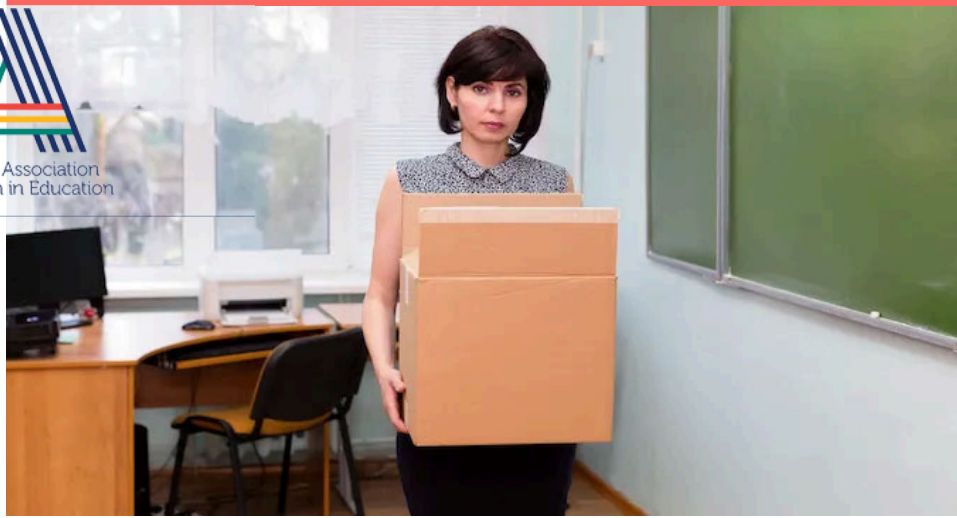



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April.13.2023

Teachers now: Why I left and where I've gone

By Robyn Brandenburg, Ellen Larsen, Richard Sallis and Alyson Simpson

"When you are a high achieving person, teaching sets you up for failure because you are never enough for everybody."

The teaching profession [is in crisis](#). By 2025, the federal government estimates a shortfall of more than 4,000 high school teachers across the country. While there is a significant body of research that has tracked the influence of teachers' work and lives and [their retention in the teaching profession](#), less is known about teachers who have left the profession.

Research, media reports, and anecdotal evidence report teachers' intentions to leave the profession within their first five years of teaching at a rate of up to 50% of the workforce, leaving Australian schools with further critical workforce shortages.

This research addresses this claim. In this nationwide study, 255 respondents/those who have exited the profession have provided insights into why they left, the critical factors that influenced their decision to leave and revealed details about the next phase of their lives. As one ex-teacher said,

As a teacher you have never done enough. You work and work and work, creating, thinking, planning to get the best for each student and it's still never enough. You still can't help so many students, you never satisfy the administration load and so much pressure from parents. When you are a high achieving person, teaching sets you up for failure because you are never enough for everybody.

Preliminary results suggest that while all Australian states and territories were represented in this study, half of the respondents were from Victoria, and close to a quarter were from both New South Wales and Queensland. Almost two-thirds of those who left were from metropolitan regions and a third of the respondents were from regional areas. Almost two thirds (60%) were from the State sector, a quarter from the independent sector and almost 20% from the Catholic sector.

70 percent of those who left the profession were full-time employees.

Who is leaving the teaching profession?

Of the 242 respondents 167 were female, 71 were male and 4 identified as other. Most had been working in metropolitan schools prior to leaving (around 60%) and 60 percent were from the state sector. 70% were teaching in secondary schools at the time of leaving and 30% in primary schools. Most respondents were from Victoria, followed by NSW and Queensland.

The greatest number of respondents had been teaching for 7-10 years followed by those who had been teaching for 11-15 years. Combined this accounted for almost 40% of those surveyed. Fifteen percent left after 4-6 years. Whilst it is evident that we are losing teachers who are early into their teaching career, the majority of those who are leaving the profession are experienced classroom teachers and leaders in their school. Forty percent of those surveyed were in school leadership positions at the time of leaving.

In response to where participants were working prior to leaving the profession, of the 172 responses, almost 57% (98) were working in metropolitan areas; 35% (59) in regional and 13% (8) in rural areas. 1% (2) – remote or other.

Why are they leaving?

Our study shows that teachers are faced with a range of challenges in the profession, causing them to not only rethink their career as a teacher but significant enough to push them to the point of taking that definitive step and leaving it behind. Participants told us that the work environment, school leadership, dealing with student behaviour, administrative load, and [workload](#) more broadly were the big contributors to their decision to leave the profession. These ex-teachers stated that they did not feel respected, and their work had failed to bring about or sustain the level of personal satisfaction they sought from their careers.

“Until teachers are given more time, respect and support to actually do their jobs, more will continue to leave the profession.”

Significantly, these ex-teachers felt that leaving was the result of not just one of the challenges in isolation; but rather *“a culmination of many things over a long period of time”* that made their jobs untenable.

“I was just so anxious, unwell, and unhappy. Every day I felt sick on my way to work. I could never get through my mountain of work, I could never get on top of classroom behaviour, and I could never get to a place where I was able to deal with the unreasonable demands of the school.”

