

Hearings make case for change

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The scope and magnitude of change to teaching, driven by a dedication to pedagogy, can be illustrated by the ability – and willingness – of the profession to embrace change.

It was the underlying theme of the first week of hearings at the “Valuing the teaching profession – an independent inquiry”, and reflected the attitude of Federation President Angelo Gavrielatos that teachers are not afraid of hard work, just tasks that take them away from the core responsibilities of teaching and learning.

One of the issues pinpointed as detracting from this core work is the demands placed on teachers and principals by the complexity of teaching in 2020, as compared with 15 years ago when the last examination of the profession’s value was conducted.

As Pasi Sahlberg, Deputy Director of the Gonski Institute for Education, told the inquiry:

“Teaching, in many schools today, has become a job which requires expertise, not just as an educator, but also as a healthcare worker, social worker, wellbeing coach, parenting specialist and psychologist.”

Mr Gavrielatos told the inquiry that change to the value of teachers and principals’ work has been more significant than in any previous period. Not only had the complexity of the student cohort altered dramatically – requiring additional skills from teachers – but also teachers have adapted to “unimaginable” changes in technology as part of their work.

He said demands on teachers and principals to collect data had also increased under the Local Schools, Local Decisions policy, which withdrew support for schools and intensified workload, so that now more time had to be spent on a range of administrative tasks.

As former NSW Education Standards Authority chair Tom Alegounarias wrote in an opinion article before fronting the inquiry: “Teachers are overworked and undervalued. While they are subject to skyrocketing demands, they get inadequate and declining support and guidance.”

Teachers embrace change because they know that change is the nature of human existence. Some changes can be calculated, such as the rise of technology and automation, while others are more perplexing.

Prominent University of Sydney psychology professor Ian Hickie told the inquiry of a documented, and “worrying”, rise in anxiety, depression and self-harm, among school students worldwide, occurring at younger ages and for reasons that are not understood.

He said the expectations that parents and the wider community place on teachers have put them on the very



frontline of managing an emerging youth mental health crisis that is expected to grow by up to 30 per cent over the next decade.

“So the pressure on teachers has gone up,” Professor Hickie, who is a director at the Brain and Mind Centre at the Sydney Medical School, said. “Teachers are on the frontline of recognition of this [issue] so many of the calls for improvements in the response have come from teachers.”

This came as a report obtained under freedom of information access during the hearings revealed the number of students with disabilities in the public education system is predicted to grow by 50 per cent in the decade to 2027, and they will need twice as many specialist teachers and thousands more support classrooms.

Researchers from the University of Sydney, who authored the 2018 report for Federation, *Understanding Work in Schools: The Foundation of Teaching and Learning*, advised the panel of the results of their survey, which documented the proportion of members who said:

- my hours have increased – 87 per cent
- the complexity of my work has increased – 95 per cent
- the collection, analysis and reporting of data has increased – 96 per cent
- Administrative tasks have increased – 97 per cent.

Perhaps teachers have done too well; they have been able to absorb change and reforms, new policies and systems too readily, leading to the imposition of further duties that have only added to their workload and detracted from teaching and learning.

The inquiry resumes on Monday, 7 September.