More teachers, but fewer staying the course

Chronic teacher shortages won't be solved, say researchers, until governments confront the reasons why so many leave their jobs early. By Caroline Milburn.

Australia's primary schools have grappled with teacher shortages for years. The race to hire more people into the profession has begun. Governments are scrambling to offer scholarships and other incentives to get more students, mature-age graduates and workers in other professions to consider a career in the classroom. The strategy seems to be working, with education authorities reporting a rise in teacher graduate numbers.

In Victoria, more than 4200 people graduated as teachers last year, an extra 600 compared with the previous year. But what if the focus on stimulating teacher supply is the policy version of putting water into a bucket riddled with holes?

The absence of education researchers who have spent the past decade studying teacher shortages is a concern, say researchers. "We think there is a policy solution to the problem," they say. "But the policy makers need to understand the underlying causes.""The problem is not just about salary," they say. "It's about the work environment and the lack of administrative support."

Between 29 and 40 percent of teachers leave the profession within five years of starting, according to estimates in numerous surveys by teachers, school leaders and education authorities. An accurate national figure is publicly available because exit statistics are kept and collated differently by state and territory education authorities.

Education specialist Dr Philip Biley of Monash University has interviewed dozens of former teachers about why they dropped out within five years of starting. Their findings identify similar problems to those uncovered in Dr Richardson's longitudinal research: that teacher education programs and school-based induction and mentoring are failing to prepare teachers adequately for the stressful demands of teaching.

Excessive workloads, often linked to compliance paperwork and administration, are also causing teachers to drop out early. As the demands on teachers have soared, some have left the profession as a result of the stress and other non-financial factors.

Some teachers report not being given an easy job, others had mentors who were too busy to help them. "Schools do the best they can, but it's problematic aspiring that classroom teachers will be good mentors," says Dr Gallant. "The mentors haven't been trained formally. You need to ensure mentoring is working and it should last for three years instead of one." Even people who had been teaching for years had only received training levels of emotional exhaustion, according to a burnout inventory applied to early-career teachers in the longitudinal study. "Teaching has a reputation as one of the most stressful jobs, with over 50 percent of teachers report high levels of occupational stress compared with 25 percent of people in managerial and 25 percent in professional and support management occupations."

In the longitudinal study, many teachers felt their university education courses had not equipped them with strategies to deal with the complex interpersonal demands of teaching. Dr Waite says most teacher education courses are not providing the kind of psychological preparation, such as in coping strategies and self-care, that teachers often need. Teachers who have students who are on the edge of emotional strain are more likely to remain in the profession for longer.

"Teachers have to find the balance between caring and being a human being. It's important that they are not overwhelmed," Dr Waite says. "Many teachers find it difficult to balance their personal and professional lives."

"We need to do better when it comes to preparing teachers for the classroom. Teachers need to be prepared in ways that are relevant to the real world," Dr Waite says. "They need to be equipped with strategies to manage stress and cope with difficult situations."

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