save for retirement – and now also food prices. It should be possible for *every* Australian to be able to reasonably cover all of their costs of living out of their earned income, without major household debt, and over the long-term, which requires reasonable job security and dramatically improved industrial relations – or government better regulating these issues to ensure their fairness. This is not compatible with or sustainable through the worsening plague of casualization and gig employment, including for teachers, or with people being employed on minimum wages. The four reports of the Senate Select Committee on Job Security should be convincingly addressed by governments.

All professionals whose exercise of their profession requires continued employment to remain up-to-date in those professions must be permanently employed and adequately remunerated. If government or employers expect such professionals to always be available during periods of increased 'demand', then they must ensure that such professionals are adequately supported during other periods; the usual means of doing so is by continued employment irrespective of fluctuating 'demand', not by forcing them into other employment or to depend upon Centrelink during lean periods. Existing

welfare support is not remotely sufficient to provide such support. Casualization is not compatible with such professional work, either in teaching or in anything else.

Obviously, in view of the staff shortages caused by COVID-19 and infected people off sick and forced into isolation, these types of shortages could only have been ameliorated or sufficiently managed if we had ensured before the pandemic that we always had sufficient people continuously employed in these professions under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, neither state nor federal governments have been willing to sufficiently invest in maintaining adequate staffing numbers on a permanent basis. Everybody knows that there will be times when we have a potential surplus of teachers or nurses or others, that demand and employment cycles fluctuate, but we have to be willing to pay for that surplus if we are to survive more challenging times as well. As we are now seeing, you will not have enough people whenever they are needed if you are not willing to invest in them permanently. We should also not be depending on international recruits, educated at the expense of other countries and often needed by them, to do work here that we should have enough Australians to do.

It is equally apparent that government has not ensured that every school is properly ventilated and that other measures necessary for the containment of the virus, or for online-distance learning, have been fully implemented, while safety measures desired by teachers and other staff have been undermined by governments' desire to return to 'normal' over the needs of the community and risks of continuing infections.

This insufficient and insecure employment situation was not always the case as it now is, which means that changes to funding and employment conditions that have occurred in recent decades have made the situation worse than it should be.

Teachers and members of the public have been very conscious for many years of a range of problems in our schools. These include:

• low salaries

• insecure employment, and in some cases reportedly forced early retirements of highly experienced teachers

• lack of career advancement opportunities

• unresolved employment and other issues around LGBTIQ+ questions, including as they affect students, particularly in religious schools

• excessive workloads, including growing administrative tasks, and insufficient properly paid preparation time

• large class sizes

• apparently worsening discipline problems, including personal risk to teachers (see further below)
• lack of resources and poor building maintenance
• increased managerialism in school administration and governance
• poor public perception and appreciation of teaching as a profession and as a public service
• excessive testing of students, with persistently mediocre results
• political interference in school curricula and other topical issues
• constantly changing regulations and theories from education departments, and lack of professional expertise of and consultation by bureaucrats
• public expectations that teachers should assume ever-growing roles outside of the classroom as well as addressing subjects in the classroom that should rightfully be dealt with by parents (there is, therefore, a growing tendency to transfer parental responsibilities onto teachers), and an attitude that schools should be responsible for solving every problem experienced by our children for which they are utterly ill-equipped and in many cases should never be responsible
• teachers being expected to teach subject classes for which they have no qualification
• poor support for the integration of children with a variety of disabilities into 'normal' classes
• poor support for schools with high immigrant student populations and where English has not been acquired and is not the first language of students
• insufficient students from the Indigenous community, of recent immigrant background, and from low SES backgrounds qualifying as teachers and being appropriately employed
• an entire system that *causes* mental health problems instead of preventing and supporting them
• higher demands for teacher qualifications and continued in-house workshops etc. many of which are a waste of time and not always remunerated
• and poor university education of teachers themselves (see further below).

This list is not exhaustive. What it nonetheless demonstrates is the sheer scale of the problem, and the extent to which no government seems to have accepted responsibility for preventing these problems from ever occurring in the first place, let alone allowing them to persist over so many years with no credible response.

I had myself at one time considered becoming a high school teacher, having a PhD and 15 years of international experience as a university lecturer and researcher. However,

I quickly relinquished any idea of becoming a teacher, as none of my past experience or qualifications would have counted for anything, I would have started at the bottom of the career ladder and on a salary a fraction of what I would have been earning as a lecturer/researcher, and probably never progressed very far up it. Although I believe I could have made a valuable contribution particularly for students in Years 11-12, including better preparing them for university, it is unlikely that existing structures would have allowed much innovation or relevant input. The demands of teaching would have precluded any further more academic work I still hoped to pursue, and I would not have been eligible for financial assistance to complete a further, mandatory teaching qualification. That is without having also considered how toxic the teaching environment now is.

