

Submission to: Valuing Australia's Teachers Parliamentary Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession

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Together, over the last five years, through a series of research projects, the above colleagues at the University of Sydney, Curtin University, University of New South Wales (Australia) and the Lulea University of Technology (Sweden), have examined the issues of work, workload, and conditions of work of Australian school teachers and school leaders, drawing international comparison to Sweden and elsewhere. We have reported (in conjunction with the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), and State School Teachers Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA)) on the largest, recent survey of teachers' work and workplace conditions in the country through input and extensive responses from over 20,000 teachers and school leaders. We welcome this Parliamentary Inquiry as both timely and of great importance.

Our research has:

- Documented, in finest detail, the specific work activities and working hours of teachers and school leaders,
- determined changes to work over the past five years,
- ascertained the challenges they experience, and
- identified strategies for addressing these.

Our research findings, founded on vast empirical data gathering of quantitative and qualitative material, show that teachers in schools retain their primary focus on matters directly related to working with students in teaching and learning and place highest value on these activities. All Teachers, Head Teachers, Assistant Principals, Deputy Principals, and Principals highly value tasks which are perceived to be directly related to teaching and to students' learning. However, they do not value administrative work which is impinging on this core focus, and is experienced as time consuming, cumbersome and concerned with compliance. Our studies also provide evidence that teachers require more professional respect, time and support for their teaching and the facilitation of student learning. This is not evident in the recent additions to teachers' workload, which is viewed as being largely focused on compliance.

Below we briefly indicate our key research findings in regard to the Terms of Reference. However, please note that ***we also seek the opportunity to provide further input to the Inquiry and would welcome the chance to present our findings in person to the committee, should it be desired.***

Response to the Terms of Reference

The findings set out below relate mostly to teachers in NSW public schools (N= 18,234). Following close-off of the Western Australian survey on December 2nd, data for that State are presently being analysed and findings will be available in early 2019.

Teachers in all types of NSW public schools are experiencing increased, and debilitating, administrative work demands. These demands are felt regardless of differences in school type, location, and level of socio-educational advantage – contextual factors which usually translate into differences in the work of teachers and the ways in which government policy change is felt and experienced. Work and workload differences related to the contextual specificities of schools have been found in much of the research team’s previous research (see e.g. Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Stacey, Wilson & Gavin, 2018; Parding, McGrath-Champ & Stacey, 2017; Stacey, 2018), suggesting that reducing disparities between schools is an essential area for redress. However even beyond this, the increased administrative demands identified in the NSW survey appear to be reached the point of having a ‘blanketing’ effect; that is, to be affecting all teachers and school leaders across all NSW public schools, largely regardless of and in addition to other contextual differences. Increased demands relating to the navigation, implementation and documentation of teachers’ work were reported to be impacting schools everywhere and having adverse effects on the scope and scale of teacher workload. **The problems that we have identified are clearly systemic.**

1. Increasing the attractiveness of the profession for teachers and principals, including workplace conditions, and career and leadership structures.

The attractiveness of the teaching profession is affected by the nature and volume of work, which also impacts on career pathways and leadership.

A) Workplace Conditions

Working Hours

Classroom teachers in NSW work **55 hrs per week** during term, 44 hours at school and 11 at home. This is slightly higher than the hours in Victoria (Weldon & Ingvarson, 2016). Both Victorian and NSW hours are considerably higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2014).

Assistant Principals’ or Head Teachers’ average term hours are 58 per week (approximately 45 at school and approximately 12 at home), while *Principals’ or Deputy Principals’* self-reported hours are 62 per week (50 at school and approximately 12 at home).

The category of ‘very long working hours’ of 50 or more hours per week, has been defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2003) and has been deployed by labour market scholars (Campbell, 2007; Campbell & van Wanrooy, 2013; Venn, Carey, Strazdins, & Burgess, 2016). **All categories of teachers are, by this definition, working ‘very long hours’.**

Work tasks/demands and their evaluation

Our studies are unique in documenting in great detail, and on a large scale, the specific work activities teachers undertake on a daily and weekly basis, plus those which are undertaken on a less frequent recurrence. *This highly detailed information is available on request.*

Moreover, teachers’ evaluation of their work activities was captured according to the following five statements:

1. This work is important/necessary
2. More time and resources are needed for this work

3. The way this work is managed is too time consuming/cumbersome
4. This work is focused on compliance rather than teaching and learning
5. Less time and resources should be spent on this work.

Resounding evidence is available from our research that **teachers highly value tasks which are perceived to be directly related to their teaching and to students' learning**, identifying planning and teaching lessons; meeting students' learning needs; and communicating with students about their learning, lives and wellbeing as some of their most important work. However, **they do not value administrative work which is impinging on this core focus, and is experienced as time consuming, cumbersome and concerned with compliance**. This includes work associated with accreditation requirements; the collection, analysis and reporting of data; and compliance with state policies.

