

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.**

AS SCHOOLS grapple with Australia's teacher shortage, the race to lure 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 400 compared with the previous year. But what if the focus on stimulating teacher supply is the policy version of pouring water into a bucket riddled with holes?

A team of education researchers who have spent the past nine years interviewing teachers think this is the case. They argue that chronic teacher shortages won't be solved as long as governments keep failing to confront the reasons why large numbers of teachers desert their jobs early.

"Poor pay is not the reason they're giving for leaving the profession: it's the workplace issues of highly stressful, poor working conditions," says Dr Paul Richardson, who has been working with Monash University colleague Dr Helen Watt since 2002 on Australia's first longitudinal study tracking the experiences of 1650 teachers from the time they started a university education course through their years in

the profession. Twenty-seven per cent of those surveyed planned to quit teaching within their first five years of teaching. Dr Richardson says the finding has big implications for governments trying to entice other professionals to switch to teaching. Many of the teacher recruits planning to quit were people who had experience in other professions.

"These were people who had been in business commenting on conditions in their schools by saying, 'There's no support, you can't get any photocopying done, you've got to do it all yourself!'

"One guy said: 'I've been a solicitor and now I've got a one-metre desk in a staffroom

teachers who leave the profession early is creating a huge drain on Australia's finances. Based on his analysis of federal education department figures, almost half of the 25,155 university students nationwide who began teacher training courses in 2006 were needed to fill jobs vacated by teachers with less than five years' experience.

"There's a rule in business that the cost of replacing a worker is three times their annual salary," he says. "High early-career attrition in teaching is costing Australia billions of dollars in wasted talent, money and training."

Dr Riley and his colleague Dr Andrea Gallant of Deakin

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DR PHILIP RILEY, Monash University education specialist

where you can't think.' They were totally shocked by the working conditions and the lack of administrative support."

Between 25 and 40 per cent of teachers leave the profession within five years of starting, according to estimates in numerous surveys by teacher unions and education academics. An accurate national figure is not publicly available because exit statistics are kept and collated differently by individual education authorities in each state and territory.

Education specialist Dr Philip Riley of Monash University says the cost of having to replace so many

University have 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 people 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, school support structures



Stress and other non-financial factors are causing many teachers to leave their jobs early. PICTURE: CATHRYN TREMAIN

haven't kept up with the changes.

In Victoria, every first-year teacher is supposed to have a mentor, under reforms brought in several years ago by the former Labor government. Both studies show the reality in schools is a version of pot luck.

Some teachers reported not being given a mentor, others had mentors who were too busy to help them.

"Schools do the best they can but it's problematic assuming 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 two years had highly elevated 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 more stressful professions. Forty-one per cent of teachers report high levels of occupational stress compared with 31 per cent of people in nursing, 29 per cent in managerial jobs and 27 per cent 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 their jobs. Dr Watt says most teacher education courses are not providing the kind of psychological preparation, such as tuition in coping strategies and self-care, that teachers often need.

"Teachers have to find the balance between caring and being hugely personally invested in their work so their own emotional health doesn't become strained.

"Psychologists receive this sort of preparation for relating with clients, and teaching is highly relational work; you're with students all day, you're dealing with parents, families. But this type of emotional management is something that isn't really present in teacher education programs."

Concern about workforce problems has prompted the Australian Council of Deans of Education to urge the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership to create a national, publicly available database on teacher supply, demand and attrition as part of the national accreditation of teacher education programs.

Professor Toni Downes, the council's president, says there is some room for improvement in teacher education courses to

build resilience in pre-service teachers. But stress is a workplace problem that should be tackled jointly by employers, unions and teacher professional organisations.

"I am not absolving teacher education courses from doing something," Professor Downes says. "But the majority of work must be done in induction and support programs in schools because the type of coping strategies that might be needed in western Sydney compared with Sydney's north shore are significantly different.

"In both cases families and communities place demands on teachers which are stressful, but they are very different demands."

She says Australia has an unimpressive record compared with other countries in providing comprehensive induction programs across private and public school systems.

"When medical and law graduates come out into the workforce we make sure they have the simplest cases, they are carefully supervised when they do something and the complex and really difficult cases are in the hands of the elite, most experienced practitioners.

"Teaching is one of the few professions where beginners are put into the deep end, almost thoughtlessly. If governments are serious about reducing attrition rates and improving the quality of teaching, then where are the structured, systematic programs that ease teachers into the complexity and diversity of their work?"

Victoria's Minister for the Teaching Profession, Peter Hall, told *The Age* he would consider the findings from both research projects that call for better quality control of school mentoring and induction programs.