

Improving Learning

A Study of Work Practices in Tasmanian Government Schools

Final report to the Australian Education Union – Tasmanian Branch

Education Policy and Practice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) conducted an online survey of members on behalf of the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU). The survey, which was open to teachers, school leaders (principals and assistant principals) and education support staff working in Tasmanian government schools and offices, was available to the majority of members of the Union in August 2017, and remained open for four weeks during Term 3. The survey was based on one conducted for the Victorian branch of the AEU in 2016.

The survey of the work of union members in Tasmanian government schools focussed on the hours of work by school staff, staff perceptions of their work, and the relationship between work practices and the quality of teaching. More than 3000 teachers, school leaders and education support staff completed the survey, a response rate of 60%.

Secondary class sizes

In secondary schools, students move among different subjects, with class sizes varying by subject. Secondary teachers were asked to indicate the number of students in their largest classes, then to indicate the subject taught for that class. They were also asked how many students they taught who had an individual learning plan. As shown in Table 1, the average class size varies by learning area. The largest classes (30.1 students) are in Arts subjects; the smallest classes (21.0 students) are in non-classified subjects, such as Integrated Studies and Vocational Education and Training. The overall average class size is 26.4 students. In addition, 91 per cent of secondary teachers worked with at least one student with an individual learning plan; that percentage was lowest in the Language learning area (81%) and highest in both the Science and Technologies learning areas (96%).

Table 1. Average number of students in secondary classes, by learning area

Learning area	Average number of students in largest class	Per cent of teachers with students with individual learning plans
The Arts	30.1	90.2%
English/Literacy	25.7	90.4%
Health and Physical Education	26.5	90.4%
The Humanities	26.3	89.9%
Languages	27.4	81.2%
Mathematics/Numeracy	26.7	90.1%
Science	29.0	96.2%
Technologies	24.5	96.2%
Other	21.0	86.2%
All learning areas	26.4	90.9%

Notes: Includes all classes in Years 7 to 12. 'Other' includes Integrated Studies, Environmental Education, Library, Vocational Education and Training, School Support and other subjects.

Class sizes vary across Tasmanian government schools, depending on the year levels in the school. Many of the extension high schools have small classes, as the program is still new and many students from these smaller communities still travel to the larger colleges. Colleges, which were included in the data collection, may have smaller classes for languages and larger classes for English and Science. Across all secondary year levels, from Year 7 to Year 12, 45 per cent of classes have 26 to 30 students, and another 13 per cent have 31 or more students (see Table 2).

Table 2. Secondary classes by class size bands

Class size band	Number of classes	Per cent of classes
15 or fewer students	87	8.1
16 to 20 students	78	7.3
21 to 25 students	292	27.2
26 to 30 students	477	44.5
31 or more students	139	13.0
Total	1073	100.0

Managing work

- Only one-quarter of teachers believe that their workload is manageable, or that they have a good work-life balance. Teachers in combined primary-secondary schools are more positive about these two aspects.
- Approximately one-quarter of teachers think about leaving the teaching profession.
- Nevertheless, more than half of all teachers look forward to the school day, with the highest percentages among teachers in specialist/support schools and primary schools.
- Only 19% of teachers in primary schools and 13% in secondary schools believe the performance and development process improves their teaching practice.

Quality of teaching

- More than one-half of teachers in all school types believe they teach well, know their students, set challenging goals for students, identify appropriate activities and resources for learning, and manage student behaviour effectively.
- Less than one-half of teachers in all school types believe they are able to meet individual students' learning needs, particularly the needs of less engaged students.
- Only a small percentage of teachers—17% of primary teachers and 12% of secondary teachers—are able to keep up with professional reading.

Teachers' suggestions for managing work

- Teachers most frequently agreed that protecting their non-contact time for teaching-related tasks—such as planning and marking—would help them manage their work.
- 80% or more of teachers agreed that a reduction in the number of government initiatives and in 'bureaucracy' would help manage their work.
- More than 80% of primary school teachers suggested that more support, from teaching assistants or education professionals, would help them; 78% agreed that more teachers would help; and 76% agreed that smaller classes would help.
- 72% of secondary teachers agreed that more teachers would help manage their work.
- In combined primary-secondary schools, 75% of teachers agreed that more teaching assistants would help manage their work.
- If teachers had more non-contact time, more than half would use it to plan more effectively to meet students' individual learning needs.

- **Teachers' perceptions of workload and workload issues, by school type**

Perceptions	Primary (%)	Secondary (%)	Primary and secondary (%)	Specialist/ support (%)
My workload is manageable	22.3	26.4	39.3	21.4
I have a good balance between home and work	21.9	26.0	45.9	28.6
My workload at school has a negative effect on the quality of my teaching	30.0	37.8	27.9	21.4
I think about leaving the teaching profession	26.9	27.6	24.2	28.6
I look forward to the school day	63.0	52.5	46.8	64.3
My workload leaves me little time to provide necessary additional support for my colleagues	53.4	56.6	51.6	50.0
My workload adversely affects my health	33.2	33.9	25.8	35.7
I have enough time to ensure that the vast majority of my lessons are well planned	31.8	23.3	26.2	35.7
I am expected to deliver too much curriculum content	65.8	52.2	32.3	28.6
The Performance and Development process/review takes up a lot of time	40.7	41.4	38.7	28.6
The Performance and Development process/review improves the way I teach in the classroom	19.2	12.7	22.6	8.3

- Notes: Figures indicate the percentage of respondents who indicated often or always to each item. Colleges are included with Secondary schools.