

Canaries at the coalface

Urgent action is required to keep new teachers in the profession. Education Today talks to Australian Education Union Federal President Angelo Gavrielatos

Early career teachers are canaries at the coalface and when they start to falter that says a lot about the needs of teachers and the needs of the teaching profession, according to Australian Education Union (AEU) Federal President Angelo Gavrielatos.

Speaking to *Education Today*, Mr Gavrielatos expressed alarm that the top four concerns for new teachers in a 2008 New Educators Survey were workload, behaviour management, pay and class sizes.

The survey results highlighted how a significant number of new teachers felt unprepared and a vast majority felt overwhelmed about a raft of issues including no formal mentoring, no training in behaviour management, no instruction in dealing with difficult parents and colleagues, no preparation to meet the needs of Indigenous students and problems gaining ongoing or permanent work.

Even more worrying was the fact over 50 per cent of the 1545 new teachers surveyed stated they would leave the profession within 10 years.

"Despite many new teachers showing great dedication for their profession – workload, pay, class sizes and behaviour management continue to drive new teachers out of the classroom," Mr Gavrielatos said.

Teacher shortage looms

Combine the loss of young teachers with the mass exodus of baby boomer teachers set to retire in the next five years and the future of public education looks bleak.

Mr Gavrielatos believes to help retain and attract new teachers; both the federal and state Governments need aggressive strategies and better policies that focus on pre-service and in-service education and training, mentoring and on-going support.

"As society becomes more complex, so do our classrooms and new teachers need induction, support and mentoring," Mr Gavrielatos stressed.

Less work more mentoring

To solve the problem, he wants to see reduced teacher loads for both new teachers and more experienced mentor teachers, so both parties can undertake mentoring and in-service training.

Another major concern for new teachers is the fact that one-third are asked to teach outside their area of expertise and qualifications.

Mr Gavrielatos believes the federal Government's plan to solve teacher shortages by fast-tracking commerce, law and science

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graduates into teaching, with only six-weeks training, is a mistake. A 'quick-fix' solution and not in the best interests of students, he said.

"The key to maintaining high standards in public education is by ensuring that every teacher has formal training," Mr Gavrielatos said. "Especially when over 60 per cent of new teachers want more formal training in behavioural management."

Specialist teacher shortfall

According to Mr Gavrielatos, there is a huge need for specialist teachers and staff, as well as school counsellors.

"In NSW there is one counsellor to 1000 students and that is an impossible caseload," he continued. "There needs to be a more concentrated effort and more resources to assess behaviour management needs."

Mr Gavrielatos also believes experienced teachers face challenges and require quality in-service training and support, especially with a national curriculum under consideration.

National curriculum

He says the AEU is comfortable with a national curriculum but believes that this alone will not improve education outcomes without suitable research into the needs of teachers and students and then with proper implementation.

It seems the 'Who's Who' of Australian politics also agree education needs a boost, with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) – made up of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Premiers, Chief Ministers, the President of the Australian Local Government Association and Commonwealth, State and Territory Treasurers – deciding late last year to inject \$3.5 billion into education over the next decade.

Of the funding package, Mr Gavrielatos estimates public education will receive \$2.8 billion. While he welcomes the decision, because it is the first significant investment in public education in 10 years, he states the AEU will continue to work towards further improvements.

"I would like both state and federal Governments to fulfil their responsibility to the education community, as teachers have for

so long fulfilled their responsibility to public education," Mr Gavrielatos added.

"To successfully attract new teachers to the public education system and retain experienced teachers, we need to better prepare and support them so they can make a long-term contribution to the education of our children."

But support for new teachers varies from state to state. In NSW, Mr Gavrielatos said, new teachers received one additional hour released from face to face teaching but mentoring is hit and miss.

"We need to see a properly resourced induction and mentoring program nationwide," he added.

Government response

In response to Mr Gavrielatos' comments, a spokesperson for the Minister for Education, Julia Gillard said the Rudd Government was working with the states and territories to deliver a \$550 million national partnership on quality teaching.

"The National Partnership on Improving Teacher Quality will deliver reforms targeting critical points in the teacher 'lifecycle' to attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and leaders in our schools and in front of classrooms," the spokesman told *Education Today*.

She added that this partnership focused on a range of reforms that would assist beginning teachers in their first years in the workforce, including the national accreditation and improvement of pre-service teacher education courses, new pathways into teaching and improved mobility of the Australian teaching workforce.

"The National Partnership also commits governments to working towards recognition and reward for quality teaching and new professional standards to underpin national reforms," she said.

