



AEU Parliamentary Brief

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State of Our Schools' Survey

A national survey of Australian public school principals, recently conducted by the Australian Education Union (AEU), showed that principals are clearly frustrated with increasing workloads, increasing pressure and limited resources. 90% of those responding said there was a real need for a significant increase in funding to public schools.

The survey was conducted during September/October 2005 with just over 1100 principals responding.

The key findings of the survey included:

- 80% of principals rated the Australian government's performance in relation to public education as very poor (50%) or poor;
- Nearly 90% believe funding to public schools should be substantially increased;
- Over 40% reported that they have at least one program being taught by a teacher not qualified in that subject;
- Over 60% of schools had experienced teacher supply problems in the previous year;
- Over half reported that the teacher supply problems had worsened during 2005;
- Over 80% of principals regarded school-raised funds as very important (50%) or important;
- Over 60% used these funds for curriculum materials and over 50% for buildings and maintenance.

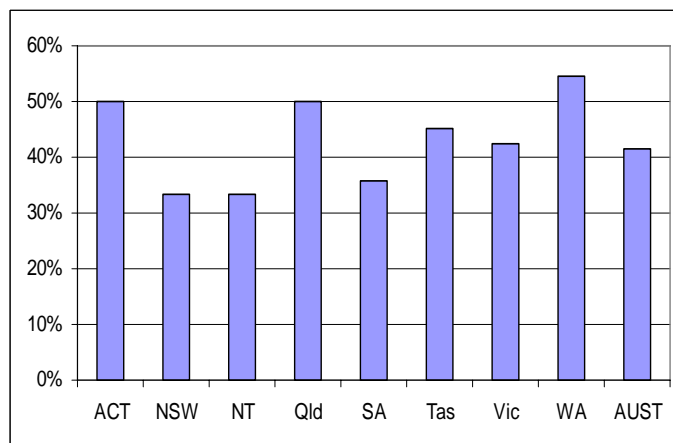
A significant number of principals expressed concern at increasing workloads with more than 50% saying they

worked between 50 and 60 hours per week and nearly 25% saying they worked in excess of 60 hours per week. The major area of workload concern was in administration and paperwork.

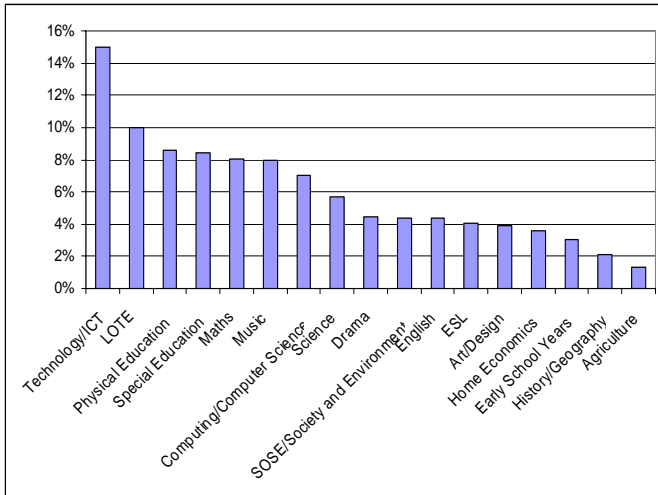
The numbers of teachers teaching in subject areas for which they have no qualifications continues to be of concern, with 40% of schools having at least one program being taught by a teacher unqualified in that subject. In secondary schools, this figure was over 72%.

The curriculum areas most affected are Technology/ICT, Languages Other Than English (LOTE), and physical education.

