



A STRONGER TEACHING PROFESSION FOR A BETTER AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE INQUIRY

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Dr Andrew Laming MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
Parliament of Australia
PO Box 6021
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Tuesday 18 December 2018

Submission for Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession

Dear Dr Laming,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee's Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession. I note that this is presented in my personal, independent capacity as a citizen, and not on behalf of my employer.

A stronger and more capable teaching profession would deliver considerable social, cultural and economic benefits to Australian children. The equation is simple: when teachers succeed, Australia succeeds.

For this reason, it is critical for government to place a high value on the teaching profession and ensure that this translates to positive, practical policy outcomes. This submission is prepared with a view of what in the interests of Australia's students, which is the reason that people choose to become school teachers.

It is thus hoped that this Inquiry will result in more than just platitudes about the importance of teachers, without ensuing beneficial outcomes.

Fortunately, a considerable body of evidence exists which will assist with the development of a best-practice pathway forward. This will be examined in support of the recommendations.

Your consideration of my submission is appreciated. If I can be of any further assistance with the Inquiry, please feel free to contact me

I look forward to reading the Committee's report into this Inquiry in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Francis Ventura

INTRODUCTION

“WE ALL REMEMBER THE IMPACT A SPECIAL TEACHER HAD ON US—A TEACHER WHO REFUSED TO LET US FALL THROUGH THE CRACKS; WHO PUSHED US AND BELIEVED IN US WHEN WE DOUBTED OURSELVES; WHO SPARKED IN US A LIFELONG CURIOSITY AND PASSION FOR LEARNING. DECADES LATER, WE REMEMBER THE WAY THEY MADE US FEEL AND THE THINGS THEY INSPIRED US TO DO—HOW THEY CHALLENGED US AND CHANGED OUR LIVES.”

– MICHELLE OBAMA



The guiding philosophy of this submission is that enhancing the status of teachers would be beneficial to Australian students and by extension, Australia. These benefits would be social, economic and cultural. As the World Bank points out, ‘investing in education has a payoff in terms of higher wages’ (Patrinos, 2016). As such, the submission will focus on a select number of areas where policy adjustments would result in improved outcomes.

There is a need for society to move beyond the misnomer that teachers work minimal hours and have chosen the profession because of an inability to succeed in other career choices. As Pendergast and Bexley (2018) note, ‘individuals who choose to be teachers do so because

they want to make a difference to young people's lives'. Hence, a greater level of respect needs to be afforded to teachers and the critical role they play in a child's development, often in trying circumstances with minimal resources.

The recommendations will be focused on the following three of the Terms of Reference:

- *Increasing the attractiveness of the profession for teachers and principals, including workplace conditions, and career and leadership structures;*
- *Identifying ways in which the burden of out-of-hours, at-home work can be reduced; and*
- *Investigating ways to increase retention rates for the teaching profession, and avoid 'burn out' among early-career teachers.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the Terms of Reference, several positive recommendations are made below.

Instant tax write off

Teachers spend a considerable sum of their personal money for students' benefit, including prizes for quizzes, professional development and classroom features to list a few. This is above and beyond other standard work expenses, such as transportation.

In lieu of maintaining receipts for tax returns which can be costly and take up considerable time, a more efficient alternative could be an instant tax write off. Thus, they could claim a specific lump sum on an annual basis, rather than having to claim receipts back on tax.

A suggested amount would be a lump sum of AUD\$1,000.



Teachers could still have the option of claiming a specific amount on their tax returns, particularly if they believe they have spent above the tax write off amount, however provision of this choice would streamline the process for teachers.

Not only would this ease the burden for teachers – especially early-year teachers on lower salary scales – it would represent a just remuneration for money invested by teachers into their classrooms, and incentivise further investment by teachers for students' benefit.

Provide resources for staff wellbeing coordinators

Teachers face disproportionately high levels of stress, especially those working in socially and economically disadvantaged schools and/or schools with students suffering trauma.

A group of academics from Georgia State University highlighted the importance of considering this issue seriously, as the 'consequences of teacher stress are far-reaching and adversely impact not just the teacher, but everyone around them, most notably their students' (Ansley et al, 2018). This is because on a daily basis, teachers must provide care and support in multiple ways, far and beyond delivering academic content in the classroom. For some students, school is their 'happy place', and their teachers are a source of stability and support in their lives, as this is lacking at home. Thus, teachers make a deep emotional investment into their students, which while rewarding, is ultimately taxing.

