

Australia: Retaining and Attracting Teachers

Brendan Mitchell (Corresponding author)

Independent Researcher

Melbourne, Australia

E-mail: brendon_mitchell@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This article examines how Australia retains and attracts teachers. It analyzes the challenges Australian teachers encounter in their teaching lives and provides recommendations to address these. The recommendations if implemented would not only contribute to improved learning in all areas of Australia, but also more broadly to the country. It is recognized that Australia is a geographically large with diverse communities and this is reflected in schools. It is for this reason the literature review examines low performing schools, which is relevant to the latter parts of this article. That is school identification in Australia and the current tools available to motivate teachers to work in remote and socially and economically disadvantaged regions.

How does Australia motivate people to become teachers, develop them, and ensure that the system is able to deliver on the best possible instruction for every child is presented? Teachers learn these tools from initial teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional learning opportunities. The system needs to ensure that it can retain and attract teachers to deliver quality opportunities for every child regardless of school or location.

Keywords: Australia, students, teachers, training, schools

1. Introduction

Australia has one of the best education systems in the world with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) scoring Australia 8.6/10 for its education system (Harvey, 2025) However, Australia faces challenges retaining and attracting teachers. This article investigates how Australia addresses the challenge of retaining and attracting teachers to the profession. The analysis seeks to discover what is being done and what could be done. This is to contribute to a government mandated goal to improve educational outcomes and ensure equal access to quality education regardless of demographics and background.

Following the introduction, a review of the literature is presented. The literature examined is based on low performing schools and what can be done to improve these schools, particularly their academic outcomes. The review is broad in that it not only focuses on literature that is Australia specific. This has been done to provide interested readers with further perspectives and references for further reading or investigation. A brief methodology section describes the approach to the research that has been employed. The final sections of this article are the recommendations, the conclusion, and references.

2. Literature Review

Research indicates that there are various ways to identify low performing schools. Measuring and defining school success is a challenging and difficult task (Bloom & Owens, 2011). There are no agreed upon research-based best practices but there is agreement that both quality and equity must be attended to when establishing criteria that differentiate between high and low performing schools. There needs to be a balance between achievement and equity regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status or ability (Bloom & Owens, 2011). Schools are often categorized as low performing based on students' test scores, graduation rates, dropout rates, and student and teacher attendance.

Some countries utilize the results of school inspections to determine if schools are low performing (Gustafsson et al., 2015). Examples include the United Kingdom and New Zealand. In the United Kingdom inspections are called Ofsted Inspections (Government of the United Kingdom, 2024). The Education Review Office (n.d.) is the New Zealand government's external education review agency. Heystek & Emekako (2020) state that publicly available information on schools' performances can motivate change. This change may be supported through increased resource allocation and support mechanisms, and in many cases could be led by a school improvement plan (document) to guide schools and their key stakeholders. Such plans provide solutions or remedies to identify challenges and problems.

Why are there low performing schools? Research illuminates the fact that there is not one answer to this question but rather, each school possesses a unique combination of teacher, leadership, and student characteristics that lead to low performance. Factors that impact school performance are students' socio-economic status, the quality of teachers and the way they are motivated, a principal's leadership style, and the schools' physical working conditions. Unfortunately, children living in poverty tend to be concentrated in low performing schools staffed by ill-equipped teachers (Murnane, 2007). Studies have found that teacher effectiveness is the most important school-based predictor of student learning and that several consecutive years of outstanding teaching can offset the learning deficits of disadvantaged students (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Hanushek et al., 2005).

The OECD (2012) provides five recommendations to improve low performing schools.

1. Strengthen and support school leadership. Grissom et al. (2021) found that effective principals have positive impacts on student achievement and attendance as well as teacher satisfaction and retention.

2. Stimulate a supportive school climate and environment for learning.
3. Attract, support, and retain high quality teachers.
4. Ensure effective classroom learning strategies.
5. Prioritize linking schools with parents and communities.

This article is primarily aligned with the third recommendation. The report (OECD, 2012) provides four key recommendations to attract, support, and retain high quality teachers.

1. Align teacher education with the needs of disadvantaged schools to ensure that teachers receive the skills and knowledge they need for working in these schools.
2. Provide mentoring for novice teachers working in these schools. Well-structured programs may improve teacher effectiveness and increase retention in disadvantaged schools.
3. Provide supportive working conditions to retain effective teachers in disadvantaged schools. Teachers are more likely to stay in those schools where they can work effectively and see the results of their effort. Without these, teachers may feel ineffective and may move schools or quit teaching altogether.
4. Design adequate financial and career incentives to attract and retain high quality teachers in disadvantaged schools.