There is the problem of discipline. Growing numbers of serious discipline problems among students are arguably caused by a broader palette of socio-economic problems within the community, including the families from which those children come. It is unreasonable to expect schools or teachers to have to solve these socio-economic problems, but it is equally unacceptable that teachers should be confronted with them, with no effective means of managing them. This would then require governments to assume more responsibility for ensuring that all Australians, not only teachers, actually have adequate and meaningful employment, a decent life-work balance, job security, and adequate incomes and housing, irrespective of what job anybody does, and far more adequate welfare support as needed than is currently available. From this perspective, supporting teachers means better supporting the entire population.

Children with various learning and other difficulties are too easily regarded by teachers not suitably qualified to understand and support them and lacking adequate supports as 'discipline problems', and subjected to unnecessary punitive measures that traumatise the children and perpetuate their difficulties, rather than helping them.

There is also considerable evidence that many children's mental health has been worsening over many years – well before COVID-19. Of course, the nature of such problems is diverse, some very serious and continuing, others less challenging and more temporary. Nonetheless, we do know what many of the causes of these problems are. They include growing anxiety about climate change and the awareness that they will have to live in a permanently worsening environment, that many of them will never over the entire course of their working lives obtain and be able to retain careers doing what they are interested in or good at or motivated to do, irrespective of how many qualifications

they earn (often partly at their own expense), and that they will not be able to earn enough to support a decent standard of living and a family, or to purchase their own home. These are all now very entrenched socio-economic and employment problems which our children are very well aware of, many of them already living with parents struggling with exactly the same problems. The pandemic has exacerbated numerous problems that already existed, enormously increasing both children's and adults' sense of insecurity in multiple ways, which still do not appear to have attracted sufficient political comprehension or a willingness to address the causes of that insecurity; an unresolved sense of insecurity then causes multiple additional problems that each need to be addressed as well. If governments refuse to address or even consider the family and social environments from which children come and within which they are expected to learn, then it is entirely predictable that there will remain chronic behavioural and learning problems in our schools, which then provide an often insurmountable challenge for teachers – who too often face many of the same problems in their own lives.

We still have a high number of children (and their parents) living in poverty in one of the most affluent countries in the world, and despite repeated recognition of this fact over more than 30 years and repeated promises to end poverty, we have signally failed to do so. No Australian government has ever taken sufficiently seriously any of these problems or their permanent impact upon mental health or the social fabric, but many if not all Australian governments have continued to allow these problems to get ever worse, despite the evidence of them, as well as pursuing policies that directly cause or exacerbate them.

There are other known cohorts with serious mental health problems, such as children and young people who identify as LGBTIQ+ who have the highest suicide rate of any group in this country (their problems begin even before puberty and therefore fall well within their school years), and many of whom are not as well supported as they need to be, and who continue to experience prejudice and discrimination. There is obviously a high incidence of children experiencing and being traumatised for life by domestic violence, who so far have not even received serious political attention as victims in their own right and who are definitely not well supported by our public health system or anywhere else. Few mental health professionals properly understand or are suitably qualified to support trauma, which is often entirely overlooked when people present with more immediate and challenging symptoms. Australia has now had five 5-year national mental health and suicide prevention plans, as well as other policy foci upon youth

mental health and suicide in particular, none of which have had any tangible impact upon anything, and we are about to commence the sixth. We have an obsession with youth mental health and suicide, we have had any number of other studies of mental health problems, numerous not-for-profit organisations working in this space, and yet none of it has made any difference! The principal reason for this obstinate failure is arguably that most responses concentrate not on preventing or reducing actual *causes* of problems but only on managing symptoms once the damage has been done, and even that is not done well.

Once again, therefore, addressing school-related issues would also mean addressing a far broader range of other socio-economic and mental health problems as well amongst the entire population, including teachers themselves. Our children must be able to see that they have a future that is worth living, that they want to and can actually live it, that it is worth their working to achieve, and that they live in a society that values all of their achievements and properly supports them, no matter what their abilities are, not a promised future that many of them will never have. They must be able to grow up in security and with enough to eat, in decent housing, adequate clothes, positive social life, and other resources, and within a society that is inclusive and which treats them all as equal human beings. How we treat our children influences what teachers are forced to cope with, and if teachers are to be helped, then our children should be far better treated by everybody who bears responsibility for their well-being. How we treat our children today also defines the society we will all have tomorrow.

