

Australia:

Shortages of casual teachers highlight education inequality

By Erika Zimmer
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A group of school principals in Sydney recently compiled a survey showing that some of the most disadvantaged students in the city's working class western suburbs are missing out on lessons because absent teachers, whether ill or on leave, are not being replaced by casual or relief teachers.

In three secondary schools alone, 169 lessons were cancelled in a single week during June. And between June 1 and June 15 in the Campbelltown district, 93 lessons were cancelled at Airds High School and more than 88 at Ambarvale High. These schools are in regions of the most entrenched disadvantage: public housing estates of growing poverty, with high unemployment rates and poor social and community services.

In the week of June 7 to 11, 89 classes were cancelled at one Liverpool high school; 38 at a Mt Druitt high school. At the Liverpool school, 10 of the 89 classes cancelled were maths, nine were art and six geography. The school had 10 teachers absent but only one casual was employed to replace them.

Primary schools and special schools for students with learning difficulties fared even worse. At one primary school in Campbelltown, 21 classes were split in a 41-day period, the students being divided among other teachers to work on their own. Since the start of the year, 45 classes have been split at Bonnyrigg Heights Public School. For 32 school days this year an absent teacher was not replaced at a Macquarie Fields public school.

Even more disturbing are the effects on schools for children with intellectual disabilities and behavioural problems. At one such school, Lawrence Hargrave at Warwick Farm, also in Sydney's west, casual teachers covered only 11 of the 144 absences. On average, 10 special programs were dropped at each of the 15 large primary schools surveyed in the Liverpool district.

Special needs programs such as those for children with learning, reading and language programs are affected

because specialist teachers have to take over mainstream classes for their absent colleagues due to the lack of casual relief.

Such interruptions to students' learning are a serious blow to their education. Students already disadvantaged never catch up on missed classes. A vicious cycle of low academic results, discipline problems and high truancy rates becomes established in the poorest working class schools. Staff morale suffers because permanent teachers return to classes that have fallen behind.

The Public Schools Principals Forum should be thanked for organising the survey in order to draw public attention to the situation. Instead the New South Wales state Labor Party government of Premier Bob Carr moved swiftly to gag them. Education Minister John Aquilina accused the schools of staffing mismanagement. In an unmistakable attempt to intimidate those speaking out and prevent any others from doing so, he sent a letter to the six schools involved, demanding an explanation for their "unusually high" use of casuals. The letter foreshadowed an inspection of each school's leave records and the school's management of casual teacher recruitment.

Reports of casual teacher shortages are not new. But they are becoming more critical and more concentrated in schools in working class and impoverished areas, compounding the growing problems in such schools.

Almost two years ago, in August 1997, a suburban newspaper, the *Mt Druitt-St Marys Standard* reported on a teachers' meeting where a teacher from a Mt Druitt school claimed that the school had not been able to provide teachers for 55 percent of senior classes and 61 percent of junior classes. A teacher from the Penrith area, in Sydney's far west, said that of 435 teacher absences in semester one, only 110 had been replaced by a casual teacher. Senior students were being left unsupervised in their classrooms while junior students—aged between 12 and 16—were told to go and sit in an open courtyard, unsupervised. Primary classes of up

to 32 children would often have to cope with up to 10 more students, who sat on the floor because there were not enough desks.

One factor in this worsening situation is that pay and working conditions for casual or relieving teachers have deteriorated over the past decade. Casual teachers are usually education graduates waiting for a permanent teaching position. They are paid on average \$10,000 a year less than permanent teachers with equivalent experience and qualifications, receive no superannuation and have only limited leave entitlements.

Changes to school funding over the past decade have also affected working conditions for casual teachers. Individual schools, and not the education department, now pay their salaries. Cash-strapped schools have the “choice” of hiring casual staff to replace absent teachers or allocating the money to other areas of need: books, photocopying, paying the power or water bill. Economic pressures usually dictate that relief teachers are given a full lesson workload and used to cover a range of teacher absences, frequently teaching outside their subject area instead of replacing just the one absent teacher within their own area of expertise.

Stretched funding also pressures schools to look for lower-paid teachers. A recent article in the NSW teachers' union journal pointed to schools employing students not yet qualified as teachers, at a reduced rate, as “tutors” to cover for absent teachers. Similar pressures have led to schools in the United States employing high school graduates without any teacher qualifications, and paying them as little as \$US30 a day.

The increase in overall teachers' working hours in NSW, agreed to by the teachers' union, has also increased workloads for casual teachers. Nevertheless the education department has called on high school teachers to work six extra lessons per term above their normal workload, as was agreed in a previous enterprise deal worked out with the NSW Teachers Federation. This is in the face of a Worksafe Australia report which revealed that teachers, hit by stress, take more time off for work-related compensation than any other workers.

Finally, casual replacement teachers are rostered onto playground duty and pressured to volunteer for extra jobs. With little status in the eyes of students, unable to get much support from overburdened colleagues and expected to be on call and travel long distances at short notice, it is little wonder that casual teaching is becoming an option of the last resort, especially in disadvantaged schools. Not infrequently, reports surface of casual teachers refusing to teach in the outer western Sydney schools with the greatest difficulties.

The casual teacher shortage highlights another area of

imbalance in school staffing in working class and wealthier areas. In Sydney's better-off northern suburbs teachers are more experienced. Almost 90 percent have had more than 10 years' teaching experience, double the proportion in the poorer areas, which have the greatest concentrations of children with high literacy and numeracy needs. Only around 10 percent of teachers in the northern suburbs are in their first five years of teaching, compared with up to 46 percent of teachers in Sydney's west and south-west. Facing deteriorating conditions in poorer schools, teachers tend to seek posts in the more affluent areas, creating high turnover rates in the working class schools.

The Carr government and the education department deny there is a shortage of casual teachers, insisting that schools can call on a pool of 28,000 casuals. However, other government publications have put the figure as low as 2,600 across the entire state. The Public Schools Principals Forum is calling on the education department to undertake a statewide survey to determine the full extent of staffing problems. The department has rejected this, claiming that schools have a range of strategies available, including the use of full-time “mobile” teachers to replace absent teachers. However, as Brian Chudleigh, the president of the principals' forum, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, education officials have in the past vetoed the use of mobile or permanent relieving teachers, because they cost more than casual teachers. Similarly, the government's proposed trial of a centralised pool of casual teachers over the next few months in one of the hardest hit areas is likely to resolve nothing because individual schools will still be responsible for salary payments.

High staffing turnovers and shortages of replacement teachers are just some of the consequences of government education policy, which is increasingly subjecting schools to market forces. Schools that have resources, and the ability to raise larger sums of money from parents and corporate sponsors, benefit while the rest are left to sink. For example, all government schools, whether situated in the leafy northern suburbs or in the lowest socio-economic areas of entrenched disadvantage, are allocated amounts for teacher relief on the same basis. The differences between these schools are swept under the carpet.

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