

Time to bolster permanent roles

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Staffing every public school throughout NSW with additional appropriately qualified and accredited permanent teachers remains one of the greatest challenges facing the NSW public school system.

During the past 18 months, I have visited many schools and met hundreds of dedicated teachers who are committed to realising the potential of their students. Their dedication is not being matched systemically with the additional permanent staffing allocations necessary to provide equitable access to curriculum for all students, or to facilitate inbuilt relief and maintain continuity of teaching when supporting professional learning, excursions and the wellbeing of sick teachers.



There are far too many examples across the state where schools are unable to offer particular subjects to students because the system does not have the capacity, or will, to allocate additional and appropriately qualified teachers even though a demonstrable need exists.

Efforts to fill permanent and temporary teacher vacancies in rural, remote and other hard to staff areas are often hindered by a lack of available applicants.

Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP) face a particular structural barrier. SSPs are staffed on a primary school formula. As such, in the staffing entitlement of SSPs, there is no central provision of specialist teachers to address the learning needs of their secondary students as expected in a mainstream high school.

In this context, the most chronic, visible and everyday staffing issue remains the casual teacher shortage. It is truly statewide. From Broken Hill in the far west to the western suburbs of Sydney, and from the far north coast of NSW to the south coast, almost every school I have visited is reporting the problem.

It is no coincidence that all of these issues have worsened during a time when the Department of Education has been unwilling to conduct a thorough statewide workforce analysis. With regards to the casual shortage, the Department has known about this escalating issue for years but has continued to vacate the field with regards to its responsibility to ensure there is a qualified teacher in every classroom for every lesson across the state.

Unfortunately, the current situation looks set to get worse, but the solution is not more casual teachers. It is a fallacy to believe there is a legion of casual teachers being held back by the Department just waiting to go forth to all corners of the state.

The solution is permanency: expand the staffing entitlements of schools and employ an increased number of permanent qualified and accredited teachers. If the Department truly valued the work of casual teachers, they would have offered them permanent work in the identified areas of need a long time ago.

There is no greater example of the Department's neglect in this area than its failure to provide additional permanent teachers through additional funding achieved by the NSW Gonski agreement. Despite lifting the recurrent and permanent funding level for the NSW public school system by \$1 billion in 2019, the Department has only added 99 permanent teaching positions above the pre-existing staffing entitlement.

Equally startling is that the Department budgeted to spend \$157 million in 2019 on casual teacher relief to cover sick and FACs leave. Calculated by averaging the expenditure on casual relief over the previous three years, this figure is modest when you consider that many classes were split, extras were accessed, or teachers did not take leave or attend professional learning because they feared their classes could not be covered.

Considering the Department expects to spend this amount, it should simply convert that money into additional permanent positions and allocate them to schools via an expanded staffing entitlement as a form of inbuilt relief. To do so would create the equivalent of 1500 teaching positions.

Add this money to the permanent increases in recurrent funding for our public schools that we achieved through the Gonski and Fair Funding Now! campaigns, and there are millions of dollars available to resolve most, if not all, of the current challenges of staffing the NSW public school system.

The provision of qualified permanent teachers – including executive and specialist teachers and the provision of qualified permanent non-school based teachers – remains the surest way of supporting schools to deliver teaching programs that can improve learning outcomes of all students, especially those across key areas of equity (such as Aboriginal background, socioeconomic status, disability and English Language Proficiency) and those impacted by a school's location in remote and rural areas of NSW.

The solution appears obvious to teachers, but there is a threat. The major obstacle to a statewide increase in school staffing entitlements and non-school based teacher positions remains the Department's Local Schools, Local Decisions policy.

Local Schools, Local Decisions has been an abject failure and is in material conflict with any notion perpetuated by the Department of a well-coordinated, structured and supportive public school system. It also remains the single greatest threat to teacher permanency and high quality, high equity public schooling for all students because it devolves the cost of teacher positions to the school budget with insufficient systemic accountability to guarantee that staffing entitlements are maintained and that teaching and learning remains uncompromised.

That is simply not good enough for our public schools and the students they engage in learning. The campaign is on. It's time to bolster the staffing entitlement of all public schools with additional permanent teachers to meet the learning needs of all students, and to support the professional learning and wellbeing of teachers.

Henry Rajendra, Senior Vice President