In essence, leaving was based on a long list of issues that, in combination, gave them no choice but to walk away. Their disappointment, frustration, and anger were palpable in their responses, as they reported on a broken system, and a ridiculous workload made all the harder by administrative and extracurricular demands. These ex-teachers also spoke of having to deal with challenging leaders, parents, and students. These challenges were then topped off by *“a teaching profession that is misunderstood, disrespected and unappreciated”*.

“I became a teacher because I am passionate about equipping the next generation to be their best. The education sector is making this harder and harder from a wellbeing perspective and from an educational perspective. The curriculum is crowded, students are pressured to succeed, teachers are trashed in media... There is little understanding of the complexity of these roles by those outside of schools.”

"Misalignment between my values and those of my colleagues and leadership. Not being equipped/ experienced enough to manage the tension that created. Lack of support from leadership when other teachers or middle leadership were treating me, other colleagues, and students in ways that did not align with my values."

Where are they going?

Overwhelmingly most of those who had left teaching after 4-15 years were still working but in different professions (90%). Many of those who had left teaching (36%) are still working in education related areas such as devising education resources, developing education policy, consulting and managing education programs in institutions such as museums and art galleries. A surprising number (20%) have transitioned into work in the Higher Education sector. About 7% had returned to casual teaching in one way or another, some had sought further education through study (4.4%) and only 4.4 % had fully retired. The remaining ex-teachers were involved in work closely connected to helping people such as in Social Work, sports coaching, counselling and the well-being industry.

The implications of these findings are far reaching as they show that teachers are making a notable contribution to the workforce when they leave. It is clear that they take their highly transferable skills built up through training and experience with them. The findings also suggest the continued commitment of teachers to matters educational leaving teaching but not education.

- *I started my own business in the private disability sector. I now work full-time in this space and employ eight people.*
- *Working for a company delivering student wellbeing programs*
- *I am still in education but not in schools*
- *I am a learning designer*
- *I left the teaching profession in a school context. I remain in education and teaching in an ITE context where I can both contribute and be challenged / developed.*

The small number of teachers (almost 10%) who had completely 'jumped ship' to another profession demonstrates a variety of new career directions including working in a cattery, as a truck driver, in animal rescue, in the military, in corporate marketing and as an engineer.

What is the impact?

Whether we have [teachers in the first five years](#) in their mid-careers, or in their later careers leave in critical numbers as they now are, the impact will be far-reaching. Schools are communities that thrive on having teachers from all career stages. When an [early career teacher](#) leaves, the school loses that teacher's inclination for innovation, new perspectives, and in some instances, a future school leader. When a more [experienced teacher](#) leaves, they take with them their experience and expertise and as a result, both students and early careers teachers miss the opportunity to benefit from their accumulated talent.

As one of our survey participants explained, *"When teachers with my years of experience start leaving in droves then that's truly a truly catastrophic loss to the system. And that's what we are seeing..."*

"I consider myself to be a highly skilled and educated teacher. I have 3 master's degrees and felt very confident in the classroom. However, the workload required to prove my worth was unreasonable and unsustainable."

Previous research has spoken to these [impacts](#), yet our study revealed the cost to these participants as well. Having left the profession, they did feel a sense of relief about getting their lives back, and for some the negative impacts to their health and wellbeing experienced while teaching began to dissipate. Many others, however, continue to experience issues related to their physical and mental wellbeing. As one ex-teacher put it,

"I was in complete burn out. There were too many administrative changes and expectations that led to unattainable work pressures. My mental health and family life were suffering, and I needed to make a choice. I love teaching and loved working with the students. I miss it but the expectations placed upon teachers is unrealistic and unsustainable without long term damage."

For many, it also meant walking away from a vocation they still cared about, and they felt a deep sadness at leaving behind their students.

As another participant put it: “The hardest thing was knowing I was walking away from making a difference in the lives of young people, each and every day.”

Eighty percent of those who have left the profession have maintained their registration and while one third of the participants stated that they would ‘definitely not’ return to the profession, almost half were less definite about their future plans.

We now know more about the problems in the sector and the narratives provided by the ex-teachers shine a light on the personal, professional, health and emotional impacts of not only leaving the profession but on the anguish that many felt prior to making the ultimate decision to leave.

Many have left teaching, but not education. Some have used the skills and knowledge they have accumulated to begin new ventures in new professions. They have embraced the change.

However, our research shows that there is an opportunity for all stakeholders to address issues of flexibility, school leadership, progression and pathways, including a commensurate salary – “a living wage” – to halt the exodus from the teaching profession.



