

## Why teachers have ordered an independent inquiry into the value of their work



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If there is a silver lining in the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be the lessons we learn. Many of them will be about ourselves — our ability to adapt, endure and make sacrifices for the common good. In the period when most children were learning from home, parents learnt first-hand what it takes to educate children.

As the President of the NSW Teachers Federation, I heard directly from many parents who said it had left them with a new-found appreciation for teachers. It was hard enough helping one child, they said. Educating 25 to 30 children every day was, well, almost unimaginable.

That teachers were able to make the transition to remote learning so successfully while dealing with contradictory government directives — and their own fears for their safety — tells you much about their expertise and commitment to their students.



But it's also important to understand that the pandemic was just part of a constant stream of change that has affected the work teachers and principals do.

The needs of the students they educate have never been greater or more complex. The numbers from disadvantaged and language backgrounds other than English have grown rapidly. There are six times more students with disability in mainstream classrooms now than there were in 2002.

The expectations of parents have increased, along with the role schools play in communities as we deal with globalisation and the rapidly changing nature of work.

No profession has been subjected to the constant political interventions that teachers have — to what they teach, how they teach it and the standards they are required to meet.

In NSW, the ill-advised and negligent shift of more administrative responsibilities to schools, combined with the withdrawal of systemic support, has led to a dramatic increase in the compliance obligations of teachers and principals.

Teachers and principals have at least two jobs now: teaching and administration. There is enough red tape to cover all the classrooms.

The constant changes, the rapidly evolving expectations on the profession and the ill-considered political interventions have led the NSW Teachers Federation to commission an independent inquiry into the changing nature and value of the work of teachers and principals.

Headed by former West Australian premier Geoff Gallop, the inquiry will examine the value of teachers' and principals' work, changes in their skills, responsibilities and workload, and whether their salaries have kept pace. The last time there was such an examination was in 2003.

One of the reasons we need this inquiry is because, when it comes to teachers and principals, the rhetoric of the NSW government has not matched its actions.

Recently Premier Gladys Berejiklian said teaching was "one of the most valued occupations on the planet". Teachers, she said, were "absolutely amazing all the time but especially during COVID". This is the same Premier who ordered a 12-month wage freeze for teachers and other public sector workers in May. If it goes ahead, the freeze will cost an experienced teacher almost \$150,000 in lost earnings over the course of their career.

Wage increases have also been capped since 2011 at 2.5 per cent a year for teachers and all other public sector workers. These prescriptions do nothing to keep teachers' wages competitive nor recognise the importance of the role they play and how it has changed.

This is a critical point when you consider we are at the start of a boom in public school enrolments. Student numbers will increase by almost 25 per cent in the next 20 years. We will need thousands of extra teachers at a time when the job is getting much harder and the salaries haven't kept pace with other professions.

Throw in the growing shortages of teachers and you start to realise exactly what is at stake.

How do we best support our teachers and principals? How do we improve the status of the profession and make it attractive enough to the next generation to ensure we have the teachers we need to deliver a high-quality education to every child? And, what should we be paying our teachers and principals given the increase in their expertise and responsibilities and the importance of their work?

These are the questions we need the Gallop inquiry to answer.

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