

Submission  
No 230

**INQUIRY INTO TEACHER SHORTAGES IN NEW SOUTH  
WALES**

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
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## ***Why are staff leaving the teaching profession?***

Having been a frontline teacher for 42 years in the public sector I developed an extensive network amongst the teaching profession, both public and private. This network of both older and younger staff is the resource I have drawn on to make my observations in this paper.

When I started teaching in 1980 schools were a pleasant place to work, where everybody was treated equally, experience was valued, decisions were made with respect to all stakeholders. Discussion, both positive and negative without retribution, was encouraged to ensure the best possible learning environment for the students we taught.

Senior teachers took on leadership roles where they mentored beginning teachers and worked closely with students in the area of academic achievement, involvement in extra-curricular activities and welfare. Promotion was encouraged for those experienced staff willing to take on these additional roles, whilst those who chose to “stay in the classroom” were still sought after to discuss future directions and changes to the educational process. Monetary remuneration was appropriate for both those teachers who remained at the top of the pay scale, as well as those staff who gained promotion after exhibiting suitable experience and leadership qualities or took on additional student/year advisor roles.

I retired at the beginning of 2022, after 42 years teaching for the NSW Department of Education. I started as a Physical Education teacher and finished as a Head Teacher – PD/Health/PE. It was not my intention to retire “early” as I still had a lot to offer as a mentor to younger staff, an experienced senior teacher and a highly qualified school administrator. Ultimately my decision to leave teaching was based on a number of issues that had affected my ability to continue to be a successful educator.

When it was announced I was retiring, ex-students who I had taught in the late 1980s and early 1990s organised a Retirement Lunch. At this function, these people spoke fondly of the quality of the education they had received and bemoaned some of the deficiencies in their children’s education in more recent years. A number of them are now teachers in their own right, and they spoke of their disillusion with modern educational practices where they feel ostracised and marginalised due to many of the same issues that I had identified. This is not just an issue in the NSW DET staff, but is also a problem amongst teachers employed in the “Catholic” and “Independent” sector.

A good friend, and highly experienced & accomplished teacher, suffered badly during the past few years whilst teaching in a private school. He found the lack of respect shown to him, the refusal of senior management to listen to his concerns and the stress caused was too much for him to deal with. Tragically, he took his own life earlier this year.

### **1. Lack of Respect / Treatment of Experienced Staff**

The feedback I am receiving from both the public and private sectors is that experience is not valued and school leaders surround themselves with young sycophants who are no more than “yes” people. Unfortunately, we are now seeing an increased levels of staff bullying by principals and other members of the senior executive team, as well as a lack of acknowledgement of the immense range of teaching and administrative skills of senior teachers.

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Many modern day educational leaders are surrounding themselves with young staff who support them on all occasions, as this often results in permanent employment and/or promotion. The opinions of older, more experienced staff are not being respected and they are often removed from leadership positions and/or overlooked for promotion. Consequently, experienced staff often retire early, leave to pursue alternate career options or, usually unsuccessfully, look to transfer to a more suitable school. One of the offshoots of this occurring is that young, inexperienced staff are catapulted into additional roles whilst still developing their “classroom skills”. This over burden of responsibilities can often lead to these teachers leaving feeling overworked and incapable of managing their many responsibilities, therefore leaving the profession early.

Additional roles are often removed from experienced teachers’ responsibility with no prior discussion, extra curricular programs are changed or cancelled for no specific reason, without proper consultation and/or staff are constantly accused of “not following the company line” and threatened with disciplinary action via the “Code of Conduct” legislation. This process was never designed to silence staff or to be used as a “big stick” when teachers were merely doing what was needed to meet the educational needs of their students.

In modern educational settings it now appears that experience is not valued and school leaders surround themselves with young sycophants who are no more than “yes” people, whilst experienced staff are discriminated against, bullied and have their opinions ignored. Consequently many “older” staff look for careers elsewhere or retire early.

## 2. Collaboration / Decision Making

An educational system which encourages leadership by people who are inexperienced administrators, who often lack the skills required, creates more issues around teacher satisfaction. A system which creates a cooperative approach to obtain feedback, both positive and negative, that is then considered honestly and without bias before final decisions were made allows all staff to feel both valued and appreciated. Long held values which provided a stable, cooperative and encouraging environment for both teachers and students, have been forgotten in the rush to enact change.

When school leaders created environments that respected other’s opinions, supported all staff and made changes to school organisation/administration based on improving educational outcomes for all students, dissenters were listened to and their views respected. Decisions in schools were explained to all staff and those negatively affected were supported to make the necessary adjustments. Major changes to school systems were not taken lightly or developed by a small, protected group of staff. They were made after numerous meetings, committees and surveys, whilst staff meetings were open forums where teachers had the opportunity to “voice their concerns”. Ongoing issues were dealt with personally and discretely, not via email or in front of other staff members.

Sadly, in many schools where a collaborative environment once existed, this is not the case anymore and the positive educational environment that existed in the 1980s and 1990s does not exist now. Experienced staff are constantly reminded by the new leadership that those days have gone, yet educational standards have continued to decline. It is not just the “oldies” who are feeling this way and we can no longer say that the “dinosaurs” are getting with the times.

