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



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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 per cent 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 per cent) were from the state sector, a quarter from the independent sector and almost 20 per cent from the Catholic sector.

Seventy per cent 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 four identified as other. Most had been working in metropolitan schools prior to leaving (around 60 per cent) and 60 percent were from the state sector.

Seventy per cent were teaching in secondary schools at the time of leaving and 30 per cent in primary schools. Most respondents were from Victoria, followed by NSW and Queensland.

The greatest number of respondents had been teaching for seven to 10 years followed by those who had been teaching for 11-15 years. Combined this accounted for almost 40 per cent of those surveyed.

Fifteen percent left after four to six 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 per cent (98) were working in metropolitan areas; 35 per cent (59) in regional and 13 per cent (eight) in rural areas. One per cent (two) – 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”.

[One said]: “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.”

[Another]: “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 four to 15 years were still working but in different professions (90 per cent). Many of those who had left teaching (36 per cent) 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 per cent) have transitioned into work in the higher education sector. About seven per cent had returned to casual teaching in one way or another, some had sought further education through study (4.4 per cent) and only 4.4 per cent 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 wellbeing 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 (initial teacher education) context where I can both contribute and be challenged/ developed.

The small number of teachers (almost 10 per cent) 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 three 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.

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