Teacher relief: a calamitous crisis

By Matt Jarman
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Prior to the pandemic it could be said a school's teacher relief availability depended on a variety of local seasonal factors, which would be invariably worked through.

The pandemic has unfortunately now caused an unwanted equity. Everyone is struggling, and in many cases, just labelling teacher relief availability as a "struggle" would be entirely inadequate.

The SSTUWA recently made the decision to give members a much-needed voice to illustrate the impact of teacher relief availability and also to help identify what needs to be done. A survey was opened, covering a brief window of three weeks at the start of Term 3.

The response was overwhelming and the comments made, such as this one and those quoted in Pat's column, are extremely worrying and reveal just how much our members are doing their best in a system that is teetering on crisis: "Many staff are very open about wanting to leave the job. As staff continued to receive relief lessons we began to see staff staying home, just to rest and recover, further causing staffing pressures."

The survey results reflect the gap between what schools are saying and what is often reported.

More than 400 members responded to the survey, predominately those at the coalface of organising relief in their school, with all types of schools well represented. The issues raised have always been present in the system and worsened over time, with the pandemic putting the spotlight on the seriousness of the situation we find ourselves in.

One member said: "I have logged 58 jobs since April 2022. Of those jobs only seven jobs have been filled. We basically collapsed Science in Term 2. There is something very wrong with the system. Disadvantaged schools are once again further disadvantaged. Our children are already up against it. More needs to be done, it is not ok."

Facts from the survey include:

- 35 per cent of schools are using student teachers to deliver teacher relief – nine per cent in their second or third year of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). (Please note the SSTUWA has only agreed that ITE students in their fourth year of training could be used to help during the shortage.)
- 25 per cent of specialist classes are interrupted weekly.
- All types of school leaders are being used for internal relief. (These statistics fluctuate from school to school.)
- 85 per cent of respondents stated they did not use the central pool of relief. (Approximately 1,980 days were provided from Statewide Services and central office qualified staff in Term

  2 alone, leaving us to wonder what would have happened if more schools depended on the central relief pool.)
- 35 per cent of those schools who accessed the central relief pool had challenges with availability.
- 30 per cent of respondents shared they were using education assistants where teacher relief was not available.
- 65 per cent of primary and 75 per cent of secondary schools collapsed classes to cope. This included across subject areas in secondary schools and across phases of learning in primary schools.
- All schools reported negative impact in many different areas:
    - 80 per cent – Delivery of core curriculum.

- 45 per cent – Semester reporting to parents.
- 45 per cent – Annual events and activities.
- 60 per cent – New initiatives or programs.

Comments from school leaders and teachers in country areas reflect how paralysed they often are, leading to little or no respite or opportunity to operate as they or their community expects.

The teacher shortage is global, the workload demands are local. One
can be immediately addressed, while the other will take investment. Relief staff have always been critical to the needs ofour schools, emerging from the pandemic there is now widespread acknowledgement of just how important they are.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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