Support for smaller class sizes

By Minh Lam



Teachers are overwhelmingly supporting smaller class sizes as many of them contemplate leaving the profession due to issues such as increased workload, burnout and a lack of respect for the teaching profession, according to a new survey conducted by the SSTUWA.

The 2023 WA State of our Schools survey reveals that about 93 per cent of respondents believe smaller class sizes would benefit them and their students through better learning outcomes, improved classroom behaviour and more one-on-one time with students.

“Smaller class sizes mean higher participation and engagement. Less (bad) behaviour and more opportunities for feedback,” one teacher said.

Another respondent said: “It would mean I have less marking and less follow up on behaviour, giving me more time to plan meaningful lessons and fun and engaging activities for my lessons.”

One teacher commented that: “Students at my school are keen to learn but get disheartened when I cannot help them as others have questions to ask too.”

And this feedback from another respondent to the survey: “I constantly worry about the students who fly under my radar due to others with greater behavioural/academic/social/emotional needs that take time from them. If I were to spend equal time with every child in my class, it would still be less than two minutes an hour.”

The 2023 SSTUWA State of our Schools survey polled teacher and school leader union members across the state.

About 90 per cent said their workload was high or very high currently, with about 32 per cent working more than 40 hours and just over 30 per cent working over 50 hours a week; 10.5 per cent of respondents reported working more than 60 hours a week.

“I was planning and prepping every night and every weekend and my family was suffering. And I still was never ahead at work,” one teacher commented.

For principals, 39 per cent reported working more than 50 hours a week and 23 per cent said they worked more than 60 hours a week. For school leaders, 40 per cent reported working over 40 hours a week; 37 per cent over 50 hours a week and almost 16 per cent working over 60 hours a week.

Stress levels are high, with about 89 per cent of all respondents reporting their stress was at either a high or very high level.

All of these factors and more, led 86 per cent of respondents to state that they have thought at some point in the past four years about leaving the teaching profession.

“I am burnt out and tired of being undervalued, overworked and having data thrown at us when there are so many environmental factors that affect results,” a teacher surveyed said.

“I love teaching and always have; however, the life is being sucked out of us along with the joy. We are continually asked to do more and more, yet there is no money and no additional time to do it.”

Another teacher said: “When I started teaching, this was our main purpose. Not developing policies and implementing private paid teaching programs. The curriculum has become so crowded and the basics are not covered properly.”

This from another survey respondent: “I have noticed a significant shift in the way schools deal with parents. It has become a situation where I’m constantly being reminded about how a parent might view or respond to a situation. I regularly question my own professional and ethical perspectives, despite being in the profession for over 30 years and always maintaining a highly moral, caring and responsible approach.”

Other major issues of concern reported by respondents revolved around teacher shortages, workplace violence and salaries.

About 73 per cent of respondents reported teacher shortages at their school.
Respondents said teacher shortages impacted on staff morale and student behaviour, with specialists’ classes such as art and music being reduced.

ATAR course offerings were also being reduced and teachers are losing DOTT time, instructing out of their area and taking on more work in order for their schools to cover shortages.

This has resulted in increased class disruption or distractions and less time to focus on individual students. More than half of respondents said there were negative changes in student behaviours.

In terms of violence in schools, about 47 per cent said a violent incident involving a parent or guardian had occurred at their school at least once a term.

Just over 90 per cent said incidents of violent behaviour from students happened at their school at least once a term, with about 31 per cent reporting that they had been the victim of physical violence at least once in the school year.

An additional 55 per cent of teachers reported they had been the victim of verbal assaults at least once in the school year, with almost nine per cent believing violent issues had been gendered.

Just over 27 per cent stated salary levels as an issue, which is a rise from the previous survey, while more than half (58 per cent) of respondents said they had not been offered professional learning on the SCSA curriculum support materials.

“The level of responsibility, the workload, the paperwork and constant stress with decision making isn’t reflected in my wages,” one teacher surveyed said.

The State of Our Schools survey received 1,431 responses, with separate sections for school leaders, principals and teachers.

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