

United Workers Union response to Review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and respect the continuing spirit, culture, and contribution of Traditional Custodians on the lands where we work, and pay respects to Elders, past and present.

We extend our respects to Traditional Custodians of all places where United Workers Union members live and work around the country.

About United Workers Union

United Workers Union (UWU) is a powerful union with 150,000 members across the country from more than 45 industries and all walks of life, standing together to make a difference. Our work reaches millions of people every single day of their lives. We feed you, educate you, provide care and support for you, keep your communities safe and get you the goods you need. We work in the public, private and not for profit sectors. Without us, everything stops.

Introduction

United Workers Union represents non-teaching school staff across the country, Teacher Aides in QLD, Education Assistants in WA, School cleaners in QLD, NSW, ACT, Vic, Tas, SA and WA and grounds and maintenance staff in, ACT, Tas, SA and WA.

Every UWU member working in our school systems plays an important role in ensuring students can reach their full potential and have the support they need to succeed in a school environment.

There are obvious benefits from having a clean and well-maintained school space and receiving additional classroom support, but beyond these practical matters UWU members in schools contribute to the creation of an environment that supports students and creates a school community.

Most of the discussion on improved student outcomes and schooling experience focuses solely on attracting and retaining teachers and teacher workload. This is of course very important and necessary; however, teachers alone cannot provide the total school experience. Focusing solely on teachers and ignoring the non-teaching workforce fails to recognise the critical role they play within schools.

There is little thought or contingency in the education system to recognise these workers are also employees who need time to undertake tasks associated with their employment, be developed, be consulted and informed. School cleaners in particular are almost invisible.

UWU believes that the Review can and should recommend that the next NRSA contain targets and reforms that value and respect the role of non-teaching staff in schools. That recognises their contribution to student outcomes, mental health and wellbeing and their role in reducing teacher workload thus contributing to better attraction and retention of teaching staff. School funding should ensure expenditure on quality workforce conditions

for non-teaching staff, direct secure employment, adequate hours and ongoing training and development to ensure non-teaching staff can contribute to high quality educational outcomes.

Workforce issues

Teacher Aides/Education Assistants

The Teacher Aide/Education Assistant workforce is a significant and growing workforce in the public education system. Estimates suggest this workforce is currently 117,000 nationally and is projected to grow to 118,500 by 2026¹. In QLD there are 26, 474 teacher aides and in WA 16,821 Education Assistants.² The Teacher Aides/Education Assistants workforce has grown by some 300% from 1990 to 2021 making it a significant and critical education workforce.

Despite the size and importance of this workforce it faces workforce challenges such as inadequate hours, lack of training and ongoing professional development that is otherwise available to teachers, workload issues, lack of paid preparation and planning time and lack of respect and recognition.

Research has shown that when Teacher Aides/Education Assistants have clear job roles, receive relevant training, are integrated into the school community, have adequate opportunities for planning with teachers and have access to information they improve student outcomes and help students catch up^{3,4}. A 2022 Grattan Institute report⁵ states that this workforce “*fly under the radar but represent a significant part of the workforce*” Yet despite their significant number and important role there is very little in the way of specific funding or policy for Teacher Aides/Education Assistants. This seems like a missed opportunity given their numbers and the impact research shows, given the right conditions, they have on student outcomes.

Workforce issues vary across States and Territories however there are a number of significant workforce issues contributing to the undervaluation of the work of Teacher Aides/Education Assistants.

Teacher Aides/Education Assistants are increasingly dealing with children with disability, and behavioural issues without adequate support and are subject to occupational violence. Teacher Aides/Education Assistants feel their skills and knowledge are not valued as they are left out of planning and other aspects of students learning. They feel they are not adequately supported nor provided opportunities for paid time preparation and planning and training and development.

¹ <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/occupation-profile/education-aides?occupationCode=4221>

² Grattan Institute <https://grattan.edu.au/news/making-smarter-use-of-teaching-assistants/>

³ <https://www.itac.edu.au/blog/teacher-aides-literature-review>

⁴ <https://theconversation.com/australia-spends-5-billion-a-year-on-teaching-assistants-in-schools-but-we-dont-know-what-they-do-187918>

⁵ As above

In some cases, there are inadequate hours of employment. High workloads in combination with occupational violence and inadequate training and support lead to burnout and attraction and retention issues.