We also know that the high level of testing now conducted in our schools is an added burden and cause of considerable anxiety for children, which it should not be. Insofar as none of these tests seem to have qualitatively improved anything over many years, it should be asked whether they are necessary at all. Certainly, the conditions under which they occur, the pressures that children and teachers feel to perform, and the inadequacy of their general education which such tests are supposed to measure (which is often neglected so that teachers can specifically prepare their students for such tests) all need to be fundamentally reassessed.

I do not endorse the knee-jerk political response of offering token financial enticements to attract more people to qualify as teachers, for example, the proposal of the previous federal government to offer one-off $5-10,000 payments to such students. This is in itself flagrantly insulting. Such 'incentives' completely fail to address the real causes of these problems, they do not guarantee that any graduates will then find the

profession any better than it was previously, and there is just as much probability that graduates so enticed will also leave the profession. Problems must be fully addressed and resolved as the problems they are, and the real problems influencing teacher shortages are in our entire education system itself.

It is unlikely that significantly more students will be attracted to become teachers, no matter how motivated they might otherwise be, until *all* of these problems are addressed, and obviously, they must be addressed immediately, before we have an entire generation of children so poorly taught that they might just as well have been home schooled, or not even bothered to have attended school.

We have many qualified and often experienced teachers in the community who have left the profession because it has become so toxic and unsustainable, but also who have sometimes reportedly been forced into early retirement. Those people could be recruited immediately, if the terms of their re-employment addressed their grievances and ensured that the reasons why they had left were fully resolved. There are many other appropriately qualified people such as myself, albeit without the requisite teaching qualification, in the community who could in principle also be recruited, if their concerns were also addressed and if their path into school teaching could be eased.

As with all major policy areas, there are chronically unresolved problems in the relationship between the Commonwealth on the one hand, and the states and territories on the other, affecting our schools, especially with respect to funding. The Gonski review was not perfect, did not adequately address all problem areas, and would need to be emended or expanded in its recommendations. Nonetheless, we do need a major overhaul in our funding models and in the sufficient allocation of funding to every school, and a full commitment to implement recommended reforms on a continuing basis.

It is utterly inexplicable, if Liberal/Coalition governments are themselves concerned about education, and if they have expectations of our education system, that they have been unwilling either to fully commit to the funding demands (and other needs) of such a system or to provide a functionally better model. These matters should enjoy bipartisan commitment and be above politicking and ideological agendas. I believe that many Australians are heartily sick of the failure to resolve such issues and of the manner in which everything becomes such a political football, especially with education and health that affect all of us. We want, and need, solutions.

An adjunct issue here is the persistent issue of our non-government schools and the share of funding that they receive. Australia is the only developed country with a major private school system, that has used those private schools as the cheaper option instead of fully and continuously funding a public school system capable of properly educating every Australian child to Year 12 to best international standards, irrespective of postcode. We have never had such a system, but many other countries with higher rankings and obviously better practice have virtually no private schools at all, which means that their public school systems are much better funded by government than ours have ever been. In many cases, other countries have invested far more and more effectively in their public education systems, including their teachers, virtually since the introduction of mandatory schooling, than Australia ever has. The UK and the US, the two countries with the closest resemblance to our dual public-private school system, have 8% of their children in private schools, whereas we have an estimated 34%. This is patently absurd and unacceptable. If we are going to retain the system as it is, with continued levels of public funding for private schools, then clearly all governments must spend considerably more on the public schools – or dramatically cut their funding of private schools, force them to become financially more self-sufficient or to transition into public schools, and transfer that money to public schools. There are long-standing political and other causes of this problem, which need to be radically re-considered.

A secular democracy should not have this level of religious influence persisting in its education system; such interest and lobby groups should not exercise such influence on government policy to the detriment of the rest of the community; and political parties should not pander to such influences for their own advantage, and thereby also undermine and corrupt due democratic process, or pursue ideologically driven agendas.

One difference here is that other countries accept concepts of 'public goods' that should be sufficiently or fully funded by government, and this includes all education, whereas Australia does not recognise any such notion of 'public goods' in that sense and has always sought to reduce public spending instead of maintaining or increasing it; this has often been a politically or ideologically motivated choice, which ought to have no place in public service delivery. Refusal to spend what is needed guarantees poor outcomes – which, one would have thought, would have been one of the first principles of traditional liberal economics.