Change over the past five years (2013-2018)

Not only are hours of work long, 87 percent of respondents reported an **increase in working hours**. Given the high, and increasing workload demands seen across all school roles, a strategy of further delegation of tasks to teachers suggested in NSW by the Department of Education's review of principal workload (Deloitte, 2017) is unlikely to be feasible, unless the Department were to employ significantly more teachers and reduce face to face teaching time.

Even higher proportions report an **increasingly complex workload** with a widening in the range of activities undertaken. Increases in administrative duties are at the highest proportions (>97%), while the collection, analysis and reporting of data is also extremely high (>96%). This almost unanimous reporting in relation to increases in workload indicates a common experience at levels rarely encountered in social science research. The particularly resounding changes in administrative workload were felt across all school locations – metropolitan, provincial and remote or very remote.

Effects of work overload

Teaching and Learning

The **increased demands are threatening teaching and student learning**. Our data is the first to make it clear that there is also another effect of changes to work in schools: the obstruction of teaching and students' learning. A very large majority of teachers now report that teaching and learning is hindered by their high workload (89%), by having to provide evidence of compliance with policy requirements (86%), and by other new administrative demands introduced by the Department of Education (91%).

Effort and Autonomy

Many respondents report that their **work often or always requires "too great an effort"** with 73% of teachers, 75% of Head Teachers and Assistant Principals and 71% of Principals and Deputy Principals reporting this. In a similar vein we find that a large proportion of teachers report experiencing **contradictory requirements** in their work. In relation to 'how' work should be carried out some 48 percent reported that they 'sometimes' had freedom to decide on this, while 33 percent said this was the case 'often' or 'always'. However, at least **one in five teachers (20%) report experiencing very low levels of professional autonomy**.

Breaks

Across our sample, a very high proportion of survey respondents report **rarely or never having access to uninterrupted breaks** at recess (57.3%) or at lunch (72.7%). Amongst specifically classroom teachers, only 19 percent usually or always have an uninterrupted break at recess and only 9.1 percent reported the same for lunch. These numbers are surprisingly low given that, unlike other school roles where there is more opportunity for meal and toilet breaks in lieu of a lack of time at recess and lunch, classroom teachers have no such opportunity because of their important face-to-face roles during class time.

Stress

Further effects of teachers' current work and workload, captured in our studies, are indicated in the NSW Public Service Commission's annual *People Matter Employee Survey* which shows a **severe and seriously**

deteriorating situation regarding public school teachers' workload and work stress. In 2017, almost 60 percent of teachers reported that work stress was at unacceptable levels. This very large proportion is much worse than in the public sector overall for which 41 percent reported unacceptable levels of work stress (NSW Public Service Commission, 2017, p. 17). And for teachers this has deteriorated very fast, worsening 5 percentage points from the previous year and in the order of 20 percentage points over the three-year period from 2014 (NSW Public Service Commission, 2017, p. 17). Over a similar period (2014-2016) the number of teachers also reported deterioration in their *workload* with 61 percent reporting in 2016 that this also was unacceptable (NSW Public Service Commission, 2016, p. 24).

Family Commitments and Work Life Balance (WLB)

Substantial proportions of full-time staff report that their current workload **conflicts with family commitments and negatively impacts upon their work life balance.** Among male staff 84 percent agree or strongly agree that workload conflicts with family responsibilities, whilst among female respondents the proportion is slightly higher at 86 percent. Higher proportions again agree/strongly agree that workload negatively impacts on their WLB with 84 percent of male staff and 86 percent of female staff responding in this way. These findings bear out the deeply detrimental effects of teachers' work and workloads. The following quotes characterise huge outcry by teachers concerning the impacts of their workload captured in the qualitative data.

"I'd like my life back. I can't spend time with my own children. If I do I don't have work prepared. I'm having to buy resources in my own time with my own money. My kids do not love shopping for class supplies. My children are at before and after school care 7-6 so that I can prepare lessons and set up classrooms and attend long meetings. I never put my hand up for the stress that schools have been dumping onto us over the last 7 years".

And

"The increase in workload has affected my home-life balance and personal wellbeing. I find my workload intrudes on quality time with my family and I have very little time to care for myself or pursue personal interests or exercise...I see new teachers overwhelmed by the demands of the profession and see experienced teachers losing heart with what the profession and the job now entails. I am left disheartened and frustrated over the intrusion of the profession into my personal and private time with my own children and family members. It is simply not possible to sustain. Something has to give. If I do my job to the standard required, my family suffer, if I focus more on my family life, I fall behind in my employment requirements...Every other week, term, year the job description just gets added to time and time again. Something must change or the [Department] will be looking at workers compensation for staff riddled with anxiety and stress disorders and the consequent physical body problems".

