

Holding Schools Together: The Human Cost of Workforce Shortages

The Issue

Australia's schools are facing a critical workforce shortage, and the impacts are most severe in country and hard-to-staff (HTS) schools.

This is not just about vacancies. It is about daily disruption to learning, narrowing of curriculum, and unsustainable strain on school leaders.

Why It Matters

- Children lose learning opportunities when classes are split, curriculum breadth is reduced, or there is no qualified teacher available.
- Leaders are forced into daily crisis management, covering classes instead of leading schools.
- Communities lose trust when continuity of teaching and relationships is broken.
- Specialist programs and inclusion supports are often the first to be cut in staff shortage emergencies.

Key Risks in the current situation:

1. **Industrial breaches:** staff working above load, inadequate planning and admin time. Reduced educator and leader wellbeing.
2. **Duty of care:** split classes and unsustainable workloads.
3. **Burnout:** declining morale and retention risk.
4. **Equity:** disadvantaged communities disproportionately affected and further disadvantaged.
5. **Student learning:** when schools run short of teachers, students don't just miss lessons, they miss out on equity, stability, and opportunity.

Leaders warn that saying "we've tried and can't find anyone" normalises failure, lowers expectations, erodes morale, and deprioritises children's learning.

APPA forecast this workforce shortage in 2008, yet the problem has deepened without preventative action.

Leader Voices

"Every day starts with a spreadsheet of who's absent and ends with wondering how much longer we can keep this up." Regional Principal

"It's not strategy - it's survival. We're holding this together with bare hands." Metro Principal

"Because of extraordinary leadership efforts, our NAPLAN and PAT results are strong and stable, but this model is not sustainable. The system cannot rely indefinitely on leaders' resilience and sacrifice." Regional Principal

Impact on Students

- Loss of specialist subjects (music, languages, arts).
- Interrupted learning in senior years affecting assessment reliability.
- Reduced access to inclusion support, disproportionately affecting students with disabilities and Aboriginal learners.
- Declining student belonging when class teachers change frequently.
- Decreased attendance and increased school 'drop out rates'.

System-Level Pressures on Leaders

- Covering classes daily → leadership work delayed or dropped, and additional work not compensated
- 2+ hours/day spent on relief timetabling, absence management, recruitment.
- Financial risks taken to secure staff (e.g., advance booking relief all year, deliberate overstaffing).
- Cancelled leave due to guilt despite exhaustion.

What APPA is advocating for

A robust conversation with the profession about barriers and enablers to be attracted to and being retained in this vital profession. This includes ‘fit for purpose’ strategies that see teachers and leaders engaged and happy in the purposeful work they signed up to do.

The Call to Action

Our leaders are not asking for praise. They are asking for the tools, people, and resources to ensure every child has a qualified, caring teacher - every day.

Without urgent system-level action, we risk burning out the very people who keep our schools, and our communities, strong.

This new plan is our chance to set bold, measurable goals for attracting, preparing, and retaining the workforce our children deserve, so that every child, in every postcode, can learn well and live well.

“The future of every child, in every postcode, depends on the choices we make for our workforce today.”

Angela Falkenberg
APPA President
16 September 2025

Summary of APPA Case Studies on Workforce Shortages September 2025

Case Study	Context	Key Issues	Risks	Impact
Case Study 1 – Large Metro P–12	1700 enrolments, ICSEA 970; 14 teachers short since start of 2025.	Leaders teaching regularly; loss of leadership time; rising workloads; equity compromised.	Student wellbeing, equity, and leadership capacity eroded; burnout risk.	Primary children split across classes; specialists diverted; marginalised students miss support.
Case Study 2 – Outer Metro Primary	ICSEA 865; school overstaffed 1.6 FTE + extra TA hours; leaders daily in classes.	Leaders constantly covering classes and duties; specialist programs disrupted; no relief teachers available.	Loss of broad curriculum; staff exhaustion; unsustainable model.	Leaders doing multiple yard duties daily; children’s right to broad curriculum undermined.
Case Study 3 – Small Regional (70% First Nations)	ICSEA 695 High complexity, 70% First Nations enrolments; poverty, trauma, climate impacts.	Finding skilled, culturally responsive teachers; principal frequently teaching; extreme student and community complexity.	Cultural mismatch risks; loss of family/system/community engagement time; leader burnout.	Leaders making daily trade-offs; some success with university-community partnerships.
Case Study 4 – Large Regional	1450 enrolments, ICSEA 1000; 16 ‘permission to teach’ teachers; high reliance on casuals.	Recruitment delays 5+ weeks; agency costs +\$200/day; leaders spending 2 hrs daily on staffing; parent complaints.	Financial strain; overreliance on underqualified teachers; inequity in senior years.	16 permission-to-teach staff; leadership constantly firefighting staffing issues.
Case Study 5 – Country Cluster (11 Schools)	11 schools, avg ICSEA 862; 296 teacher days lost Feb–July 2025; 15% unreported absences.	Relief unavailable; schools overstaff to cope; morale drops; risk of normalising failure; system unresponsive since 2008.	Staff morale decline; lowered expectations; children’s learning deprioritised.	Schools forced to hire additional staff as buffers; systemic neglect noted.
Case Study 6 – Regional P–12	550 enrolments, ICSEA 1000; ongoing vacancies, leaders covering classes.	Specialist staff hard to secure; reliance on early career teachers; leaders teaching daily; ‘moral injury’ in recruiting from other schools.	Industrial breaches; duty of care risks; burnout; equity impacts on disadvantaged students.	Strong NAPLAN and PAT results but achieved only through extraordinary leader sacrifice.