3.2 Does your school have any programs being taught by teachers who are not fully qualified in the curriculum and teaching areas concerned? (All schools)

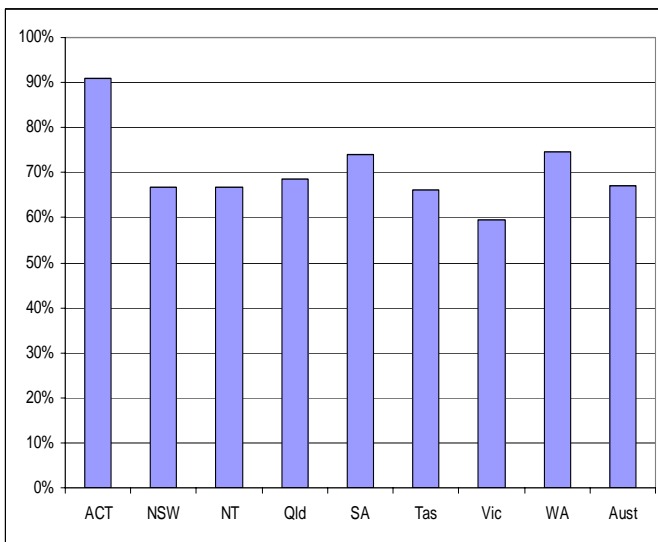


3.3 If yes, please specify the curriculum areas involved.

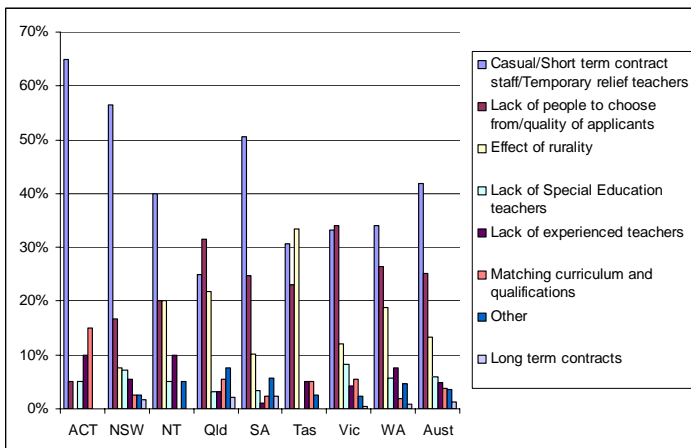


Teacher supply is also of concern with over 60% of principals having experienced difficulties in staffing their school during 2005. The main problem area is that of casual/short term relief positions.

4.1. Has your school experienced any teacher supply problems over the previous year?



4.2 If you are experiencing teacher supply problems, which is the main problem facing your school?



Classroom results undercut panic merchants' claims

Author: Geoff Masters
Source: The Australian (Page 12, Tuesday 22 November 2005)

So much for the argument that our school standards are in serious decline, argues Geoff Masters

THE conventional wisdom in these pages is that standards in Australian schools are plunging and that this supposed decline is due to an outcomes focus being adopted by Australian schools. Neither claim is supported by available research.

The most reliable evidence we have on standards in Australian schools is provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Program for International Student Assessment and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. Each of these surveys involves more than 40 countries and tests Australian students from all states and territories in government, Catholic and independent schools.

PISA assesses the ability of 15-year-olds to apply understanding and skill in mathematics, science and reading to everyday problems. Are students able to perform currency conversions? Read tables and graphs in newspapers? Use basic understanding of science to make sense of magazine articles about topics such as genetically modified foods and animal cloning?

The results show that Australian 15-year-olds are among the best in the world when it comes to careful reading, logical thinking and the application of mathematical and scientific understanding to everyday problems. Among the 41 countries participating in PISA in 2003, Australian students were significantly outperformed only by students in Finland in reading literacy; Hong Kong, Finland, South Korea and The Netherlands in mathematical literacy; and Finland, Japan and South Korea in scientific literacy. Australian 15-year-olds performed at similarly high levels in PISA in 2000.

TIMSS assesses Year 4 and Year 8 students' mathematics and science knowledge. Do students know how many legs an insect has? Which animals lay eggs? What happens when light passes through a prism? What is the sum of the angles of a triangle? How do you convert 7/10 to a decimal?

TIMSS results show no decline in Australian Year 4 or Year 8 mathematics or science achievements between 1994-5 and 2002-03. In fact, levels of achievement in Year 8 science increased during this decade. During the same period, achievement levels in other countries improved, meaning that some countries that were below or equal to Australia a decade ago now outrank us, but there is no evidence from TIMSS of a decline in the mathematics or science knowledge of Year 4 or Year 8 students.