3. Methodology

The methodology used in this article was an analysis of publicly available documents and data on attracting and retaining teachers, the teaching career ladder, identifying low performing schools, and incentives for teachers to work at schools and/or – predominantly rural – locations that struggle to recruit teachers. The previous section provided some commentary on how to improve low performing schools.

4. Australia

Australia comprises six states and two territories. While there is a federal Department of Education, the states and territories have jurisdiction over education, which includes curriculum, teachers' licensing requirements, employment, and salaries. There are some consistencies among the states and territories but there are differences too. For example, while a teacher may be licensed in one jurisdiction, if a teacher moves to another state or territory they need to apply for registration in that state or territory. This article does not focus on any state or territory but rather provides an analysis of Australia as a whole, while drawing on specific state and territory examples where needed.

The article is only reporting on the public sector schools in Australia. In 2024 only 63.4% of the 4,132,006 students were enrolled in Australian schools were enrolled in the public system (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.-a). This statistic has been included as it may have relevance to governments (if they wanted to) address the slower enrolment rate in the public sector, while enrolment rates at the non-government sector

schools continue to increase in Australia (Duffy & Heathcote, 2025; Cassidy, 2025).

The *Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs, 2008) committed Australia to improving educational outcomes for all Australians. It notes that Australia has low performing students in indigenous and low socio-economic areas where the outcomes, equity, and opportunities need to be addressed. The report says that “achieving these educational goals is the collective responsibility of governments, school sectors, and individual schools as well as parents and carers, young Australians, families, other education and training providers, business, and the broader community” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 7). Additionally, the report states, “Australian governments commit to working with all school sectors to attract, develop, support and retain a high-quality teaching and school leadership workforce in Australian schools” (p. 11).

4.1 Challenges of Attracting and Retaining Teachers

A goal of the 2019 the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* is to build on the success of the 2008 Declaration. The 2019 Declaration promotes excellence and equity, supporting educators, quality teaching and leadership, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners to reach their potential, and supporting all young Australians at risk of educational disadvantage.

While both declarations seek to attract and retain teachers, is this currently happening in the public sector? Recent reports by the Department of Education, Australian Government (2022, 2023) reveal that Australia is struggling with teacher supply and retention rates. Heffernan et al. (2022) and others (for example, Stacey et al., 2023) have cited teachers’ workload as being a factor in teachers leaving the profession. The workload referred to is the administrative and bureaucratic requirements placed on teachers. This is even though administrative and clerical staff increased by 90.2% in primary schools, 82.6% in secondary schools, and increased central and regional office staff by 56% - three times that of teachers, and the number of management roles increased by 70% from 2002 to 2019 (Cobbold, 2019). Unfortunately, or perhaps expectedly, this is reflected in the higher education sector too. Senior management positions at Australian universities grew by 110% and middle management roles grew by 122% in the twenty years from 1997 to 2017. During this period academic support staff decreased by 70% (Sawyer, 2025).

There are additional reasons why the teaching profession is losing teachers from its ranks. These include the feeling of lack of respect and support, work environment, leadership, student behavior, unreasonable demands, a crowded curriculum, being undervalued in the media, and parents (Brandenburg et al., 2024). Reversing the trend of bad student behavior, intimidation (of staff and students), and truancy where Australia ranks among the worst in OECD (Hare, 2023) are challenges. However, all is not lost and some of the teachers who have left the profession could be enticed back if conditions improved. This is because more than 80% of the teachers who have left the profession have retained their teacher registration (Federation University, 2024).

4.2 Career Development

All Australian states and territories have career ladders for teachers. It starts once a person decides that they would like to become a teacher. There are number of pathways to becoming a teacher in Australia: undergrade teaching degree, bridging course to an undergraduate degree, undergraduate degree and a graduate diploma in teaching, and a Master of Teaching. The Department of Education, Australian Government (2025) provides information on the pathways including links to the requirements of the states, territories, Catholic schools, and independent schools. This is one of the many examples of where Australia should nationalize an area.

Each state and territory has its own teacher registration unit and registration requirements. In Queensland it is done through the Queensland College of Teachers, with the other states and territories having similar bodies. The website (Queensland College of Teachers, n.d.) provides information on what the requirements are, registration portal, conditions for re-registration, and more.

