Inquiry into Teacher shortages in New South Wales

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Submission to the Inquiry into Teacher Shortages in NSW 2022

- Factors contributing to teacher shortages, and how the NSW Government can address them

30 July 2022

This submission principally relates to public high schools in NSW.

I have a strong connection with teaching in NSW with two immediate family members being teachers and understand the pressures that impact them on a daily basis.

Teaching is a great profession, and many find it very rewarding. However, many teachers also leave the profession. Perhaps the TWO most important factors that drive high school teachers from the professions are:

1. A classroom work environment that, for many teachers, is highly stressful and impossible for them to effectively control.
2. Unsustainable workloads outside core classroom teaching /sports supervision hours.

This submission discusses these TWO issues in more detail and provides suggestions for how the NSW government can address them. The submission does not seek to imply that other factors being considered by the inquiry are not important. Rather, it suggests that any long-term solution that may be put in place to address teacher shortages that does not addressing these TWO issues will not be a success.

A classroom work environment that, for many teachers, is highly stressful and impossible for them to effectively control.

Managing poor student behaviour has always been a part of a teacher's role. And it always will be, no matter how well a school and its teachers manage the issue. However, for many current teachers, lack of effective support makes poor student behaviour very difficult or impossible for individual teachers to control. Because poor student behaviour is so difficult to control at many schools and because it is an ongoing issue in many classes each working day it becomes highly stressful and drives teachers from the profession.

Evidence: Teacher 1 (Permanent teacher working at _____): 'I chose the schools I put on my transfer list very carefully. That's why I am teaching at ____. I could not work at many other schools (because of poor student behaviour).'

Evidence: Teacher 2 (recent graduate working as a casual at _____): 'I got offered a one term block at ____. I accepted the offer. They suggested I come in for a few days (as a casual) to familiarise myself with the school. After working for a few days at ____ I declined the one term block due to the classroom environment (student behaviour issues) at the school.'

Evidence: Student 1 (announced in frustration to class after enrolling in another school): 'and I am moving to _____ school because of this (in reference to poor student behaviour in class making it difficult to focus on her work).'

Evidence: Student 2 (in reference to subjects she studied for her HSC at _____): 'I chose certain higher level subjects (rather than the courses I really wanted to study) because the behaviour is much better in those classes and I would actually learn something.'

Poor student behaviour in class takes many forms including: disruptive behaviour, failure to follow direction, inappropriate language, inappropriate use of technology, verbal abuse of teachers or other students, dangerous behaviour and the list goes on. Some of this behaviour is now commonplace in many classrooms. Classroom culture at many schools seems to be one where:

- many students are disengaged and treat the classroom as part of their social agenda, chatting with their fellow students, engaging is social media and having fun playing online games on their devices. Such behaviour is disruptive to effective teaching.
- many teachers accept this environment, work in it as best they can whilst trying to control more extreme forms of inappropriate behaviour and dangerous behaviour. The ability to learn in such an environment is difficult for students. Moreover, the ability for teachers to teach is difficult and for many is highly stressful as they battle daily to talk over student who are talking, listening to music, sometimes out loud, or being otherwise disruptive.
- teachers who try to effectively control their classes at schools where the above classroom culture is in place are more likely to find teaching highly stressful. Battling an established culture in any workplace is difficult and often highly stressful. So, it is unsurprising that dedicated teachers battling to effectively teach in many schools find their jobs highly stressful.

Evidence: Student teacher (training to be a teacher after building and selling a successful business): 'A generation is going through our high schools learning little (referring to the classroom culture impacting effective teaching in the classrooms he has been exposed to during his practical blocks)'.

Clearly, poor student behaviour not only causes a highly stressful work environment for many teachers but also significantly impacts on student learning outcomes. Accordingly, successful strategies to address poor student behaviour will not only reduce teacher stress but also lift teaching outcomes. This in turn will lead to greater teacher satisfaction which will also assist with teacher retention.

Strategies to better manage the classroom work environment, and for many teachers, reduce stress caused by student behaviour issue.

Poor student behaviour is managed well in some schools. It is suggested that a detailed independent survey of student behaviour in NSW high schools and how NSW high schools seek to effectively control student behaviour be commissioned.

It is expected that such a survey will show that different approaches to: uniform policy, device use policy, culture of inappropriate language use, detention processes, follow up of non-compliance with direction from teacher processes, suspension policy and processes and many other factors will correlate with the level of poor student behaviour, the levels of teacher stress and learning outcomes. Accordingly, the outcomes of the survey will guide changes that can be adopted across the NSW public school system.