Teacher Aide/Education Assistants roles are increasingly becoming specialist roles that go beyond direct classroom support for teachers. They are specialist in working as interpreters, including AUSLAN, with children with disability, with First Nations children. This specialisation needs to be recognised in paid preparation and planning time to give adequate recognition to the important role of this specialist work.

As Teacher Aides/Education Assistants take on more and more direct activity supporting education outcomes for students they need to be recognised and supported to do this work and ensure their jobs have sufficient hours to undertake this work.

Often the way funding works drives poor quality jobs. Funding models have contributed to a proliferation of insecure hours and insecure employment. Hours get broken down to their smallest component parts so that additional people can be brought into the system but on low hours low security employment.

As an example, in QLD Only 3000 permanent Teacher Aides of some 26,000, are on 30 hours per week (despite mandatory maximisation to 30 being an industrial requirement since 2015). 1753 are at 25, with special schools in particular continuing to apply a 25-hour ceiling on the employment of their Teacher Aides. Hundreds of permanent Teacher Aides are engaged between 5 and 10 hours per week.

To address this a recently finalised Enterprise Agreement between UWU and the QLD Department of Education has introduced a New Model of Employment. This model prescribes a Standard Job Model under which Teacher Aides will be employed to work 33.75 hours per week (30 per week and 3.75 to offset remuneration maintenance over school holidays). This is a significant move away from insecure work that failed to adequately recognise the value of the Teacher Aide role.

Many of these workforce conditions are highlighted in a recent survey undertaken by UWU among WA Education Assistants asking about support available to children with autism. The survey found.

- 42% felt the needs of children with autism were being met. This was higher among special needs and advance special needs AEAs but fell to 33% among mainstream Education Assistants
- Education Assistants noted a significant increase in children with undiagnosed autism, and inadequate hours allocated to student once they have a diagnosis
- Education Assistants felt their time skills and knowledge in working with children with autism was not maximised and they were often excluded from planning reporting, liaising with parents and other practitioners despite them working most closely with the student
- Mainstream Education Assistants feel under supported and trained in dealing with children with autism, this leads to increased burnout

UWU recommends that measurements around Teacher Aide/Education Assistant job roles, including training and development, hours, and mechanisms to address occupational violence can be contained in the next NSRA. Teacher Aides/Education Assistants roles should be clearly defined and integrated into the school community and planning for students. Teacher Aides/Education Assistants should have paid time opportunities for preparation and planning and to undertake ongoing training and development and have their significant contribution to student learning outcomes, and wellbeing recognised.

Cleaning and grounds and maintenance staff

One of the most significant workforce issues for UWU cleaning and grounds and maintenance staff is where their work is contracted out rather than being directly employed.

Contracting out these roles has only led to false savings; the community and workers have not benefited, and the model is ill-suited for constructive, consultative relationships between these workers and the school community.

One of the clearest signs that the current system is not working is by assessing outcomes i.e., the cleanliness and safety of public schools. There are demonstrably poor outcomes from the current service in those places where cleaning and grounds and maintenance staff are not directly employed. Schools are not clean, nor well maintained, workers are working in poor conditions, students and teaching staff are therefore impacted by a learning environment that is not appropriate for education. This is not for lack of work ethic – cleaners and maintenance staff can't finish the job in the allotted hours – but it is demoralising work when there is not sufficient time to complete duties and workers are blamed for the lack of cleanliness and maintenance.

In a 2021 UWU survey of contracted school cleaners, 90% of respondents had less than 30 minutes to clean a classroom – more than 20% had less than 10 minutes. Over 60% of respondents said their workloads had increased since the pandemic. Almost two thirds (63%) of cleaners did not receive a daily task list that specified duties or specific areas that needed to be cleaned. Principals and teachers have added tasks to an already heavy workload because communication and direction from contractors is often insufficient.

These workers face rampant bullying, harassment, and favouritism. Cleaners, and particularly women, feel unsafe working alone late at night with insufficient outdoor lighting or security cameras in schools.