An area of improvement is to strengthen staff wellbeing services within schools. At present, senior staff members with responsibility for the human capital of schools – such as Principals and Deputy Principals – are usually juggling a range of other roles, such as administration or tending to students. This means that time to specifically focus on staff wellbeing is severely stretched and consequently, wellbeing support to staff is not as rigorous as it needs to be.

Having the pleasure of working in a highly supportive and collegiate school – Calwell High School – which also has a leadership team dedicating to the wellbeing of both students and teachers, there are a range of initiatives in place. These include social club on Friday nights, weekly morning tea sessions, as well as peer awards. Leave for mental health reasons is always allowed. Although Calwell High is uniquely wonderful, this situation may not be replicated across all schools.

Hence, it is recommended that provision be made for a staff wellbeing coordinator. For smaller schools, a part-time position could suffice, while a large school may require at least one full time staff member in this position. Their role would be to coordinate



wellbeing efforts, thus ensuring they actually happen. The flow on benefits of increased staff morale would be better quality of teaching.

Report writing time

As previously outlined, teachers suffer very high levels of stress. One of the main periods of stress is during report-writing time towards the conclusion of each semester. For many full-time teachers, this period involves writing and then editing around 100 reports, in addition to marking end-of-semester assessments, delivering lessons and continuing to provide support and care outside the classroom.

It is evident how the already high possibility of stress and burnout is exacerbated during this period. Nonetheless, similar to other points, teacher wellbeing is only a part of the picture. Given that it is well-established in literature and research that when teachers can perform at their best, students will benefit academically, it is concludable that flexibility around report writing time needs to be offered.

It is thus recommended that education departments and directorates provide schools with the funding to allow for teachers to utilise a full day to properly prepare their reports at the end of each semester. This would allow teachers to be more focused on providing high quality, constructive and individualised feedback to students and their parents/carers, rather than writing them deep into the night after a long day. Furthermore, the increased quality and accuracy of feedback would be beneficial to students' progress.

Consolidation time

At present, particularly within the public school system, there is insufficient time within business hours for teachers to consolidate students' learning. As a result, 'many teachers arrive early, stay late, and spend part of their weekends working to ensure that they are adequately prepared' (Meador, 2018). Although the vast majority of teachers would be caring and generous with their time, this is not a sustainable model for teachers' wellbeing, nor for students' success.



It is this recommended that schools be allocated extra resources to allow teachers time to plan and consolidate. This would represent best practice and is an 'investment that will pay off in the long run' (Meador, 2018).

While teachers – including me – dedicate time over evenings and weekends to these tasks, it is not reasonable to expect teachers to regularly give up personal and family time for work. This is not an expectation placed on many – if any – other professions and is a key contributor to burnout and teachers leaving the profession.

For the absence of any doubt, this is not a request for extra break times. This consolidation time would allow for teachers to fulfil the necessary tasks that complement classroom practice, such as:

- Making contact with parents/guardians to update on students' progress;
- Meeting with year coordinators to discuss academic progress and wellbeing of students;
- Planning highly engaging lessons with differentiation;
- Preparing feedback on formative assessments;
- Meeting students to provide mentoring, feedback or holding restorative conversations.

Similar to the provision of report writing time, this initiative would need to be implemented on a State/Territory level. However, the Commonwealth can still play an encouraging role.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this submission has made the following recommendations that would be beneficial to teachers, and thus to Australian students:

- ✓ An instant tax write off to cover the extensive sundries expenses teachers face;
- ✓ Fund a staff wellbeing coordinator in every school and ensure teachers have access to appropriate wellbeing support;
- ✓ Mandate for a day for end of semester marking report writing, which would make sure that students receive accurate and detailed feedback; and
- ✓ Allot more time for student-focused consolidation.

Thank you again for considering this submission. It has been deliberately brief, as the Committee's time is both limited and valuable. Additionally, there will be numerous high-quality submissions made by an assortment of academics, thought leaders, key stakeholders and unions, all of which will provide ample information for the Committee to consider.

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