B) Career and Leadership

Some 82 percent of full-time teachers agree/strongly agree that their high **workload demands have negatively impacted upon their career aspirations.** Similarly, 79 percent of teachers also agree/strongly agree that workload demands associated with the roles of school executive, including those of Principals, have negatively impacted on their personal aspirations to seek those roles. This has potentially serious implications for not only individual teachers' careers but the sustainability of staffing for school executive positions. This data raises concerns about future workforce capacity that requires further research attention.

2. Provision of appropriate support platforms for teachers, including human and IT resources.

A) Human Resources:

The shift to more devolved education systems in NSW and WA, via the LSLD and IPS programs respectively, has led to a **discernible reduction in the support provided by the respective Education Departments for human resource (HR) decisions** related to staff recruitment, selection and transfer management. In WA the IPS program has unwound the previous centralised transfer system which placed teachers in school across the state. The IPS program has shifted HR responsibilities to the school level, allowing local choice in all instances (that is, apart from a recently instigated requirement for IP schools to at least consider redeployees of the centralised system). By comparison, the NSW system only allows local choice for every second teacher appointment, and this is after incentive transfers and Aboriginal employment applicants have been placed.

These changes have **increased the HR role of the principal** in such schools. In this regard, the survey responses accord with the separate interview data we have collected in WA and NSW. **Principals often appreciated the ability to select the teaching staff** in the schools they led; however, principals **expressed concerns about the additional managerial workload** this added to their role. Moreover, our research in WA and NSW indicated that few principals have a well-developed skill set with regards to specialised HR processes. One apparent corollary of this was the **preference for selecting fixed term contract or temporary teachers to address the recruitments needs of schools**, rather than permanent appointments. The **proportion of permanent teachers has been declining**, at least in NSW. Teachers in both states have raised concerns about the transparency and equity of this recruitment approach. In the words of one survey respondent:

Temporary teachers are taken advantage of and loaded with an unreasonable amount of work by schools in their efforts to have the school consider them for a renewal of temporary contracts. The schools are happy to take advantage of these young teachers without having to commit to renewing their contracts.

In August 2018 the WA Public Sector Commissioner issued an instruction to limit use of fixed term contract and casual arrangements, a policy that in the public education system is now being enacted by the WA Department of Education's Staff Recruitment and Employment Services. This highlights that careful consideration needs to be given to the provision of HR support platforms and the devolvement of HR responsibilities to schools. We report further findings on the experiences of temporary teachers in NSW below, in the section on early career teachers and retention.

B) IT Resources:

There was evidence in our survey of teachers' experiences of difficulties in **grappling with moribund or dysfunctional IT systems that impede instead of support their work**.

The 'daily activities' inventory established by our study indicates the proportion of teachers reporting daily work on "navigating implementation of new external technology platforms e.g. SPaRO, Scout, PLAN", which equate to more than 1,000 staff across the state. For many others, the IT issues are encountered weekly or according to the pattern with which they must deploy IT in their work. Qualitative responses regarding IT persuasively depict this matter as being problematic.

3. Identifying ways in which the burden of out-of-hours, at-home work can be reduced.

Our research asked teachers to identify what can be done to support them in their work, requesting that they rank 11 strategies and providing an open-response item for additional input and ideas. The strategies were developed from our Phase 1 investigations in conjunction with extensive and wide-ranging advice from those in a wide range of roles, accessed via the NSWTF and SSTUWA.

The top 3 strategies identified in responses to the NSW survey are:

1. Reducing face-to-face teaching time for teachers, executives and teaching principals to increase collaboration on planning, programming, assessing, and reporting.
2. Acknowledging the professional judgment of teachers, executives and principals by developing protocols for the collection/ recording and analysis of data, to eliminate processes that are unnecessary/ cumbersome/ extremely time consuming.
3. Providing more specialist teacher support for students with special needs.

The full list of strategies can be provided on request.

4. Investigating ways to increase retention rates for the teaching profession, and avoid 'burn out' among early-career teachers.

The challenges currently experienced by teachers and identified above in relation to increases in workload and the resultant negative effects on their personal and professional interests may well be affecting retention within across the profession, as some of the qualitative responses to the NSW survey indicated. In the words of one teacher, for example, the job was:

“not about teaching anymore and, in the words of my own Principal, 'it's not enough to be a great teacher'. We're all required to constantly complete menial tasks so that the person one level above us can tick pointless boxes that demonstrate accountability or implementation of policy x or policy y. Good teachers leave because they have the sense to get out of a system which is fundamentally broken”

The many comments such as this suggest that **reducing excessive administrative demands and allowing teachers the space to focus on their core work of teaching and learning is likely to support increased retention.**