Early results from a current survey of UWU school cleaner members in NSW where school cleaning has been outsourced since 1994 found 55% have had their hours cut back in the past 5 years, there was a significant increase in tasks leading to 40% reporting they had been injured in the last 5 years more than half of respondents reported not being paid properly.

It is not only the cleanliness of schools that cleaners contribute to but the overall school environment and positive interactions with students. An article in the Conversation⁶ drawing on academic research highlights the difference in the experience of a contract school cleaner in NSW with a directly employed cleaner in Tasmania.

Kath Haddon, a school cleaner in NSW since 1981, remembers when cleaners' names started to drop from use in her workplace. It was in early 1994, following the Greiner Coalition government's decision to dissolve the Government Cleaning Service and tender the work to private companies. "We went from being employees of the school to being employees of the contractors overnight, and you could physically feel the change," she says.

"I can barely step onto school grounds without hearing 'Robbo this, Robbo that!'," he laughs. He has been cleaning primary schools since the 1970s and sees remembering names as a crucial dimension to his work. "At the start of the year I look at the whole group and pick out the really shy ones, the ones looking like they are left out or the ones who are in trouble," he twinkles. "I stand at the front and tell them, 'I'm Robbo, I'm the cleaner here, don't worry about what the teacher says, do what I say!'"

Direct employment is a safer, more transparent, and a more accountable option to ensuring public and school safety, better student outcomes and wellbeing and ensuring quality workforce conditions. When the ACT directly employed their school cleaners and maintenance staff in 2020, they found that it "facilitated the development of a fair and productive workplace environment. This has supported improved cleaning outcomes and enabled innovations and contemporary industry methodologies."⁷

Cleaners and grounds and maintenance staff are part of the school community and care about their schools very deeply. Many have had their own children attend these schools and have built relationships with teachers and staff over years.

Pay and conditions for cleaning and grounds and maintenance staff are poorer under contracted models.

In both the ACT where cleaners and maintenance staff are employed centrally, and in QLD where cleaners are employed directly by the government through the school pay rates are higher than in states where these roles are contracted.

Conditions are superior for directly employed school cleaners in ACT, QLD, and WA. There are rigorous dispute resolution processes for QLD cleaners to resolve issues on site, usually at a site level, but there is also opportunity for regular consultation through regional joint consultative committees (JCCs). They also have comprehensive union rights including union delegate training, paid time to complete delegate duties and union membership is encouraged.

⁶ Frances Flanagan, The Conversation, 2019 <https://theconversation.com/whats-the-school-cleaners-name-how-kids-not-just-cleaners-are-paying-the-price-of-outsourcing-115443>

⁷ Directorate of Education (2022), "Insourcing cleaning in ACT public schools", Case study for the ACT Government. Page 2 at https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/2001530/Insourcing-cleaning-case-study.pdf

In the ACT cleaners work is organised so that the permanent workforce performs school vacation cleaning and training sessions. In Queensland cleaners RDOs are accrued so that they are not forced to take paid leave in the holidays.

QLD has workload parameters, with an average of 530m²/hour and established criteria for calculating cleaning time. Additional cleaning time is provided for additional tasks. The ACT Directorate calculates the hours required per school, regularly inspects schools and due to the flexibility of a centralised employment model, is easily able to cover extra duties where required when there are activities at schools outside school hours. In WA where cleaners are directly employed, they have a cleaning ratio of 1 hour for 300sqm plus additional time for extras for example, vinyl floors, special education rooms.

A centralised model of direct employment managed by personnel with specialist knowledge in the delivery of cleaning and maintenance services, including understanding of the relevant industrial instruments, would ensure fair standards across schools, equity of treatment and all staff having the same expectations and duties, as well as meaning there is the knowledge and systems in place to manage delivery of chemicals, equipment, and uniforms. This would reduce the burden for administrative staff at schools, both in terms of the safety of students and staff with reduced turnover of staff so it is clear who is cleaning and maintaining their school and at what times.

UWU recommends to the Review that targets should be included in the NSRA to ensure centralised, direct employment models for cleaning and grounds and maintenance staff that treat workers with the respect and dignity they deserve and recognises the essential work they perform in our schools every day to keep the school community in a safe and clean environment.