Staff in Australia's schools
A major survey of the teaching and leadership workforce in Australia’s schools has provided a detailed demographic picture of the Australian teaching workforce and also highlighted a range of specific issues for future workforce planning.

Phillip McKenzie describes the study and its results.

The Staff in Australia’s Schools survey was conducted by ACER with the assistance of the Australian College of Educators (ACE) between October 2006 and April 2007. Around 20,000 teachers and school leaders were randomly selected and invited to participate in the study. The survey included primary teachers, secondary teachers, primary leaders and secondary leaders from Government, Catholic and Independent schools from all states and territories. Leaders were defined as Principals, Deputy/ Vice Principals and their equivalents in the different school systems. Final survey responses were received from 5,209 primary teachers, 5,394 secondary teachers, 1,116 primary leaders and 1,393 secondary leaders.

In addition to the survey, consultations were undertaken with key stakeholders around Australia regarding possible longer-term collaborative approaches to workforce data collection processes.

The Staff in Australia’s Schools study was commissioned by the then Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training and was supported by an Advisory Committee representing government and non-government authorities, professional associations and teacher educators. Results of the survey and consultations were published in two reports released in January 2008.

The survey component of the study gathered information on teachers’ and leaders’ basic demographics, qualifications and current study, motivation for becoming a teacher, current teaching position, professional learning activities, career intentions, job satisfaction and views on strategies to enhance attracting and retaining teachers.
The survey identified a number of issues in the school teacher and leader workforce that generated widespread media coverage when the results were released in late January this year. They included a shortage of senior teachers interested in becoming principals, principals covering teacher shortages by asking teachers to take subjects outside their personal areas of expertise, and a looming shortage of teachers as retiring teachers leave the workforce.

One topic that has not received much attention since the report’s release is the high level of satisfaction teachers and school leaders feel with their jobs. Overall about 80 per cent of teachers indicated that they were either satisfied (about 60 per cent) or very satisfied (20 per cent) with their current job. Participants had been asked to rate their satisfaction against a number of specific aspects of their work.

The highest level of satisfaction was noted in relation to teachers’ working relationships with their colleagues, and their working relationships with parents/guardians. The areas of least satisfaction were the value society places on teachers’ work and the amount of non-teaching work teachers are expected to do.

Although most school leaders also expressed a high level of job satisfaction, only about 50 per cent believed that school leadership positions were attractive to qualified applicants. Around 35-40 per cent of leaders said that such positions were unattractive and about 5 per cent that the positions were very unattractive.

Despite the generally high levels of satisfaction with teaching, career intentions were found to be somewhat fluid and difficult to predict with certainty. The majority of teachers said that schools as a whole have difficulty in retaining teachers in the profession.

This was believed to be the case by 66 per cent of primary teachers and 73 per cent of secondary teachers.

Particularly high proportions of early career teachers (those who have been teaching for less than five years) were unsure about how long they would keep teaching, indicating a lot of uncertainty about whether teaching will be a long-term career.

Results suggest that many early career teachers are not yet committed to teaching as a career. Younger teachers were more likely to indicate that they intend to leave teaching permanently before retirement, or that they were unsure about their career intentions. Only about one-third of primary teachers and one-quarter of secondary teachers aged 35 years or less indicated that they did not intend to leave teaching permanently before retirement. Around one-half of the teachers in this age band were unsure of their career intentions, which imply difficulties in projecting the number of replacement teachers that will be needed. On the other hand, by the time teachers reach their 50s it appears that few intend to leave before retirement or are unsure of their intentions.

For those teachers who were sure that they would leave teaching permanently prior to retirement, the most important factors were dissatisfaction with teaching and better opportunities outside of schools. “I never intended teaching to be a long-term career” was rated as either an important or very important reason by only 30 per cent of the primary teachers and 26 per cent of the secondary teachers who intended to leave, which implies that the most influential factors came into play after they had started teaching.

Finding ways to keep younger and early career teachers in the profession will be important to long-term workforce planning and avoiding deepening shortages of teachers in the future.

Teachers who felt that schools have difficulty in retaining teachers in the profession were clear in the strategies that they felt would help to retain teachers: over 90 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that more support staff, smaller class sizes, fewer student management issues, and a more positive public image of teachers would help to retain people in the profession. Among the strategies canvassed in the survey, higher pay for teachers whose students achieve specified goals was the least well supported: 25 per cent of the responding primary teachers and 30 per cent of the secondary teachers agreed or strongly agreed that this would help to retain teachers.

Teacher pay is currently a topic of considerable policy and media interest in Australia. The survey examined the importance of pay in attracting and retaining teachers to the profession in depth.

Results of the survey indicated that teachers do not enter the profession for the money or the public esteem of being a teacher. The most important factors in the decision to become a teacher were largely intrinsic and often altruistic, such as personal fulfillment, desire to work with young people and making a worthwhile social contribution.

However, money does seem to become a more important issue in retaining teachers in the profession. When asked for their views on a number of possible financial strategies for attracting and retaining teachers, the three most highly ranked were extra pay based on higher qualifications, extra pay based on years of teaching service, and successful completion of professional learning activities.

Less than half considered extra pay based on performance assessed against professional standards would be effective,
and less than 20 per cent considered that extra pay based on gains in student learning, would be effective in either attracting or retaining teachers. However, around one-fifth of principals indicated they were unsure about whether the strategy concerned would be effective, which suggests this is a policy area in which there is considerable uncertainty among school principals.

**Workforce data and planning processes**

The second major component of the project examined longer-term approaches to teacher workforce data collections and planning processes in Australia. That component was based on extensive consultations with stakeholder groups in all states and territories between September and December 2007. The second part of the report summarised current research and information about the Australian school teacher and leader workforce. The results of the consultations are included in a separate report: Teacher Workforce Data and Planning Processes in Australia.

The consultations identified two broad priorities for teacher workforce data and planning in Australia. The first is to ensure that individual decision makers have the data they need to make the best possible decisions for their circumstances. The second priority is that there needs to be a greater collaboration on workforce planning matters across Australia because of the common issues affecting teachers no matter where they work. Those seeking to improve teacher recruitment in any one state or sector will struggle to achieve satisfactory outcomes if not enough teachers have been trained or there are more attractive careers elsewhere.

One of the conclusions to come out of the study was the apparent need for a regular teacher and leader survey. A survey such as the current Staff in Australia’s Schools (SiAS) survey should be conducted on a regular, predictable cycle. Such a regular, high-profile data collection would enable schools, teachers and potential users to build it into their own planning, reduce the survey burden on schools and teachers by minimising the need for a number of different surveys from various organisations and, if well-resourced, encourage high response rates and thereby improve data quality and use, including the analysis of any trends.

At present there is an array of different surveys from different organisations – a situation that can lead to survey fatigue and have a downward impact on the response rates achieved. However, if teachers and school leaders know that a high-stakes survey is imminent and they can prepare for it, they may be more likely to participate and provide valuable information that can be used to assist in future planning.