It can be concluded from these international surveys that Australian 15-year-olds, on average, have relatively high

levels of skill in reading and in applying mathematical and scientific principles and processes to everyday problems. Although Year 4 and Year 8 students perform as well as they did a decade ago, Australian students are not among the highest in the world in the area of knowledge recall.

A recent article in the Bangkok Post talked of plunging standards due to an outcomes focus at Australian schools. The reference to an outcomes focus points to recent work by schools and education systems to clarify what all students should be learning. This is part of a worldwide trend to focus not only on educational inputs (such as expenditure, syllabuses and student-teacher ratios) but also on what students should be learning (that is, desired learning outcomes) and how well this is being achieved. From the point of view of accountability, it is no longer sufficient to know that teachers are teaching the syllabus: an outcomes focus requires measures of what students are learning.

The idea that specifying desired learning outcomes may lead to a decline in standards is not supported by international evidence. Singapore, which consistently performs at or near the top in TIMSS, organises its curriculum around learning outcomes. Finland, which consistently performs at or near the top in PISA, explicitly uses student-centred instruction, has no streaming and no national examinations and gives teachers considerable discretion in how they teach.

There is also no logical reason why specifying desired learning outcomes should lead to a decline in standards. Although some attempts to specify outcomes have gone into too much detail, fragmenting the curriculum into many bits of learning, and others have resulted in outcomes that are too vague and open to interpretation, these are extremes. Learning outcomes at their best provide a level of detail that is useful to teachers in designing classroom activities and include essential knowledge, skills and understandings underpinning school subjects.

A focus on learning outcomes and individual progress does not imply leaving students to do what they wish or to learn for themselves. Intervention to address students' misunderstandings and direct teaching of subject matter -- including whole-class teaching -- are important elements of effective teacher practice in learning-centred classrooms. With greater clarity about the knowledge, skills and understandings that all students are expected to develop by particular points in their schooling, it becomes unnecessary to require every teacher to teach in exactly the same way. Professional judgments can be made about the most appropriate ways to achieve desired learning outcomes with particular groups of students.

And the specification of learning outcomes facilitates rigorous assessment. Clear statements of what students are expected to learn provide a better basis for constructing examinations than descriptions of what teachers are planning to do. Sound measurement requires knowledge of what students are expected to learn as a result of classroom activities.

Whatever the motivations of those who claim that education standards are plunging, that our schools are failing and that efforts to specify desired learning outcomes have contributed to this supposed decline, there is no support for these claims in international evidence.

Geoff Masters is chief executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research.

(Article reprinted with the kind permission of Geoff Masters)

Why AWAs are bad for education

Education needs teamwork.

Teachers, support staff, school leadership, parents and students all work together to provide quality education. Teams of staff develop methodology, prepare materials, deliver rich learning experiences and ensure special needs are met. A cooperative work culture is essential to this process, but this is undermined if staff feel that they are competing for a share of limited resources, or that they can achieve individual advantage by keeping a good idea to themselves or by claiming the work of a team as their own personal achievement.

Education is complex work.

Measuring productivity is very difficult when the "production line" is a school or TAFE, and the output is not widgets but the educational, cultural, and psycho-social development of students. The "enterprise" of education is subject to a plethora of external factors at a macro and a micro level. In addition, what works with one student will not work with another, and educators constantly revise and reinvent their work to achieve the best that is possible in the context of constantly shifting circumstances.

This is typical of a highly skilled workforce bringing professional judgement to bear, rather than applying rigid, pre-determined procedures. If education were *not* characterised by considerable variation in technique, it would not be quality education, since each student is a new challenge demanding new approaches.

Nevertheless, this means that assessment of staff performance can be highly subjective. Without time to understand the particular factors in each case -- those over which the staff member and their colleagues had control and those which were imposed externally -- judgements tend to be arbitrary and inaccurate.