It might be suggested that there are tensions in our public and political attitudes towards education, and that these also cause problems, including for teachers. Motivated

teachers will be passionate about their subjects, and they will want to teach their subjects as knowledge that has intrinsic value of its own, irrespective of what that is knowledge of. Our national approach to education, however, under-values knowledge in this sense, we frequently do not make appropriate use of knowledge available to us as a society, and we therefore also under-value the motivations of our teachers, because we are too focussed on knowledge by implication only having value when it serves employment and national economic objectives, but not for any other reason. On one hand, unlike Australia, other countries have developed philosophies of education that value knowledge outside of and arguably above such employment and economic priorities, and as being of inherent value to their societies, so that their entire attitude towards the importance of education is fundamentally different, and generally supports better education outcomes than we do. Such international philosophies of education also ascribe greater innate value to every human individual as a person, and not as cogs in economic wheels, which is not the case in Australia, where education is now increasingly alienating and dehumanising.

On the other hand, our ostensible economic priorities are never achieved. Despite now decades of advocating more education to drive economic growth and development, we do not have a globally competitive, high-tech and diversified advanced economy, but one that is shrinking (see the Harvard Index) and which is increasingly incapable of supporting all of the demands made upon it or providing suitable and secure employment to all, which suggests that education alone, particularly a sub-standard, under-funded and poorly regulated education, is not the solution we have imagined it to be. This problem has in the first instance nothing to do with education but rather with chronic lack of venture capital investment and strategic national long-term economic planning by both governments and the private sector, and poor onshore development of research outcomes and innovation. We speak incessantly of 'job-ready skills' but have no idea what they are or how they should be instilled, and many of our graduates will never have careers in areas in which they acquire qualifications and are highly motivated, and will instead be forced to re-train merely in order to obtain employment. There is here a nexus of self-defeating national attitudes that has the effect, among others, of discouraging the very people upon whom our education depends, and which would require a fundamental change of attitude to resolve the problems we create for ourselves.

There are also a number of problems with the education of our teachers. The following comments should not be taken as criticisms of teachers themselves.

It has been suggested that one factor in teacher attrition (as also in nursing) is that students are not sufficiently prepared for what they encounter in schools, and that it might therefore be helpful to include practical placements in schools during their university studies; these should be financially assisted, and should not involve unpaid work.

We will not improve the quality of our teachers as long as high school graduates are not better educated than they currently are – but which under existing circumstances is impossible to improve – or unless the period of their studies is considerably extended at university to compensate for the comparatively mediocre standard of even our best private schools, to say nothing of average or disadvantaged public schools, which should then ensure that they commence their teaching careers properly trained in all areas they require. Such an improvement could be considered in one of several ways, such as a preliminary 1-2 years between high school and commencement at university, during which they were made fully literate and provided with other necessary knowledge and skills they should have already acquired in high school; or reforming and extending the programme of their tertiary studies to include this; or extending the duration of high school (Australian students are among the youngest in the developed world when they complete high school). In any case, it is essential that they acquire a higher standard of basic knowledge and skills than they currently do, and that universities ensure that they have them before issuing their degrees. Recent measures introduced by the previous federal government do not adequately resolve these issues, but the high level of students experiencing difficulties even in meeting those minimal requirements strongly suggests how sub-standard our education system is. In public discussion of education, this self-perpetuating cycle of mediocrity between the level of education achieved by Year 12 and its consequences for their university studies, and what that then means when still poorly educated graduates go back into our schools as teachers, is never identified. And yet this problem is obviously very real.

In view of the fact that our society is increasingly expecting teachers to have a range of skills far beyond what is ordinarily required for the actual teaching of their subjects, we should either ensure that in the course of their professional qualifying education, which would then need to be proportionately lengthened, we also include sufficient education in other areas (such as an understanding of the nature of the various disabilities their students will have and how to support them; better preparation for multicultural students and some education in their cultures, religions etc.; understanding

of mental health problems; in areas of consent, sex and relationships; and in aspects of law as those apply to their work and responsibilities; among many other things), *or* we ensure that separate, specialist support and other teaching staff are fully available for every classroom in every school in the state (or country), so that teachers can concentrate on the teaching of their discipline areas. It is far from evident that all teachers are being fully educated in all of the areas they are now expected to be competent in.

