Managing teacher relief: What you told us

SSTUWA
State School Teachers' Union of WA

All staff are extremely stressed, overworked and exhausted.

Teacher shortages means DOTT time can be cancelled on a daily basis. This directly impacts the preparation of resources for rich learning experiences. Whilst this is paid back to the teachers this is usually done at little notice and requires the teacher to create another lesson, putting increased pressure on the teacher and taking away from the learning of the students.

"We have had a lot of our DOTT cancelled at short notice. If we choose to be paid back that DOTT then we have to plan and provide the lesson for the relief teacher who comes in. We have also had DOTT moved so that we don't get collaborative planning time."

Running the school has required a coping mindset, and critical incidents are more frequent. People are stretched, making mistakes and need support. We can't provide support due to being permanently double booked – there are classes, parent meetings, student complaints, school damage, vaping incidents, fights and attendance to follow up, HOLAs who need help to lead their teams/curriculum delivery, SIRS tasks, TFA/LAT support, recruitment processes etc.

"It is stressful every day having to find relief teachers. And then when none can be found, it is stressful deciding how to cover classes."

As a school leader it has been clear that the teacher shortage has impacted student outcomes through interruptions to the education programs. Something that does not get talked about enough is the impact that the teacher shortage is having on teacher well-being. Teaching is already a demanding profession, so when DOTT is constantly being taken away due to specialists being used in classrooms, the pressure and stress this puts on all staff is significant. There has always been a shortage of relief in the country, but this has been magnified this year.

"Teachers have reported that they feel compelled to come to school when they are not fit to do so, even though our messaging has been very clear that they need to prioritise themselves and we will manage what we have to. That being said, unless relief teachers are booked well in advance, it is almost impossible to get one. I have personally rung and messaged about 100 relief teachers for a same or next day booking and not been able to get one. This creates a huge workload. As a deputy, I have had to relieve teachers and take classes on multiple occasions. This has created a massive workload as no one is doing my job while I am in a class. I and the rest of the admin team have been working 10-14 hour days trying to keep our heads above water. This does not take into account the number of hours in the evenings and on weekends spent trying to get relief teachers. It is Saturday today and I am at school trying to catch up.

Teaching staff have been expected to fulfil the same level of responsibility, without large portions of DOTT and extra students from across the school (e.g. Year 6 students in Year 1 classes) which is having a massive impact on the emotional well-being of staff, both mentally and physically.

Specialist teachers are being used to cover classroom teachers. All teachers are owed DOTT and there is a rising feeling of burnout within the school.

Teacher burnout is very real, resulting from the continuous system-wide demands that assume we are working under normal conditions. With rolling waves of staff members having to isolate the reality of the situation is that we are exhausted just managing to keep the core teaching and learning operating.

"The teacher shortage (and subsequent flow on of workload) has simply reduced the passion for teaching for myself and many colleagues like myself with decades of service. Burn out has increased at an unprecedented level in an attempt at maintaining the system we once had.

"One recent and worrying trend we are discovering is valued, long-term staff are considering leaving the profession due to the difficulties and stress of the job.

We have had to close down areas of the playground as we don't have enough teachers to supervise safely.

"Quite a stressful environment. Everyone is working at full capacity and endeavouring to continue to deliver effective learning programs."

The overall feeling of the workplace is one of low morale. Overworked staff are reluctant to pick up any extras or try innovative ideas ... there is no energy.

Most students ask teachers 'are you going to be our teacher for the rest of the year?' Most students have had several teachers and in most cases the curriculum has not been delivered.

The teacher shortage is having a profound negative impact on the quality of instruction and the ability of schools to do more than manage their core business. We are not thriving we are surviving.

Expected to report to parents but we haven't had any proper learning going on.

High-needs students have a range of complexities, with one being anxiety. The constant change of teaching staff or not knowing if their classes will be hubbed on any given day increases their anxiety and impacts their behaviour. This can lead to aggression and others being hurt, such as staff and students.

We have been using a fourth-year student as full-time relief, which is causing lots of student behavioural problems and flow on effects from someone who has lost all teaching mentorship.

Most of us are coming into work sick or run down but we have no choice. We have a large percentage thinking about leaving, because when does our physical and mental health take first place?

"No thanks, no recognition, no renumeration package from the government. We are frontline workers and we feel very unsupported."

The system is broken, our kids and people are suffering. We are being repeatedly asked to do the unreasonable.

Quotes are member responses provided in the SSTUWA *Managing teacher relief in WA public schools survey*, which was conducted early in Term 3. Responses have been edited for spelling or grammar.

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