The degree of subjectivity in such assessments also leaves the door open to favouritism, discrimination and corruption. It is easy to disguise an improper motive when each decision is taken in isolation. And it is easy to slip into lazy habits, allowing subconscious prejudices to operate, when employee conditions are treated as individual events rather than as patterns of employer behaviour.

As a result, the individualised assessments of performance implicit in individual wage outcomes are distrusted and resented by the very staff they are meant to “motivate”.

Collective bargaining is the most efficient choice.

The administrative burden involved in developing, negotiating, settling, registering, monitoring, applying and renewing terms and conditions of employment on an individual basis for hundreds of thousands of employees, would be immense. Whole new bureaucracies would be required simply to keep the machinery of individual agreements rolling.

If individual negotiations led to variation from the “pattern agreement”, there would need to be monitoring and compliance mechanisms to ensure that each variation was kept track of and adhered to, and tracked from one agreement to the next. Over time the resulting complexity would be horrendous.

If employers insured against mushrooming complexity by rigidly adhering to a pattern agreement, the whole edifice of “individual” bargaining would be revealed as a sham. Employers would in fact maintain a collective set of terms and conditions, while depriving employees of the opportunity to negotiate collectively.

The burden of administering individual agreements for staff would be smaller in magnitude, but even larger in impact, for smaller education employers, such as disability and early childhood services. In most cases the burden on such employers would be intolerable, leading to job cuts and reductions in services to the community.

The imbalance of power is extreme.

There is no equality of bargaining power between an individual employee and a public education employer. Teachers, with substantial HECS debts, are largely dependant on a single employer for opportunities for relocation or promotion within the career they have trained for. Even with shortages of teachers in some regions and some subject areas, each teacher taken individually has vastly inferior bargaining power to the large employers within which they negotiate their careers. Allied staff, often part time workers with family responsibilities, likewise have no capacity to bargain on an equal basis with a large government department.

Many rights depend upon consistency

Education departments are large systems. Many conditions only make sense if they are equitably applied across the system: such as teacher registration; transfers between schools; and funding for professional development.

These arrangements impact directly on workers’ lives. They can only be regulated – and bargained – collectively. For example, a variation to one teacher’s transfer entitlements affects the transfer entitlements of all other teachers in the system. Similarly, education workers at all levels must be able to rely on their colleagues’ training and expertise. If one person accepts

terms of employment which require them to perform a role they are not qualified for, or where ongoing professional development is compromised, that has an impact on the conditions of all staff, not just the individual signing the AWA.

AWAs can undermine these collective rights, and leave workers with no viable avenue to collectively improve such rights.

Improvements in public education have been won through collective bargaining, and could not be achieved through AWAs.

Education workers often combine industrial demands (eg controlling excessive workload) with solutions which improve the quality of education (eg reduced class sizes). Bargaining collectively, education workers have proposed systemic solutions, and addressed system-wide problems. Reduced class sizes, more support staff, better resourcing of special needs, more women in leadership positions, the expansion of teacher training in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, new classifications to retain high skill teachers in the classroom, and many other initiatives, have originated in the industrial demands of education workers.

With AWAs, no single teacher or teacher’s aide could, for example, achieve a state-wide reduction in class sizes in the early years.

The Australian community benefits from the fact that education workers bargain collectively to improve the quality of public education. These benefits could not be achieved through individual bargaining.

Indeed, an individual bargaining regime such as the one being proposed threatens the very existence of public systems as we know them. While schools as individual entities may suit a privatised view of education provision, such a model undermines the provision of quality education for **all** students, which is the “raison d’etre” of public systems.

Collective bargaining in the education industry is of benefit to the workforce, to the employers, and most importantly to the public.

Australia needs a public education system that rewards its professional, highly skilled and dedicated workforce, at the same time finding ways to improve teaching and learning. This can be done using collective bargaining. It cannot be done through AWAs, and would be endangered by the uncertainty that AWAs would introduce.

Kennett in Victoria, and Court in WA, tried to move education staff onto individual agreements. The results were disruptive, demoralising and counter-productive. The education of Australia’s youth is too important to be put at risk by repeating a failed experiment.

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