There is a diversity of view on certain aspects of education. For example, uniform policy, device use policy, IT device use policy, a culture of inappropriate language use, detention processes, and follow up processes where there is non-compliance with directions from teachers.

Some NSW public schools **enforce uniform policy** reasonably strictly. Others do not. It can be argued that non-compliance with uniform policy leads to non-compliance in other areas and is therefore important to enforce. It can also be argued that by enforcing uniform policy students learn there are standard they need to meet, that the standards are important, and they need to take the effort to comply or there are consequences that are followed. If these arguments are correct **uniform policy compliance should be more strongly enforced** in many NSW public schools and would assist to improve poor student behaviour.

Some NSW schools have reasonably strictly and **effective device use policy**. Others do not. Device use is a key form or distraction in classrooms and a source of poor student behaviour. In many schools its is a near impossible task for teachers to control inappropriate device use in class. If students are focussing on messaging other on their phones, or on social media application or on gaming they are not focusing on learning. Sometimes this is not disruptive but does impact on individual learning. At other times it is very disruptive to the classroom environment. Strong, effective, and enforced device use policy would reduce poor student behaviour, led to more effective teaching and reduce teacher stress. If these arguments are correct **reasonably strictly and effective device use policy and compliance should be more strongly enforced** in many NSW public schools and would assist to improve poor student behaviour.

Some NSW schools have a **reasonably strictly policy and culture about inappropriate language in the classroom**. Others do not. Language heavily laden with swear words is not acceptable in most workplaces. Similarly, swearing should not be a routinely accepted as a normal part of ordinary conversation in classrooms. Most students recognise this but may routinely swear in the classroom because they know they can get away with it. Students need to learn how to communicate about all matters without swearing and do so in the classroom. Learning to control their behaviour and being compliant in doing so will improve poor student behaviour. If these arguments are correct **reasonably strictly compliance about inappropriate language use** should be more strongly enforced in many NSW public schools and would assist to improve poor student behaviour. In addition, teachers should lead by example and not swear in front of student or in other routine conversations at school, yet some do.

Some NSW schools have good and **effective detention policies and processes**. Others do not. Some schools push detentions to individual teachers to arrange and manage. If students do not comply, follow up by head teachers and deputies may not occur or be ineffective. The threat of a detention can then become a hollow threat and ignored by many students who do not turn up, knowing full well that the consequences of doing so are minor or inconsequential. For detentions to be an effective tool for helping to improve poor student behaviour they need to be effective managed and enforced. Moreover, this needs to be managed on a whole school basis otherwise the burden for management and compliance falls on individual teachers. If these arguments are correct more **effective detention policies and processes** should be put in place in many NSW public schools and would assist to improve poor student behaviour.

Some NSW schools have good **follow up process for situations where there is non-compliance with directions from teachers**. Others do not. Unless non-compliance with directions from teachers is adequately followed up students learn they can ignore directions from teachers, knowing full well that the consequences of doing so are minor or inconsequential. For directions from teachers to be

effective in managing poor student behaviour (or for other reasons e.g. classroom management), non-compliance has to have consequences. This needs to be managed on a whole school basis otherwise the burden for management and compliance falls on individual teachers. Without support to deal with non-compliance with directions, teachers are more likely to tolerate poor behaviour and this negatively impact the classroom environment. If these arguments are correct improved **follow up processes for situations where there is non-compliance with directions from teachers** needs to be put in place in many NSW public schools and would assist to improve poor student behaviour.

Strategies to improve the classroom work environment, and for many teachers, reduce stress caused by student behaviour issue.

One of the causes of poor student behaviour is disengagement. There are a range of reasons why students are disengaged. A portion of students are not academically inclined and dislike the classroom environment. Such students can be disruptive through poor student behaviour.

Evidence: School councillor 1 (Permanent teacher working at _____): '_____ approached me for a chat. He is a really talented athlete. He told me he hated school. He elaborated about why. He is one of those boys that is not suited to being in a classroom. I asked him what he did in the holidays. He said he helped his uncle who worked as a tiler. I asked him how he liked that. He said it was really good.'

Streaming non-academically inclined students in schools that use academically focused curriculums does not assist their education nor the education of other student in their classrooms. Pretending that teachers can teach topics of no interest to some students in an engaging manner is not a solution that has worked. There needs to be a review of how best to educate all students, whether they are academically inclined, or not.