Australian teachers begin their careers at the bottom of an incremental scale and based on years of experience move up one step each year, which corresponds with a higher salary level. Salary is generally based on years of service, qualifications, and prior teaching experience. For example, the Department of Education, Western Australia (2024) has fourteen stages, which means teachers are eligible salary increments over this period. There are differences between the states and territories.

4.3 National Collaboration for the Teaching Profession

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was established in 2010 to provide national leadership for the states and territories for teaching and school leadership (TIMMS 2015 Encyclopedia, 2025). Under AITSL's (n.d.) umbrella are national professional standards for teachers and school leaders, initial teacher education programs, entry requirements, teacher registration, and professional development. These domains are still under the jurisdiction of the states and territories, with AITSL having what could be described as a unification role. Additionally, the Australian government established the Initial Teacher Education Quality Assurance Oversight Board to improve initial teacher education programs, and their consistency and outcomes (Department of Education, Australian Government, n.d.-b).

Since 2012, AITSL has taken on a growing role in state and territory collaboration and supporting nationwide improvements throughout the sector. A goal of AITSL is to promote excellence in teaching and school leadership by developing nationally agreed policies and providing resources to support educators to become expert practitioners and drive excellence in teaching and school leadership. AITSL provides tools, guidance, resources, data, and frameworks in key areas: teacher standards, prepare to teach, teach, lead and develop, migrate to Australia, deliver initial teacher education programs, tools and resources, research and evidence, and Australian teacher workforce data (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d.).

The areas in the above paragraph should be nationalized under the jurisdiction of AITSL with all of the state and territory bodies made redundant to provide consistency among the states and territories. For example, Victoria has decided not to recognize Western Australian teachers who have completed a one-year Graduate Diploma in Education (Murphy, 2025). However, under mutual recognition registered teachers in New Zealand are eligible for teacher registration in Victoria (Victoria Institute of Teaching, 2025). Yet, New Zealand Graduate Diplomas in Teaching are only one-year (University of Auckland, n.d.). Where is the consistency?

4.4 Attracting and Retaining Teachers, Particularly to Low Performing Areas

As covered in the career development section of this article there are differences in the number of tiers and therefore salaries among the states and territories. A further example is that experienced teachers in Victoria are paid approximately AU\$15,000 less than their New South Wales counterparts (Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, 2025).

According to Fleck (2025), Australian teachers are the second highest paid teachers in world behind Germany. Educators, as public sector employees, are also entitled to leave entitlements such as sick leave, long service leave, paid parental leave, leave for study purposes, special leave (bereavement), and unpaid leave. Yet, due to administrative pressures and conditions Victorian teachers are pushing for a 35% pay increase to address teacher shortages and attracting teachers to the profession (Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, 2025). In May 2024 teachers in Queensland went on strike for the first time in 16 years over pay, but more so over conditions, with violence by students against teachers being at the forefront of their complaints (Oberge, 2025). However, there are a range of counter measures that have been introduced to retain and attract teachers.

Australia has introduced the High Achieving Teacher Program pathway to trial new and innovative pathways for schools most in need. This includes more teachers from a diverse range of backgrounds, more STEM teachers, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, teacher aides, and people based in remote locations (Department of Education, Australian Government, n.d.-a). In 2022 the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* that sets out a clear pathway to addressing the national issue of teacher workforce shortages was released (Department of Education, Australian Government, n.d.-c). The plan seeks to improve teacher supply, strengthen initial teacher education, retain (current) teachers, elevate the profession, and better understand future workforce needs.

In addition to the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* (2022) the Australian Government Department of Education has implemented additional programs to address supply, retention, and attracting teachers to remote and low performing schools. These include Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships, Regional University Study Hubs, Alternative Pathways – High Achieving Teachers Program, and the Very Remote Teachers Program. This Program will provide teachers who after applying and are selected to work in remote areas will have their Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt reduced.

Hunter and Sonnemann (2021) produced a report about how to entice young high achievers

into teaching. Their report found that over the last 30 years there has been a steady decline in young high achievers seeking to enter the profession. They want to be paid based on expertise rather than years of experience. While AITSL has teacher standards there is not a current agreed upon evaluation framework or tool to enable this to be possible at the present. Scholarships have been recommended, which have since been implemented by the government. A marketing campaign has been suggested, but at least some of the items in the recommendations section of this article need to be implemented before any campaign commences. A third point – that is included in the recommendations section – is to provide career pathways.

The states and territories have mechanisms to incentivize educators to work in regions where there is high demand. The demand tends to be in remote areas and challenging environments. The incentives include accommodation or accommodation allowances, location allowances, transportation, relocation expenses, appointment schemes, and additional leave entitlements.