The NSW survey also reveals some concerns particular to the experiences of early career teachers. **Early career teachers in our sample were more likely to work in temporary positions**, a structure acknowledged by the Department of Education itself, which notes that “the majority of teachers commence their careers in the NSW public education system as casual or temporary teachers” (NSW Department of Education, 2018). The employment category of temporary teacher has been growing steadily since its creation in 2001 (while the overall proportion of permanent positions has been decreasing) and, as mentioned above, was noted by the temporary teachers in our sample as highly unsatisfactory. When data were disaggregated for employment category, it became evident that temporary teachers are generally doing the same amount of work as their permanent counterparts. Yet they also experience significant and particular precarity (Burgess & Campbell, 1998), with qualitative responses indicating a perceived need to ‘prove themselves’ and take on additional roles within the school so as to be in a better position for gaining permanent employment. To give one example:

“Temporary and casual teachers are in an awfully precarious position, their careers at the whim of principals who pick and choose according to who tows the line. They take on all roles, jumping through hoops to retain their position and add to their CV in order to gain permanency.”

Some temporary teachers felt they worked even harder than their permanent counterparts, and that they were at times exploited by other staff who would “shift” work to them. When asked about strategies to improve their workload, the overriding qualitative response was a request for there to be **new systems and structures around converting, or otherwise transitioning current temporary teachers to permanent status.**

Temporary teachers in the NSW survey were also more likely to be working in rural and remote school settings, or those serving low-SES students and communities. While the overall workload effect documented in the survey has been a ‘blanketing’ of administrative demands across all schools, it should also be noted that schools serving rural and remote, and low-SES student populations also involve particular challenges for teachers in meeting the needs of students (see e.g. Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Stacey, Wilson & Gavin, 2018; Parding, McGrath-Champ & Stacey, 2017; Stacey, 2018). Therefore, **reducing system-wide inequity, much of which has been exacerbated through school choice policy approaches of the past thirty years, is an additional strategy which must be employed.**

Conclusion

Our research shows high and increasing working hours, complexity and demands, alongside a range of negative outcomes associated with those changes. While some variation in the nature of work demands is evident across different school settings, the shifts in hours and intensity of work appear to be universal. Thus we conclude these changes are systemic and due to the impost of a range of policies which individually may have understandable intent, but which collectively produce an unsustainable increase of demands upon teachers. Our research is consistent with a range of other studies, including those conducted by government, nationally, and also internationally. We welcome this inquiry’s efforts to attend to this situation and **reiterate our willingness to provide further input to the inquiry as appropriate.**

Our selected Publications and Related Materials

Reports (4)

- McGrath-Champ, S., Wilson, R., Stacey, M. and Fitzgerald, S. (2018). *Understanding work in schools: The foundation for teaching and learning*. Report to the NSW Teachers Federation, <https://news.nswtf.org.au/application/files/7315/3110/0204/Understanding-Work-In-Schools.pdf>
- Parding, K; Sehlstedt, T; Johansson, A; Berg-Jansson, A & Jakobsson, M (2018). *Lärares arbetsvillkor i kontexten av marknadisering, privatisering, val och konkurrens – beskrivande data*. Rapport. Luleå: Universitetstryckeriet. ISBN: 978-91-7790-024-5 <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:ltu:diva-67117>
- McGrath-Champ, S; Wilson, R & Stacey, M (2017). *Teaching and Learning: Review of Workload (Preliminary report)*. NSW Teachers Federation: Surry Hills.
- Fitzgerald, S., McGrath-Champ, S., Wilson, R., Stacey, M., Rainnie, A. & Parding, K. (2016). Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee. Inquiry into the Department of Education's Independent Public Schools Initiative, Western Australian Legislative Assembly.

Journal Articles (10)

- Fitzgerald, S. Stacey, M., McGrath-Champ, S., Parding, K. and Rainnie, A. (2018). Devolution, market dynamics and the Independent Public School initiative in Western Australia: ‘winning back’ what has been lost? *Journal of Education Policy* 33(5), 662-681. doi: 10.1080/02680939.2017.1412502
- Fitzgerald, S., McGrath-Champ, S., Stacey, M., Wilson, R. and Gavin, M. (2018). Intensification of Teachers’ Work under Devolution: A “Tsunami” of Paperwork. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, online first. doi: 10.1177/0022185618801396
- Gavin, M. (2018). Working industrially or professionally? What strategies should teacher unions use to improve teacher salaries in neoliberal times? *Labour & Industry: A journal of the social and economic relations of work*, online first. doi: 10.1080/10301763.2018.1548068

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- Parding, K., McGrath-Champ, S. & Stacey, M. (2017). 'Teachers, school choice and competition: Lock-in effects within and between sectors'. *Policy Futures in Education* 15(1):113 – 128. doi: 10.1177/1478210316688355
- Parding, K. & Berg-Jansson, A. (2016). Teachers' working conditions amid Swedish school choice reform. Avenues for further research. *Professions and Professionalism* 6(1), 1-16.
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