An assumption underlying our education system is that the longer students stay at school the better. Statistics show that on average: the higher the level of a person's education, the higher the level of their future income, and the higher the level of their standard of living. These statistics paint an accurate picture. But they can be misleading when looking at poorly performing, non-academically inclined students. For these students schools are more like child minding facilities where they do not engage in learning activities. Or day prisons that they hate. Schools are too valuable and expensive a resource for that. Improving the education system so that it meets the needs of all students would be beneficial for the education of both academically inclined and non-academically inclined students.

I recommend the establishment of an enquiry into the appropriateness of the current NSW public education system for all students, and particularly for non-academically inclined students. Such an enquiry should look at how education outcomes can be improved for all students by amending the current system so that education content is fit for each and every student. This will lift future income and the standard of living for all. It will also lead to less disengaged students, better classroom behaviour and less stress for teachers.

Unsustainable workload outside core classroom teaching /sport hours.

Many teachers complain about the need to work excessive hours so as to fulfil the requirements of their teaching positions. Surveys have been conducted that capture this information. The National Employment Standards (NES) protect the work conditions of all employees in Australia. One of the standards sets a maximum of 38 hours of work per week for fulltime employees. This is built into all awards I have reviewed, except teaching awards.

The standard states that employees may refuse to work additional hours if they are unreasonable. It also states that in determining whether additional hours are reasonable or unreasonable, a variety of factors must be taken into account. After reviewing the factors, it is not clear, from a teachers' perspective, how many of hours work per week are unreasonable.

What is clear is that many teachers consistently work many more than 38 hours per week, and this impacts their health, personal circumstances and the family responsibilities they have.

The scope of a teacher's role has continually increased to meet perceived needs. This has consequently increased teachers' work. Without a clear weekly cap on how many hours of work are reasonable, work hours have kept expanding. Moreover, it is difficult for a teacher to refuse to do work as it is not clear that the refusal will be seen as reasonable. This has led to the situation where many teachers currently feel they must put in far too many hours, for far too many of the school weeks of the year, and work substantial hours during term breaks, to satisfy the demands of their position.

How many hours should a teacher work each week during term time? This includes work at school and at home. How many hours should a teacher work each week during term breaks? Neither seem to be defined. So, expectations of what is a reasonable is not known. And extra demands on a teacher's time keep increasing without any consideration of whether the teacher has time to do the work, or not. They are just expected to get the work done.

Consequently, teachers view their workload and compare that against comparable professionals. They can argue strongly that they can secure work in other industries for the same or better pay and usually work 38 or less per week. As such, the high workload of many teachers is a strong motivation to change professions. This leads to the need to replace teachers who have left the profession and therefore teacher shortages.

This situation is exacerbated when the high workload is couple with a highly stressful role due to poor student behaviour. Why stay working in a role which is highly stressful due to poor student behaviour and where you need to put in abnormally long hours to do the job properly. No wonder teachers are leaving the profession, needing to be replaced, and there is a teacher shortage. No amount of training additional teachers will overcome these problems. Solutions need to be found for both issues.

The number of hours worked each week varies by teacher and by school.

Some factors that contribute to teacher workload outside core teaching and duty hours include:

- learning course content (where this is not already known to an adequate level),
- preparation of lessons and supporting material for lesson (where this has not already been prepared to an adequate level or needs revision)
- preparation of school teaching plans / registers

- preparation of assessment tasks
- marking of assessment tasks (time taken depends on subject area and task)
- school related administration
- faculty meetings
- whole school meetings
- special project meetings
- preparation for parent teacher meeting
- parent teacher meeting
- monitoring and responding to emails
- arrangement of excursion and other events
- training and accreditation

Reducing teacher workloads needs to consider time spent on each of the factors, and other that have not been listed above. A few suggestions are listed below:

Teachers should be rostered to teach classes only in their areas of expertise, where this is possible, to minimise their need to learn new content. They should also **deliver the same classes year after year** so they are not required to learn new content each year. Where possible, teacher should teach multiple courses of the same subject. This is particularly important for teachers during the early years (first 10) of their career. This seems obvious but is not standard practice at all schools. Rostering can be based more on other factors without consideration of a teacher's depth of knowledge in a subject area.