## 3. Micro Management

Experienced staff, those who became teachers as a “calling” not a job, are not trusted by principals to successfully educate students and support younger staff. Modern school leaders are constantly asking

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these staff members to justify, explain, document and defend their “day to day” teaching processes, above and beyond usual DET/NESA expectations. These are often conducted by very expensive “outside providers” who have little or no knowledge of the specific school environment. Staff are expected to regularly update computer records, report minor students’ discretions and justify changes to their daily teaching practices. This data is rarely accessed and a teacher’s “gut feelings” developed over many years of staff/student relationships are not respected anymore.

Also, staff are “taken off” their timetabled lessons to attend meetings, tutorials and evaluations to explain and justify their teaching processes. During these times, classes are taught by casual relief staff, often not qualified in the specific subject area. Many experienced teachers, find this both time consuming and demanding as their teaching had never been questioned by previous school leaders, students and their parents during a long career. Many of these meetings appear to be designed for senior leaders to justify their positions and “pad” their CVs.

#### 4. Administration / Excessive Paperwork

As previously noted, the “needless busywork” required by school leaders takes away from the number one responsibility of a school teacher, to educate “every student, every lesson, every day”. In addition, the paperwork required to organise extra-curricular and sporting programs is excessive, whilst risk assessments are no more than a “common sense” statement and legal speak to protect DET from litigation. On bushwalks, camps and excursions organised many years ago, the students are no more in danger now than they were 30 years ago, even though the paperwork required has morphed from 1 page to over 50 pages.

Sadly, this requirement for excessive paperwork also results in many young staff feeling overburdened and/or not willing to be responsible for the organisation of these important “off campus” educational experiences.

#### 5. Professional Development

The recent increased need for all staff to access “external” professional development opportunities is an additional burden on all staff, often resulting in teachers accessing online courses that are time consuming and not relevant to their particular professional educational needs. All that is important is to “get your hours up”. Professional Development should be designed to meet the individual needs of each staff member and cannot be achieved by a specific number of hours. Experienced staff are not rewarded for “prior knowledge” or staff mentoring, and many PD experiences do not count towards the NESA requirements. Many of the new courses are now online, where learning is often limited and there is no opportunity to develop practical skills. For example, the “Emergency Care” online course requires a teacher to pass multiple choice questions related to the administration of First Aid, with no requirement to actually exhibit first aid practices.

#### 6. Permanency / Transfer / Promotion Opportunities

In my early years of teaching, staff taught for many years before developing and then physically demonstrating the skills required to lead a faculty/department/school. It is not uncommon in schools today to find young inexperienced staff, who are still developing their educational knowledge and skills,

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being promoted to leadership positions because they are supportive of the principal and are willing to “tow the company line”. They are promoted to “learn the new job”, without having exhibited any of the abilities required. More experienced staff are therefore overlooked and openly discouraged from seeking leadership opportunities. This includes permanent and relieving leadership positions. In some cases, principals create additional leadership roles for “like minded staff” using ‘Local Schools, Local Decisions’ budgets to financially support these positions. Also, there is an increasing number of promotions occurring “in house”, again limiting the opportunities for experienced staff, especially those from other schools.

In many schools, young casual/temporary staff are rewarded for their support with permanent employment positions, with limited opportunities given to experienced staff currently teaching in other schools. Under previous transfer conditions, experienced staff had the opportunity to apply for transfer to schools closer to home, offering “new” educational opportunities and/or to have a different clientele. Modern employment conditions seem to be sidelined by principals who can manipulate transfer and permanent placements.

It was reported in the newspaper this week that a “new” teacher, who had been attracted from the non-teaching workforce, had after retraining, been placed into a selective high school. This is certainly not an equitable situation when there are many teachers who would have possibly welcomed the opportunity to transfer from their current school.

#### 7. Superannuation

When I started teaching in 1980 the NSW Department of Education allowed staff to access a “defined benefit” superannuation scheme, where retirement payments were based on years of service and a teacher’s salary at the time of “separation” from the department.

Sadly, this scheme is not available anymore, as it ensured permanent staff stayed in the profession much longer and encouraged suitably qualified staff to seek promotion. With the current superannuation scheme offered in teaching, there is no incentive for “older” staff to remain in the system. It also allows younger staff to easily move away from teaching into other areas of employment.

#### 8. Curriculum / Syllabus Content

The modern curriculum is constantly changing, as are syllabus documents. This results in teachers, both young and older, spending enormous amounts of time rewriting lesson plans, learning programs and assessment tasks. Many of the “new” syllabuses based on the “National Curriculum” are reported as being vague, poorly developed and badly structured, with content across various cohorts showing limited continuity. Selected outcomes are often unachievable for some students and content is so “full” that opportunities for practical application of knowledge is limited. This also includes the addition of topics such as “Gender Issues” in the Stages 4/5 PDHPE Syllabus. NESA have only recently advertised for teachers to be employed as writers for “new” Stage 6 English, History and Mathematics syllabuses, even though the current course were only first assessed at the HSC in 2019.