From left to right: **Robyn Brandenburg** is a professor of education in the Institute of Education, Arts and Community at Federation University Australia. She researches teacher education, reflective practice and feedback and mathematics education and is a past-president of the Australian Teacher Education Association. She is on [LinkedIn](#) and Twitter [@brandenburg](#). **Ellen Larsen** is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ). Ellen is a member of the Australian Association for Research in Education [AARE] executive and a convenor of the national AARE Teachers' Work and Lives Special Interest Group. Ellen's areas of research work include teacher professional learning, early career teachers, mentoring and induction, teacher identity, and education policy. She is on Twitter [@DrEllenLarsen1](#). **Richard Sallis** is an Arts education academic in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne. He also holds positions with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) and is a leader in curriculum planning and teacher professional development. His research interests include Initial Teacher Education, teacher professional learning, and diversity and inclusion in schools. He is on [LinkedIn](#). **Alyson Simpson** is a professor of English and Literacy Education in the Sydney School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. Her current research projects focus on building an evidence base of teacher quality, the role of children's literature in education, and the power of dialogic learning. She is on Twitter [@ProfAMSimpson](#)

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9 thoughts on "Teachers now: Why I left and where I've gone"



Marg Rogers

April 13, 2023 at 7:20 am

This is a terrific and timely article. Well done to the authors, and I look forward to seeing more results in news-based articles like this one and journal articles. The transferable skills section was fascinating.



George LILLEY

April 13, 2023 at 8:02 am

Thanks pretty much sums up why i resigned from Victorian DOE last August. What do you think of the Centre for Independent Studies releasing a report last August questioning that there is a teacher shortage?

"But perhaps the bigger problem is that all of those claims are either overstated, or flat out wrong. And what's worse, they risk obscuring the very real challenges facing the profession in coming years."

"If teacher supply is an issue, the answer lies in raising entrants, not preventing exits."

"It's not the number of hours teachers are working that's the problem, but what they're tasked with doing."

"Australian teachers are already among the highest paid in the world, and starting salaries now exceed virtually any other occupation."

<https://www.cis.org.au/commentary/opinion/are-we-really-in-a-so-called-teaching-crisis/>



Heather Hobbs

April 13, 2023 at 10:32 am

Thank you for articulating these issues so well.

I loved teaching but hated the school system for all the reasons you cover. I know I was an excellent teacher but absolutely identify with your 'never enough' quote.

Pingback: [Teachers Now: Why I Left And Where I've Gone - ECourses Online](#)



Deborah Meier

April 15, 2023 at 2:03 pm

So many of these comments struck home painfully.

I left when I was 76 and couldn't walk up the stairs! I loved almost all the nearly 50 years I spent in urban public schools. But most of the time I was able to "get away" with ring part of a

community of colleagues with our own "godfather/mother" – who gave us the courage to pool our collective experience with that of our students' families. We came close a few times – so we thought – to creating a system that could have enabled many others to have the things we all – including our students – longed for

We had some painful experiences when our luck ran out and we never were able to spread our successes fully . But they were great years and there is no damned reason why it couldn't be spread across the nation. I suspect those in power think that, in fact, things work out just fine even if we don't do what we all know works – precisely what the wealthy and powerful provide for their own children.

Yes, we can create schools that work for all children and sustains the joy of teaching and have fun doing it! For 50 years!

Deborah Meier,

Read " The Power of Their Ideas" by me, "These Schools Belong to You and Me" by Emily Gasoi and me. And any book by Mike Rise or Eleanor Duckworth .



Steve Waters

April 20, 2023 at 9:23 pm

Hi

Many thanks for this thoughtful, as well as concerning, article.

I am struck by the similarities of the problems between the UK and the Australian systems of education.

I recently conducted a survey into the impact of Ofsted (the English school inspection body) on teachers' wellbeing and mental health. You can see the shocking results here: <https://padlet.com/stevewaters171/survey-ofsted-inspections-in-schools-impact-on-teacher-wellb-l6brn4j1pfuqqcuc>

I've also developed a set of indices to enable teachers to assess their own level of Burnout and the school's approach to mental health. You can download your free copy here: <https://tinyurl.com/waters-indices-burnout>

Steve Waters

Teach Well Toolkit



Cecile Rosewame

April 20, 2023 at 11:09 am

Excellent article. I have 30 – ish years experience in early childhood education as well as adult education. What I have found heart breaking is that we 'oldies' predicted the staff overload, student anxiety/depression, disrespect etc but felt powerless & voiceless.

Today when colleagues discuss yet another child's 'issues' I want to cry. When I am told I need to write yet another 4 page 'incident' report that never gets looked at, I want to scream. I totally understand the mass walkout.



Bill Allen

April 20, 2023 at 2:49 pm

Remember in 2004/6 when Teachers's Professional Colleges/ Registration Boards were established, with the aim of making teaching as recognised as medicine? These were then subsumed into AITSL. What a disaster they, and AITSL in particular have been. The profession has been destroyed since then, as these bodies have bureaucratised teaching rather than professionalising it. I love reading Hattie's work but he's no teacher and he, Greg Craven and insipid Heads of ITE institutions have joined these registration bodies in making teaching a lifeless, uninspiring job.



Heather MacDonald

May 1, 2023 at 8:24 am

It is so tragic to see the volume of teachers leaving – a crisis that has been and still is largely overlooked by those that can impact on retention. I think we need to reimagine how education is delivered and how we better support teachers in the classroom. I left the profession 25 years ago but have worked closely alongside in an effort to provide opportunities for students and teachers. It is a complex problem that requires many strategies but it can be done! One purposeful step after the other!

Comments are closed.