I spent several months on a corporate training project earlier in my career. The project budget included 10 hours per course for each hour of face-to-face instruction time. This was just for preparation of delivery collateral. In this case, PowerPoint presentations for classroom style delivery. Standard material was prepared for each instructor. In comparison, teachers do not have high quality, professionally prepared resources available that they can use to deliver their lesson. Each teacher is responsible for developing their own material. Some material is available of school drives or is shared between groups of teachers. Feedback I have is that material freely available on school drives is not of a high standard and often is outdated. Therefore, teachers can spend hours each day preparing lessons, especially during the early years of their career.

A **few sets of high-quality teaching collateral per course** prepared and maintained by the department so that content is current and covers every syllabus dot point would significantly reduce teachers' workload. More than one set would be needed because of the diversity in the type of classes across the state. Some will argue that each class is different, and material needs to be developed and customised for each class. I would argue that few if any teachers have the time to develop such material for each class each year. Rather, teachers tend to accumulate teaching collateral they consider is adequate and use it on an ongoing basis. Accordingly, I would argue that having **a few sets of high-quality teaching collateral per course** will improve the average set of teaching collateral that is used and significantly reduce teacher workloads, especially for teachers in the first 10 years of their teaching career.

Smart, well designed IT systems could significantly reduce teacher workloads, if this was a key design requirement. My guess is that functional requirements and project implementation costs drive IT system design. Extra IT development work that would reduce the workloads of the many teachers using the systems is not considered. This needs to change so that **school IT systems are designed to deliver functionality whilst also reducing teachers' workloads.**

School student reports have grown more comprehensive and complex over the years. A review is warranted to understand whether all the extra effort and workload required of teachers to generate the reports in this manner has led to greater understanding by parents of their child's school performance. If not, **student reports should be simplified,** to assist parent in better understanding their child's performance and to reduce the workload of teachers.

School administrative processes vary across schools. The administrative burden on teachers can be significant. Practices need to be reviewed so that **administrative tasks can be performed by teachers efficiently and effectively and in a defined number of hours each week.** This would limit the ability of some head teachers, deputies and principals to demand more of teachers' time than is reasonable.

Teachers are required to prepare lessons when they are sick. Which other job in society needs to plan and prepare their work for days they when they are off sick? **Relief teachers should have access to standard lesson plans that they can deliver**. Teachers would then simply highlight the syllabus dot point that needed to be covered during the days that they are off sick. This would help reduce teacher workloads when they are sick and should be resting.

Planning for excursions can be very time consuming. This task should be handled by competent administrative staff. This would lift an administrative burden from many teachers. Staff in **the Department could coordinate this for "standardised excursions" that could be booked by schools**. By standardising the process, administration efficiencies could be generated, and cost and teacher workload burdens reduced.

The Department could also standardise other functions for schools and generate scale efficiencies. For example, the Department could place bulk orders for textbooks. This could reduce costs and deliver better outcomes. Many schools have restricted budgets and order limited sets of textbooks based on their available budget. Books they order might be intended to be shared between classes with sometimes single physical copies needing to be shared in individual classes between students. **The department could arrange bulk supply agreements with publishers giving all NSW public school students and teachers electronic access to the latest copy of the schools preferred text and limited physical copies that could be ordered by schools**.

The Department, not individual schools, would have the combined order volume and resources to negotiate such arrangements. This would relieve individual schools of some workload associated with ordering books. It would also improve educational outcomes as all Preliminary and HSC students would have access to the latest electronic version of at least one textbook for all their courses.

It's easy to ask teachers to do extra tasks. It's easy to justify such tasks by stating certain benefits that would occur. Each additional task requires work. As many teachers already are working excessive hours **the focus needs to be on reviewing tasks that teachers perform and removing those that do not add value or lead to excessive workloads**. And to only request teachers to perform new tasks where these can be completed, along with all other out of classroom and duty tasks, within a reasonable number of hours.

The cumulative workload across all required activities is what leads to excessive workload. Workloads vary by teacher and school based on the teacher's recent teaching experience, their knowledge of their classroom subjects, the ability, motivation and special needs of students in their classes, resources they have already from past years and school administrative and process demands and expectations. Managing all the above is complex and difficult. Focussing on what can be

achieved, including a number of the above suggestions, would make a real difference to teachers workloads and help retain motivated teachers in the profession. Doing so, will more that any other actions, help to reduce teacher shortage in the future.

Conclusion

My hope and recommendation is that the committee findings include recommendations that:

1. help reduce poor student behaviour,
2. help classroom teachers better manage poor student behaviour, and
3. reduce teachers' workloads, especially for teachers in the first ten years of their profession.

Practical suggestions to achieve these aims are included above.