Additional educational areas are constantly added to the already overcrowded curriculum to the detriment of important literacy, numeracy and basic knowledge education. It is all very well to think that all students should want to study STEM based subjects, but to force students with limited reading and comprehension skills to participate in additional “STEM Course” outside the normal subject based requirements. Also, in some schools “Gifted & Talented” and “Soft Skills” programs take away valuable teaching time from basic subject areas. There is even a NSW Government policy to reintroduce compulsory Mathematics in Stage 6 (Years 11/12)

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## 9. Technology

Technology has great advantages in modern teaching, but in many schools the use of it has overshadowed basic structures that are important in presenting quality educational programs. Before emails, communication amongst staff was normally “face to face” and/or via Notices/Memos when required. With modern technology it is not uncommon for staff to receive multiple emails every day, including at all times of the day and night, requiring an immediate response, additional work and/or creating stressful situations. Staff can go days on end without any personal contact with school leaders, but may have been sent many emails, mostly about minor things that add to the stress of teaching. Many of these emails are used to notify changes to working conditions with no prior discussion.

As previously stated, staff are expected to regularly update computer records, report minor students’ discretions and justify changes to their daily teaching practices on a variety of technological platforms. Most of this data is never acted upon. Also, many principals are requiring teachers to not only prepare “face to face” teaching programs, but also develop and upload to complex computer platforms (eg “Canvas), online teaching and learning lesson plans. This can sometimes double the amount of time required for lesson preparation.

Many years ago, all schools employed experienced and extremely competent timetablers. In fact, it was impossible to be promoted to a Deputy Principal position without having successfully timetabled a school year. These timetablers, a small group of administrative specialists, would spend an enormous amount of time developing school timetables that were for the benefit of all students and staff. Classes were allocated to the most appropriate teacher, ensuring the best education was available to each cohort, and “split classes”, where students had one teacher per subject, were the #1 priorities. Whilst computer programs which provide some capability in this area are welcomed, it needs to be recognised that they are far from perfect and experienced human intervention is still required to achieve the most successful outcomes for both students and staff. School timetables that result in poor allocation of staff, classes not equally spread across the teaching week/fortnight and, worst of all, creating multiple “split classes” (sometimes 3 teachers/subject/class) add to the stress amongst the staff involved and creates an enormous amount of extra work for all involved.

## 10. Parent Involvement

Parents have always been an important part of the educational process, and I personally have experienced a very positive relationship with those of the students I have taught. Sadly, with the advent of emails as the acceptable form of communication in schools, teachers are often bombarded with multiple emails from parents on a daily basis. Many of the questions contained in these have already been answered via previous notices, announcements and newsletters or contain minor issues related to their child. Modern day principals expect these to be responded to within 24 hours.

In many cases a complaint from one parent via email or at a P&C Meeting can lead to a complete change of school procedures without any discussion with the school staff, even if the complaint is unfounded. Historically, a parent complaint would initially involve an interview with a member of the senior executive staff before the teacher becoming involved. Currently, many school leaders send the complaints directly to the classroom teacher to deal with, leading to increased work and more stress.

I believe all these previously indicated issues, including the relevant examples, have been responsible for many experienced staff either retiring early, contemplating “getting out” of teaching, are moving to the “private system” and/or leaving the educational sector altogether. They can also be considered the reasons younger teachers have decided the education sector is not a great place to spend their professional career.

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There have been a number of recent announcements related to overcoming the long term teacher shortages in NSW, especially in the “public system”. Attempting to attract large numbers of overseas teachers has never been highly successful in the past, especially the program to bring teachers from the USA in the 1960s & 1970s. With the incredible number of requirements, including online PD courses that must be completed before entering the NSW DET system, it is a very long term objective and will have very little affect on the current situation. It was hard enough for ex-teachers to return to casual teaching during the recent health mandates to access these requirements, and they had the necessary experience, qualifications and language skills.

In addition, the aim of targeting teachers in the “private system” would have very little chance of succeeding as the pay, holiday provisions, working conditions and student behaviour levels are much better than those in the NSW DET system. This is also an issue with attracting prospective teachers from the non-teaching/industry workforce.

The suggestion to ensure trainee teachers spend more time at schools and, more importantly, in the classroom has some merit, although there is still no guarantee that when they become fully qualified that they will be willing to teach in the “hard to staff” schools, or will not seek employment in the “private sector”. Teacher’s Scholarships were very successful in the 1960s & 1970s as not only was the teacher training course free (& trainees were paid a small fortnightly “wage”), but on graduation they were guaranteed a permanent teaching position. The advantage to the government was that the teacher could be sent to any school in NSW and had to remain in the position for a least 3 years. Many of my compatriots on scholarships were allocated positions in country schools and never returned to Sydney.

The most recent announcement to employ parents to assist with school administrative tasks, including organising excursions, needs to be looked at very closely before any benefits are acknowledged. Privacy, responsibility and legal issues all need to be fully investigated before any long term changes are implemented.