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Schools in crisis as staff shortages take heavy toll

The teacher shortage in schools throughout NSW and the ACT has intensified to breaking point, with one Sydney Catholic secondary school, Brigidine College, having closed for the entire week because so many staff and students are off sick with COVID or isolating because of it.

The Independent Education Union of Australia NSW/ACT Branch – which represents more than 32,000 teachers, principals and support staff in non-government schools – is deeply concerned about the impact on school staff, students and their families.

“Our organisers have been in schools all over the state and territory, and they’re saying members everywhere are distressed, burnt out and exhausted,” IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Acting Secretary Carol Matthews said.

“There’s a high level of absence among both teachers and support staff – up to 30 per cent of teachers could be absent on any given day – and this means it’s harder and harder to get casuals. So teachers who are off are simply not replaced, placing an intolerable burden on our members.”

Throughout NSW and the ACT, schools are combining classes or splitting them up throughout the school. Some members are reporting up to 60 students in a class, and many students are getting only minimal supervision.

“In some schools, staff report behaviour standards are slipping as they cannot provide adequate guidance,” Matthews said. “I don’t know how much learning is going on if Year 5 students find themselves in a Year 1 class for the day. One teacher even described her role as ‘crowd control’ rather than teaching.

“Some schools are even engaging students who are in their final year of tertiary study to become a teacher, and this is placing enormous pressure on those student teachers – they’re entering the profession at an extremely challenging time. Many have not had practical experience as this has largely been cancelled in the past two years due to the pandemic.”

IEUA NSW/ACT Branch President Chris Wilkinson said: “At a Catholic secondary school on the central coast, the Learning Support department has been hit hardest, meaning there is no support for students with special needs or students for whom English is a second language. Excursions are being postponed or cancelled as there is no one to supervise.”

There are no quick fixes but there is a solution. “We need to get many more teachers into the system and keep those who are already there,” Matthews said. “It’s a matter of fair pay and manageable workloads, but employers have proved unwilling to move on this so far. This shortage did not come out of nowhere, governments and employers knew about it before the pandemic. A radical rethink is needed.”

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The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch represents over 32,000 teachers, principals and support staff in Catholic and independent schools, early childhood centres and post-secondary colleges.

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