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Supporting our teacher workforce

Three steps to uplift teacher and student outcomes

The teacher workforce is not in freefall – but nor is it future-proof.



Despite frequent headlines about shortages and burnout, the demographic data tells a more consistent story, as demonstrated by the recent [AITSL report on national trends in the teacher workforce](#) and new research by [e61 on teacher attrition](#).

The workforce is ageing, yes – but not in a way that suggests an imminent cliff. Attrition rates have remained largely steady, and the overall supply of registered teachers has not drastically declined.

But this stability in numbers masks a deeper and more complex reality: the profession is under significant and growing pressure.

The reason most teachers consider leaving the workforce – sometimes never to return – is workload.

Across Australia, many qualified and registered teachers are choosing not to return to the classroom, not because

they've lost their passion, but because the day-to-day reality of teaching has become unsustainable.

And while the size of the workforce has remained stable, the expectations placed on it have not. Over the past decade, the role of schools – and by extension, teachers – has expanded significantly. With increasing investments in education have come increasing demands. Systems now expect more intensive support for student wellbeing, growing engagement with parents and communities, and greater responsibility for addressing complex social and emotional needs.

Much of this expansion is necessary and worthwhile, particularly in the context of rising mental health concerns among young people, but it inevitably requires more from a workforce that has not grown proportionally.

Simply put: the same number of teachers is now expected to do much more.

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These workforce pressures are not felt equally across the country.

Some of our most disadvantaged and geographically isolated schools are experiencing the most acute staff shortages.

The unintended effect of significant increases in overall school funding, while the overall size of the workforce remains stable, is that teachers tend to be drawn toward better-resourced metropolitan schools.

This concentration of teacher supply deepens educational inequality and leaves communities in rural areas, and those of low socioeconomic status, grappling with chronic staffing gaps.

This is the negative cycle we must break: excessive workloads drive teachers out of the system, which increases pressure on those who remain.

It's not a new problem. Teachers have faced workload challenges for many years, and we have a pretty good understanding of the challenges and solutions.

However, if we're serious about solving the workforce challenge, we need to shift our focus from headline-grabbing panic to long-term structural reform. That means moving beyond discussions of supply and focusing instead on how we support, deploy, and retain the teachers we already have.

This conversation is all the more urgent in the context of the Australian Government's current focus on productivity. Recent Productivity Commission analysis and broader Treasury discourse have rightly turned attention toward improving efficiency and outcomes in the non-market sector, including education.

As one of the largest publicly funded sectors in the economy, improving how our schools operate is not only a matter of fairness and quality, it's a matter of national economic strategy. The education system plays a foundational role in shaping long-term productivity, social mobility, and prosperity.

There are at least three critical areas where education systems can make meaningful change.

1. Strengthen Pathways into Teaching and Invest in Early Career Support

Improving graduation and retention rates for new and aspiring teachers must be a central priority of all systems.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs are a crucial entry point, but too many students enter the classroom underprepared for its practical realities, particularly when it comes to behaviour management and student wellbeing.

Reforming ITE programs to provide more hands-on, in-school experience is essential. But equally important is what happens after graduation. High-quality mentoring, coaching and induction programs are proven to boost retention, yet too few early-career teachers receive the structured support they need.

Yes, investing in mentoring places extra demands on schools in the short term, but it is essential to building a sustainable workforce in the long run.

2. Rethink the Role of Teachers and Broaden the School Workforce

Our current staffing models are relics of the past. Many secondary schools, in particular, still operate under structures designed for a different era.

We need to reimagine how schools are staffed and how time is allocated, not just to teaching, but to all the other responsibilities that now fall within a teacher's remit.

To ensure our schools are equipped to meet the evolving needs of students, we must act decisively to support and reform the profession.

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We need to reimagine how schools are staffed and how time is allocated, not just to teaching, but to all the other responsibilities that now fall within a teacher's remit.

This means expanding and clarifying the role of education support staff, integrating operational and administrative functions more effectively, and exploring the use of technology to streamline low-value tasks.

It also means better embedding health and wellbeing professionals into the school environment (including through improved models of clinical and educational governance), reducing the burden on teachers to meet every student need alone.

There are encouraging pockets of innovation in this space, but we need system-wide conversations and coordinated reform efforts. Until we update the operating model of schools, we will continue to expect too much from too few.

3. Cut Administrative Red Tape to Improve Productivity and Morale

Finally, systems must act decisively to reduce the administrative burden on teachers and school leaders. While the hours are long, it is often the nature of the work – rather than the sheer volume – that leads to burnout.

Excessive compliance requirements, documentation, and bureaucratic processes take teachers away from what matters most: teaching and connecting with students.

Many of these burdens stem from well-intentioned and necessary reforms – especially in areas like child safety and data reporting – but the cumulative effect is significant.

Katie Roberts-Hull's [recent review](#) of school administration in Victorian government schools is an excellent example of the kind of forensic, practical work that needs to happen across jurisdictions.

Streamlining systems may not be glamorous, but it's the hard, necessary work that will pay the biggest dividends in workforce sustainability.

The teacher workforce is not in freefall – but nor is it future-proof.

We have the advantage of stability, but that alone won't solve the challenges ahead.

To ensure our schools are equipped to meet the evolving needs of students, we must act decisively to support and reform the profession.

That means building better pathways into teaching, rethinking the structure of school workforces, and stripping away unnecessary complexity. It means leadership, not just from education departments, but from government, unions, communities, and schools themselves.



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