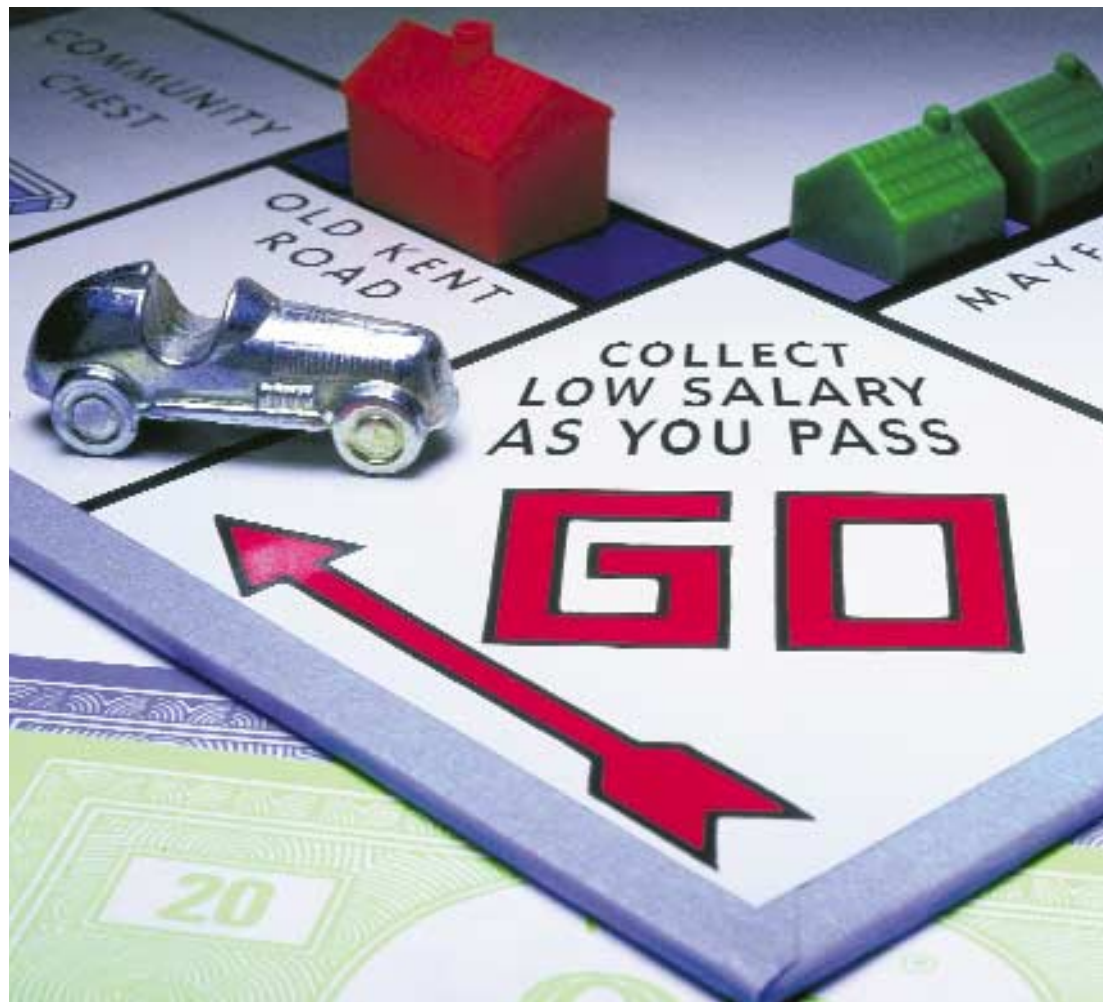


This way up

School teachers' salaries are not high enough to attract students into teaching or prevent teachers from accepting more lucrative jobs overseas. Jane Breusch reports.



Enterprise bargaining negotiations across five states this year have highlighted the severe salary and workload issues threatening the school teaching profession.

With strong community support, AEU members took unprecedented industrial action in NSW, Victoria and WA in pursuit of pay rises and better working conditions, as well as publicising the looming teacher shortage. With over 100,000 teachers and allied staff on strike and stopwork meetings attended by more than 40,000, this was the biggest teachers' strike in Australia's history.

"Clearly, salaries need to be lifted across Australia if we are going to attract and retain teachers in the public education system," says NSW Teachers' Federation secretary Barry Johnson.

While comparing national salaries is part of the picture, AEU federal secretary Rob Durbridge believes a global perspective is also essential.

"Around 35,000 Australian teachers work in London alone," he says.

"We have to be considering salaries as part of a global market for teachers. In Britain, they get considerably more money and that's what's attracting them."

Durbridge says the highest rate of departure overseas occurs in the first five or six years of a teacher's career as they approach the upper salary limit in Australia.

"This problem is compounded by the ageing workforce where, in the next decade, up to 100,000 teachers will retire. At the same time, teacher training rates have not recovered even to the level of the 1980s."

Low salaries and poaching According to Victorian branch research officer Paul Kennelly, Victoria used to have the best beginning teachers' salaries of any of the states. "Now we are fifth," he says (see 'Ready, set, go' on page 6).

AT A GLANCE

- Current teacher salaries are not attracting students into teaching or preventing teachers from accepting positions overseas

- Salaries need to be increased to address the growing national—and international—shortage of teachers

- Enterprise bargaining negotiations have also focused on workload and class sizes.



Clearly, starting salaries need to rise to attract students into teaching, says Kennelly. "They'll make up their minds about whether to pursue teaching as a career when they see the workloads during their teaching rounds. But if you don't have them in the course in the first place, you have a real problem."

While low starting salaries are a big disincentive, it doesn't get much better for experienced classroom teachers (see 'Classroom salaries around Australia', right).

Victorian teachers turned out in record numbers on the National Day of Action in September.

