



South Australian
State School Leaders
Association

POSITION PAPER

Workload in Enterprise Bargaining Negotiations

Excessive Workload – A Critical Risk to our People and our Public Education System

SASSLA members are reporting that workloads in schools are increasing and there appears to be no end in sight. Two recent reports provide a comprehensive picture of the extent and impact of the problem of excessive workload.

- The Australian Principal Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022 Data Report identified¹:
 - The two top stressors on school leaders were the sheer quantity of work and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning. These have been the top two stressors since the start of the survey in 2011.
 - In the 2022 Report, teacher shortages were reported for the first-time as the third highest source of stress. In 2020, it was ranked 17 out of 19, in 2021 12 out of 19, and in 2022 three out of 19.

A key finding of the report is that the cumulative impact of increasing workload, teacher shortages, and supporting the wellbeing of students and teachers increased stress levels. Across the Australian public education system, 51.8% of survey participants received a red flag (an indicator of serious mental health concern). This is an increase from 31% in 2021.

- The 2022 Review of the National School Reform Agreement by the Australian Productivity Commission reports that Australian teachers work between 44 to 57 hours a week during term time and spend more time on general administration, such as communication, paperwork, and other clerical duties than their international counterparts. Principals spend an even greater share of their time on administration, along with leadership tasks and meetings, while on average spending just five per cent on the professional learning for school staff. The report identifies that high and unsustainable workload is the main factor behind teachers' intention to leave the profession.

The findings highlighted above are consistent with feedback from SASSLA members. Our recent Country Visits Observation 2022 and earlier evaluation of Preschool Director Workload provides additional information on the problem of excessive workload. These reports are available on our website.

¹ The Australian Principal Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022 Data: Australian Catholic University Institute for Positive Psychology and Education.

The current body of research evidence identifies the elevated costs and risks across three dimensions:

- **People:** Detrimental effects on the health, personal relationships, and family life of educators.
- **Productivity:** Leaders and teachers are less able to prioritise critical elements of work that promote the growth of teaching and learning.
- **Sustainability:** People are making alternative career choices away from teaching and leadership roles because of excessive work demands.

These are strategic risks. If they are not positively and logically addressed, long term negative consequences will result for our educators and the public education system. Tackling excessive workload must be a serious priority!

Current Enterprise Bargaining Negotiations

Workload is an industrial matter as it relates to conditions of employment and is therefore integral to Enterprise Bargaining negotiations.

The AEU engaged the Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion from the University of South Australia to undertake research on conditions of employment for educators which is published in the report *Teachers at Breaking Point (2022)*². This work underpins the AEU's Campaign titled "*Fix the Crisis – Bargaining for a better future*" which sets out its interests and ambitions for the current round of negotiations. The main areas of focus relevant to workload are:

- Restricting new initiatives.
- Changes to industrial regulation including definitions of teaching duties; quantum of face to face teaching, non-instruction time (NIT) and class size.
- Increased resourcing including a support staff member (SSO) in every class.

Implicit in the AEU's approach is the achievement of workload reductions through the industrial regulation of workload. The type of regulation contemplated in *Fix the Crisis – Bargaining for a better future* will potentially change the pattern and distribution of work and will require major recruitment of new teachers to realise the benefits in workload reduction being sought.

It is essential to assess the potential impact on system operations and efficiency when considering the design of regulation. Two specific areas of high risk related to the AEU's claim are:

- **Further embedding disadvantage in hard to staff schools and preschools:** The areas of regulation proposed by the AEU will require substantial employment of additional teachers in what is already a very tight and undersupplied labour market. Hard to staff schools, predominantly located in the country or low socio-economic areas, are struggling to appoint teachers now. If there is a sudden demand spike for new teachers state-wide, these sites will be further disadvantaged. This will put intense pressure on our hard to staff schools and creates a serious risk of creating a two-tiered public education system.

² Teachers at Breaking Point: Why working in South Australian schools is getting tougher by J. Windle, A. Morrison, S. Sellar, R. Squires, J. Kennedy, and C. Murray. University of South Australia, Centre for Educational and Social Inclusion.

- **Embedding inefficiency in schools and preschools:** Employment regulation must be carefully analysed to assess its effect on the patterns and distribution of work. An effect of poorly designed regulation is to move work from one class of employee to another which does not address the underlying workload problem and often embeds further inefficiencies across the system.

SASSLA's Position

Options for changes to regulation must be carefully assessed and calibrated to ensure they achieve their intended aim without creating significant new risks or unintended consequences.

SASSLA's clear position is that school and preschool leaders have direct experience of managing industrial regulation and staffing at a site level and their voice is critical to getting the balance right.

An Alternative View

Evidence suggests that changes in industrial regulation and increased resourcing have had limited impact on improving workload conditions for educators over the last 20 years. To the contrary, evidence suggests work demands have increased over this time.

The problems of conventional industrial approaches in managing workloads were recognised by the Industrial Relations Commission of South Australia (IRCSA) in the arbitration of a new Enterprise Agreement in 2009. Relevant extracts from the IRCSA decision are:³

For too long the resourcing/staffing paradigm has driven the parties positions, as reflected in the AEU's claims for workload protection.

More generally, the historical approach to workload has obscured meaningful examination and investigation such as how much time teachers spend on "core" and "non-core" work and alternative means of providing support to teachers and alleviating workload.

The view expressed by the IRCSA in 2009 is prescient to Enterprise Bargaining negotiations in 2023.

To put the matter in perspective, it is important to note that management-initiated proposals aimed at improving workload conditions have also had limited impact. A recent survey conducted by SASSLA of initiatives implemented in the public education system across Australian jurisdictions indicate that they have had minimal impact. Three important criticisms are:

- They mostly focus on personal support and wellbeing, not the underlying conditions that give rise to increased job demand.
- They tend to be shallow and narrow interventions that do not change the structure and pattern of work.

³ IRCSA, conditions of employment for DECS and DFEEST (TAFE) Employees Decision no 2, June 2010, paragraphs 817 and 818. THE IRCSA is predecessor to the current South Australian Employment Tribunal (SAET).

- They tend towards ‘set and forget’ style of policy interventions with limited evidence of any ongoing priority, or serious evaluation.

In 2023 we are in a stalemate. We do not have a playbook to work from!

SASSLA’s Position

Excessive workload is essentially a systems-based problem. It is related to how work demands are created and managed, the design of job roles, the allocation of resources and services to meet job demands, building workforce capacity and capability, and the regulation of the system for fairness and compliance.

If workload conditions are to be improved, a wider systems perspective and a clear set of guiding principles to inform process design are needed. SASSLA suggests that the following principles provide a solid starting point for further discussion:

- It is a strategic priority anchored in the purposes of public education.
- Openness and transparency about the nature and scope of the problem supported by access and sharing of information and data.
- Placing a cost on excessive workload gives it a quantifiable value and assists in prioritising actions.
- Collaborative processes, including active engagement and partnerships with unions and associations, are essential to solve the problems and trade-offs that will inevitably arise.
- The experience of work shapes the perception of workload; how we design work and jobs to create meaning and job satisfaction is a critical piece of the puzzle.

The question of designing a process is a further issue that SASSLA will present its thinking on in the second half of 2023.



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