Our universities are responsible for the education of our teachers, and yet no consideration has been given to whether any of our universities are in fact properly educating anybody at all. The de facto corporatisation of Australian universities over the past 25 years has seen constant reductions in degree programmes (including for teachers), among many other cuts, as well as in the majority casualization of the entire national academic workforce, leaving casuals not remunerated to provide the level of out-of-classroom support for individual students that many need, the lack of other necessary campus services, oversized tutorial classes, and many other problems. Universities used the excuse of the pandemic to further massively reduce this workforce unnecessarily, even while domestic enrolments remained stable or were projected to increase, thereby further reducing the quality of education provided to students. Nationally, we have now lost an estimated 17-40,000+ university lecturers in the past two years, many of whom would also have been responsible for teaching student teachers. It has been recognised by government reviews of the university sector for decades that good teacher-student ratios are essential to good education and outcomes, and yet the measures necessary to maintain such optimum ratios have never been implemented, and are now as many as six or seven times worse than they were until ca. 1980. (Many of the other unresolved problems in our schools are equally unresolved problems in our universities.) We should now have nationally 3-4 times as many full-time continuing (*not* FTE) university lecturers as we currently have.

It would be reasonable to expect that every teaching trainee was required to complete a full and comprehensive degree programme in each of their respective discipline areas, that that programme would ensure as far as possible that they had successfully completed courses on all of the topics they would be required to teach in schools to a level higher than that actually required, or consistent with national curricula, that there should be no variation between universities awarding teaching degrees, and that the national qualities and standards body (TEQSA) would enforce compliance with such degree programmes (this should be occurring for every other professional

qualification as well, but it isn't). If we have national curricula for schools, then it ought to be a 'no-brainer' that our universities are required to implement national curricula for teaching degrees to ensure that all teachers are sufficiently well-educated to teach those national school curricula, not only the actual content but also in *how* to teach their subjects so that the stated learning objectives are achievable; that is not usually taught. This discipline education is separate from any pedagogical and other training, just as the old BA qualification was a discipline qualification while the additional DipEd was a separate, pedagogical qualification. One assumes that teachers are also sufficiently trained in the psychology of learning, to a level that they are capable of thinking for themselves in an informed manner about their practice, as well as in developmental/childhood psychology.

Further, it should be for lecturers to determine whether each student has demonstrated sufficient knowledge and understanding of their subjects in each course, and to be at liberty to fail them if they have not. Currently, the authority of academics in this respect is almost non-existent, and universities will pass students who have not demonstrated even minimum knowledge or ability (because they are more concerned about funding and completion rates than about quality and standards), thereby ensuring that under-qualified graduates then become teachers. Again, currently, degree curricula are a fraction of what they used to be in this country, of what is actually needed to qualify competent teachers, and of what is standard practice in many other developed countries (where other subjects are also mandatory or common that are not offered here). Other countries' university systems have more consistent and standardised degree curricula than our universities have. If, therefore, we expect all of our teachers to be properly competent, and as such to also feel sufficiently confident to do their job, we must reform our entire higher education system. State governments are responsible for universities, but they have not exercised that responsibility in ways urgently needed.

I have 15 years' experience of university lecturing primarily in France and Germany, where the vast majority of my students were trainee teachers. The requirements for their education, as well as the levels of knowledge and skills already acquired there by the end of high school, were considerably higher and greater than what is the case in Australia. Australia has had every opportunity to understand, learn from, and implement best international practice in its schools (and elsewhere), and yet has consistently failed to do so. As long we persist in not learning anything, we will never improve, nor will we attract more students to qualify as teachers.

Australia has acquired a reputation for adopting ludicrous educational theories years after they have been tried and found wanting and been abandoned in other countries, and the current theoretical notions seemingly prevalent in this country, including in university education departments, often appear to be inappropriate. Perhaps the most egregious example of this was to stop teaching English grammar, composition and comprehension in our schools – with disastrous consequences we still have today. The institutionalised aversion to what is indiscriminately called 'rote learning' is likewise not justified: some 'rote learning' is absolutely necessary for the acquisition of systematic and basic knowledge and skills across many discipline areas before more critical independent and 'discovery' learning is possible; and excessive encouragement of self-directed learning and discovery is arguably responsible for major deficits in what should be comprehensive knowledge and understanding of subjects. There are in my opinion other misguided pedagogical practices in Australia that should be questioned and reviewed.

It would be advisable to study and learn from best international practice, to establish a more sustainable and durable balance between what we expect our school students to have learned by Year 12 and how that can best be achieved, to fully fund and commit to its implementation (and funding and other recommendations) across our entire national public school system, and then leave that model to operate for a decade or more with only limited progress reviews and interference, rather than constantly adopting new and contradictory, poorly conceived and researched ideas. I suggest that confused, ill-conceived, constantly changing, and obviously ineffective educational practices, which again teachers are often not appropriately trained or qualified to adopt successfully, and do not always have local school support to challenge, is a factor in teacher attrition.

19th July, 2022