4.5 How Australia Ranks Its Schools?

There are several methods Australian schools are ranked. The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It assesses four areas: reading, writing, conventions of language (spelling, grammar, and punctuation), and numeracy (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2025b). While NAPLAN is not an assessment of school quality, the publicly available data enables the public to compare school outcomes on the NAPLAN and My School portals (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2025a). The My School portal provides information and data on schools and population data, student attendance data, school financial information, vocational education and training (VET) participation and outcomes, and year 12 certifications.

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034) (Australian Government, Department of Education, n.d.-d) through its mandate of creating a fairer and better education system for all students and its enabling initiatives realizes that there are discrepancies between schools. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2025c) has recently released the *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia*. This Framework along with the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (2019), the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's (n.d.-b) *National Report on Schooling*, the various education acts and intergovernmental agreements on education, and related reports will or should allow reliable and valid school measurements to be done. These measurement tools and the data derived from them will or should hopefully result in school improvement plans to be created and delivered to achieve the goals and aspirations defined in the various documents.

5. Recommendations

The article discovered that there is a need for actions to be taken to not only attract teachers to the profession but to retain current teachers. If all governments and the various relevant bodies were to implement the recommendations presented, current and perspective teachers

would be encouraged to stay and enter the profession, including in lower performing schools and remote areas.

- Support teachers and teaching and do what is needed reach what is outlined in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (2019) and other documents presented in this article. This includes implementing the OECD's recommendations presented in the literature review.
- Reduce the administrative burden on teachers along with the number of bureaucrats and get them back into the classrooms. Use economies of scale where feasible such as through cluster school models to support lower performing schools and lower resourced schools. This should filter through to administrative and planning tasks as well.
- Remove teacher bias whether it is deliberate, situational, opinion-based without evidence, or other. Western Australia (Kirk, 2025) has moved to ban teachers from giving their opinions on various issues. Goals of education in Australia need to include social cohesion, integration, assimilation, embracing (the values of) a country, being able to research and present views based on balanced evidence. If a teacher has bias how can students be fairly assessed and treated by a teacher if they do not share the same views as a teacher?
- Nationalize teacher registration, salaries, career ladders, initial teacher education (programs), in-service professional development, and all other possible areas. All these activities should be transferred to AITSL with the disestablishment of state-based bodies. Have one curriculum including early childhood under the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. That is, the Australian Curriculum. Nationalize other areas such as secondary school completion (for example, introduce ACE, the Australian Certificate of Education) and its requirements, and all vocational courses to be registered through the national body the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and close all state and territory bodies. This includes early childhood education state and territory entities.
- Education and teaching must be aligned with national (economic, integration, expectations, etc.) needs and plans, along with providing the foundation for learners to have successful lives. Decrease the crowding of the curriculum. Focus the curriculum on Australia, its traditions, and its needs. Prepare students for their future with the knowledge, skills, and values they need.
- Instill discipline and national pride in the education sector, and very importantly the curriculum, its implementation, and schools. Improve student behavior including having strong punishment measures available for schools, police, the courts, and other relevant bodies. Punish poor behavior by parents and make parents accountable and engaged in their children's education journey. Some students and parents need to understand responsibility and consequences for actions or lack of actions. The strengthening of ties among schools, communities, business, and all stakeholders

through school (careers) counsellors will contribute to better behavioral and educational outcomes. There needs to be clearly defined pathways for students through all stages of education, and post-education and opportunities.

- Provide support and guidance for disadvantaged students, families, and communities, and schools. Support is particularly needed in remote and disadvantaged areas. Positive, proactive intervention and mechanisms must be introduced where appropriate. Support must be provided for young indigenous people who aspire to be teachers.
- Implement teaching and administration career pathways. The teaching pathway needs to have the same standing and recognition as the administrative pathway. It may have higher salary bands for education directors overseeing a cluster of schools.
- Ensure support for NAPLAN – it is compulsory and in children's, parents, schools, and the country's best interest that children do their best. Data is necessary for support for schools, regions, and children that need it.

6. Conclusion

This article demonstrated that while Australian teachers are some of the highest remunerated in the world, the profession is struggling to retain and attract teachers. There have been numerous governmental documents constructed over many years to try and address these challenges. Some of the ideas presented in these documents may work. However, education needs to be a federal responsibility and not state and territory based to realize the goals outlined in these documents. The recommendations section provided a list of initiatives, which if implemented will not only greatly contribute to retaining and attracting teachers in Australia, but providing improved outcomes and opportunities for students, which is the key.

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