Clearly, starting salaries need to rise to attract students into teaching...

Tasmanian branch state manager Chris Lane says the main concern there is how to address the problem of experienced teachers getting stuck on the same top classroom salary after only eight years of service.

The Tasmanian branch is negotiating for a review of promoted positions and the introduction of an in-classroom promoted position to allow for salary increases for more experienced teachers.

"Unfortunately, what we tend to do is promote the best teachers out of the classroom," he says.

South Australian branch secretary Jack Major says interstate poaching on its own, let alone international poaching, reinforces the need for more uniform salaries around the country.

CLASSROOM SALARIES AROUND AUSTRALIA

NSW and the ACT currently have the highest salary for the top of the unpromoted classroom teacher rate, at \$58,992, followed by the Northern Territory at \$58,360, Queensland at \$57,132, and Tasmania at \$57,095.

Victoria's Experienced Teacher with Responsibility classification (at \$59,055) and Queensland's Senior Teacher classification (at \$59,510) both provide opportunities for teachers to progress to a higher salary without leaving the classroom. Similar advanced skill classifications, on a more limited basis, are available in South Australia, the Northern Territory, Tasmania and Western Australia.

Victoria and Western Australia have the lowest salary horizons for unpromoted classroom teachers, at \$55,828 and \$56,126 respectively.

South Australia is currently midway through the period of an agreement. State teachers received a salary increase of four per cent on 1 July this year and are due for another 3.5 per cent in October 2004.

Currently, the top salary for classroom teachers is \$56,758 a year.

"It's a national teaching market these days. It didn't used to be, but now with issues of teacher under-supply, the NSW government has been advertising in Saturday's press here for months to fill vacancies there," he says. "They're snapping undergraduates out of the three South Australian universities."

Workloads and class sizes count. Higher salary increases were not the only focus of negotiations this year. "The central issues around the country at the moment are salaries, workload and class sizes," says AEU federal industrial officer Linda Gale.

"Members are not saying that salaries aren't important but workload is just becoming unbearable," says Gale. "So that's a big-ticket item on the bargaining agenda everywhere."

In Queensland, which negotiated a 3.8 per cent pay increase from 1 June, the key issue was improved working conditions.

Queensland Teachers' Union president Julie-Ann McCullough says the greatest achievement was securing additional teaching places to reduce class sizes to 28 from 30 in years 4 to 10. A new head of curriculum position will also be introduced.

"Obviously the key to us this time was working and learning conditions," says McCullough. "It was the community that wanted this as well. The government decided it was better to agree to the issue of class sizes in an overall strategy rather than continuing to have us offside and have the community offside." >

 For more information www.aeufederal.org.au/Industrial/Salaries/teachers.html

Parity between states

The ACT won a 6.87 per cent pay increase on 1 October for teachers at the top of the unpromoted scale, bringing salaries there in line with NSW.

“For us, what was important was re-establishing parity or better with NSW classroom teachers. We’ve done that,” says ACT branch secretary Clive Haggar.

An unusual clause in the previous agreement required the first pay increase under the next agreement to be finalised before the expiration of the old agreement. With that now done, the ACT branch has begun negotiations to finalise the remainder of the new agreement, including subsequent pay increases.

“We will look at the outcomes in NSW and determine what’s appropriate there and obviously take a position into the bargaining arena,” Haggar says.

Arbitration

Salary negotiations in NSW were preceded by the Vinson inquiry into public education last year, which recommended an immediate five per cent increase in teachers’ salaries outside of the existing award.

“The federation’s claim in New South Wales for a 25 per cent salary increase includes the five per cent recommended by the Vinson inquiry,” says Johnson.

“The federation’s major concern is that government has repeatedly stated it will only fund a CPI increase in salaries for teachers. Any increase over and above that would need to come from within the existing education budget.

“This is unacceptable and members have therefore focused their campaign

on the need for the government to fully fund any increases awarded by the Industrial Relations Commission,” says Johnson.

The NSW Teachers’ Federation has taken its claim to the NSW Industrial Relations Commission for arbitration.

In Western Australia an inadequate offer from government on wages and workload provoked escalating industrial action, with bans on a range of non-teaching duties. In November the government applied to have the Union’s claim arbitrated by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

An average pay rise

In Tasmania, agreement has been reached to continue the so-called “nexus arrangement” on salaries, which means teachers receive a pay rise each year that is the average of pay rises around the country.

Lane anticipates an increase of about four per cent in March next year after a 4.4 per cent rise this year.

Teachers are “absolutely happy” with the nexus, he says, which has lifted them from the position of being the lowest-paid in Australia. And it has stopped many young teachers from leaving university and going straight to the mainland states.

“It’s the mid-range and for Tasmanian teachers that’s quite remarkable. In my 18 years working for the union, we have constantly had to battle to get Tasmanian teachers off the bottom of the salary range,” Lane says. “We had been so far behind.”

Northern Territory branch secretary Alan Perrin says salaries and

“The government decided it was better to agree to the issue of class sizes...rather than continuing to have us offside and have the community offside.”

allowances are critical to attracting teachers to remote locations. The Territory is currently mid-agreement, receiving a five per cent pay increase in March with another four per cent due in March 2004.

“We always have trouble with our remote locations,” says Perrin. “Basically, it’s an entirely different world. Salaries really have to be a reward for working there.” ■

JANE BREUSCH is a freelance writer.



READY, SET, GO

In Victoria, new teachers with four years tertiary training receive \$40,983 a year. This compares with \$41,753 in South Australia, \$41,610 in the Northern Territory, \$41,400 in the ACT, and \$41,109 in New South Wales.

In Queensland, new teachers receive \$40,517 a year, while in Tasmania they are paid \$39,040 and in Western Australia \$38,288.