

When you fail teachers, you fail children

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Two years ago, NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell said the teacher shortages in NSW were so bad they were keeping her awake at night. If that was her response then, she must hardly be sleeping a wink right now.

[Acute shortages of teachers](#) are having a devastating impact on children across NSW. Almost 2,400 permanent teaching positions were vacant in public schools in February and casual teachers have become impossible to find. As a result, secondary students are missing up to half their lessons in a day, stuck in the playground or library with only minimal supervision. Primary teachers report having 40 children in their class for 10 days in a row or standing in corridors trying to teach multiple classes at once.

The shortages are impacting on the motivation and discipline of students and exacerbating mental health and behaviour issues. This shouldn't come as a surprise. What kind of message are we sending to our children when we can't even guarantee that there will be a teacher in their classroom every day? Dismissing the shortages as simply a short-term problem caused by winter flu and COVID reflects the spin and denial to which the NSW government resorts on a daily basis.



It is a long-term workforce crisis and the intransigence of both the NSW government and Catholic employers in the face of it has forced our unions [to call a 24-hour strike on June 30](#). Teachers in government and non-government schools will stop work and rally together for only the second time in the long history of education in NSW.

The shortages are increasing the already unsustainable workloads of teachers whose average working hours exceed 60 a week. A quarter of public secondary teachers are forced to teach subjects for which they have no university qualifications.

We are in serious danger of burning out a generation of teachers, lost through overwork and disenchantment with the way their focus is constantly taken from their students to a mind-numbing amount of administration and compliance work. They also see a government in denial, unwilling to stand up for the profession or address the root causes of the shortages: the uncompetitive salaries and crippling workloads that are turning people away from teaching. The minister freely admits teachers are "drowning" in paperwork but then oversees a strategy that, Department of Education reports show, didn't save teachers a single hour in 2021.

The government's one-size-fits-all pay cap will deliver teachers' salary increases far below inflation at the same time as its own internal research warns: "On average, teacher pay has been falling relative to pay in other professions since the late 1980s and this makes it a less attractive profession for high achieving students."

Failing to act on this workforce crisis will have profound consequences for NSW long into the future. Catholic Schools NSW recently warned the retirement of baby-boomer teachers and an insufficient supply of graduates to replace them will lead to a 15 per cent shortfall in their workforce by 2030. In the public system, a minimum of 20 per cent more teachers will be needed in the next decade, just to cope with rising enrolments.

Right now, we have to make it clear to our politicians that failing to act is failing our children. If we truly want every child to get a great education, we have to invest more in the teachers by significantly increasing their salaries and reducing their workloads so they can focus more on student learning. That is an investment in our future that will pay off for our children and our country.

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