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Teachers suffer from “unsustainable” administrative demands, finds massive survey

An overwhelming 90 percent of New South Wales teachers say that changes in government policy as well as data collection and administrative responsibilities have significantly added to their work over the past five years and impacted their time to focus on students.

A majority of those who took part in one of the largest ever teacher surveys also said that departmental support had remained static or declined over the same period.

The massive survey of more than 18 thousand or a third of the State’s teachers was conducted by the University of Sydney’s Business School, the School of Education and the New South Wales Teachers Federation.

The results, described as “worrying” by researchers, come in the wake of the latest Gonski recommendations that many commentators say would further add to a teacher’s workload if implemented without additional necessary support.

Many of the surveyed teachers who reported an increase in their work cited administrative tasks. Others cited new policies and procedures, government initiatives and data collection and reporting as factors that are diverting them from activities of direct benefit to students.

While nearly 90 per cent (87.2) said their hours had increased, almost 95 per cent (94.9) also said that their work had become more complex and more than 95 per cent (95.1) said that the range of their work related activities had increased.

More than 96 per cent (96.4) said there had been an increase in the collection, analysis and reporting of data and more than 97 per cent (97.3) reported an increase in administrative tasks.

“The almost unanimous reporting in relation to increases in work indicates a common experience at a level rarely encountered in social science research where variance usually abounds,” said researcher Dr Rachel Wilson said.

Lead researcher, Dr Susan McGrath Champ, described the survey results as “unique”.

Dr McGrath-Champ also said that anonymous comments made by survey respondents reflect a strong sense that layer upon layer of government reform is diverting teachers away from their primary task of ensuring the best possible educational outcomes for students.

“Administration, box ticking exercises and data-related menial tasks waste valuable preparation time and get in the way of delivering authentic learning,” said one teacher.

Another claimed that “administrative tasks and record keeping had more than doubled in the past five years”.

“I feel overworked at the expense of my students,” said yet another respondent.

Dr McGrath-Champ said “many teachers report that the Department’s micro managing and accountability requirements are limiting creativity and do not improve student learning”.

“While they want to support student learning, many teachers feel that accountability or proving themselves to the Department has become their primary task,” she said.

While teachers report an increase in their workload, they say that there has been no improvement of support provided by the Department of Education.

More than 40 per cent of teachers actually reported a decline in support from the Department in relation to student behaviour and welfare. More than 50 per cent of principals and assistant principals reported a decline in support not only with behavioural and welfare issues but also with new syllabuses and policy implementation.

This latest survey follows a 2017 study by the Public Service Commission which found that only 40 per cent of teachers believed that their level of work related stress was acceptable, leaving 60 per cent to deal with what they believed to be unacceptable stress levels.

More than half (54 per cent) of who took part in the Commission’s survey did not believe that the change process in schools was being handled well.

“It is clear from our survey and other recent studies, that current workloads and stress levels in the education sector are unsustainable,” concluded Dr McGrath-Champ.

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