

**Education Research Paper**

# **The Bureaucratisation of Public Education in Victoria**

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## Summary

Australia has long been infected by what world renowned Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg, currently professor of education at the Gonski Institute of Education in Sydney, coined as GERM (Global Education Reform Movement). It is characterised by corporate management policies, test-based accountability of schools and fostering competition between schools to drive improvement in education outcomes. One manifestation of GERM is a bloated bureaucracy to police compliance with regulations, collect and record information and monitor performance.

The Victorian public school system has seen an enormous increase in bureaucracy since the turn of the century. So-called school reforms beginning in the 1990s promised less bureaucratic control but instead have intensified bureaucracy at all levels of public education systems. Both Coalition and Labor governments have adopted GERM and expanded bureaucracy in public education.

The administrative demands on principals and teachers have been unrelenting and have derailed educational leadership in schools. One principal told Save Our Schools that central office is “micro-managing schools”. A teacher said: “Our days are increasingly regulated....the way the Victorian Department of Education and Training deals with teachers and schools can be described as ‘high levels of monitoring and compliance, and low levels of support’”.

Bureaucratisation has increased throughout the system - at central and regional offices, schools and for teachers. From 2002 to 2019, the increase in administrative staff at the system and school levels was far greater than the increase in teachers and students.

- Administrative and clerical staff increased by 102.9% in primary schools and 98.5% in secondary schools. The increase in primary schools was nearly three times the increase in teachers (35.3%) while the increase in secondary schools was over five times the 16.6% increase in teachers.
- The increases in administrative staff also far exceeded the increase in enrolments – nearly five times the increase in students in primary schools (22.3%) and nine times the increase in secondary students (12.3%).
- Administrative staff now comprise 27.4% of school staff in primary schools compared to 20% in 2002. Administrative staff in secondary schools increased from 18.3% to 27.7% of all secondary staff.
- Central and regional office staff increased by 72.2% or four times the increase for all students of 18.2% and nearly three times the increase for all teachers of 26.3%.
- Detailed figures for staff in central and regional offices are available only from 2015. The number of executive (management) staff increased by 40.1% which was much greater than the increase in students of 9.7% and the increase in teachers of 14.7% over the same period. Administrative and clerical staff increased by 45.3% and specialist support staff by 59.8%. Total non-school staff increased by 45.4%, about five times the increase in students.
- Only three out of 40 branches of the Victorian Department of Education appear to be directly involved in supporting teaching and learning. The vast majority are devoted to administration of finance, policing compliance to regulations, performance monitoring, human resource management and other corporate functions.

Despite the increase in administrative staff in schools, the administrative load for principals and teachers has increased. Data from the OECD’s Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 show that principals and teachers are working longer hours on administration. Australian teachers spend the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest number of hours on management and administration in the OECD.

The bureaucratisation of public education has clearly failed. Achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students in Victoria remain large at three to four years of learning at age 15.

Of course, public schools must be accountable, but the accountability regime imposed on schools has led to a significant misallocation of resources. The huge increase in administrative staff in schools and in central and regional offices has diverted much needed funding from supporting teaching and learning and derailed leadership in schools. The percentage increase in expenditure, adjusted for inflation, on administrative and clerical staff and other non-teaching staff in schools was nearly 40 times the increase on teachers since 2002 - 50.8% compared to 1.3% on teachers. It soaked up three-quarters of the very small increase in government funding for Victorian public schools since 2002.

Increasing bureaucratisation is not the way to improve school performance and student outcomes. Public schools continue to face large shortages in teachers and many teachers are teaching out-of-field. As a result, nearly one-quarter of all students having their learning hindered by the shortages. The Victorian Government must eradicate GERM and focus on directly supporting teaching and learning in schools, especially disadvantaged schools. Public schools need high quality human and material resources to reduce the large achievement gaps.

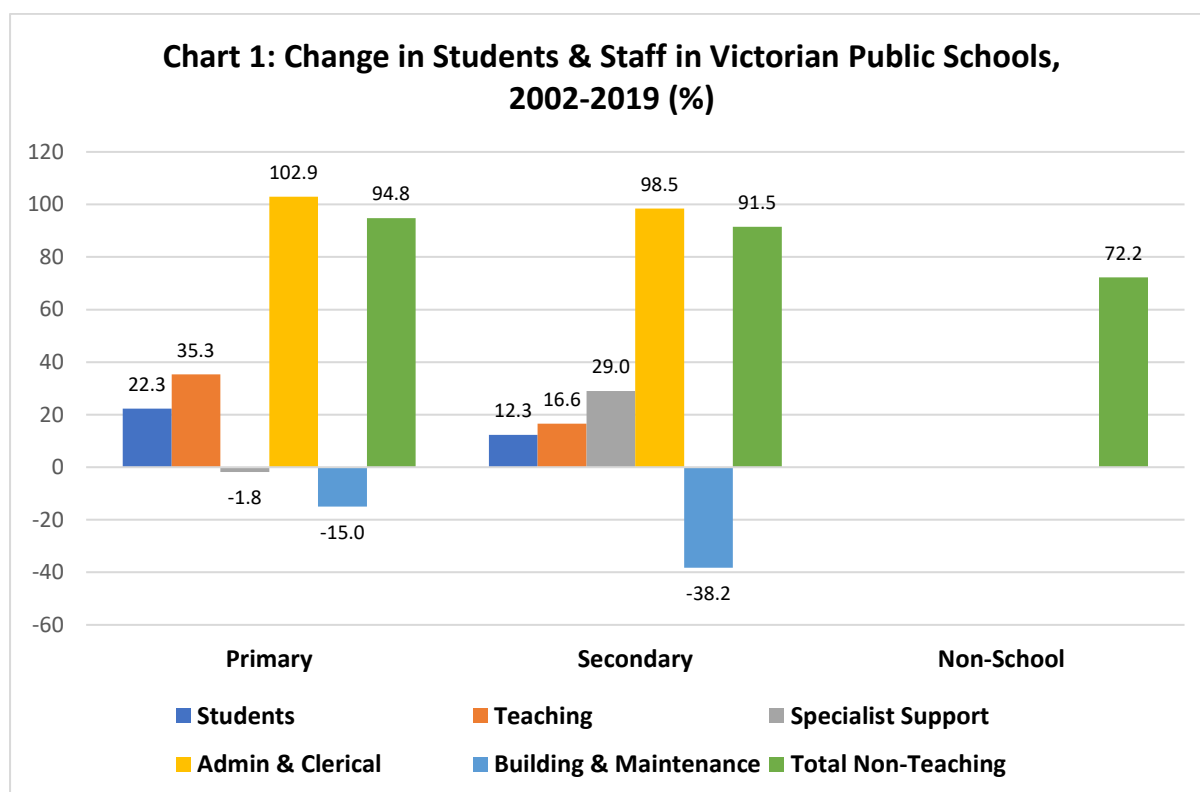
## 1. Introduction

Australia has long been infected by what world renowned Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg, currently professor of education at the Gonski Institute of Education in Sydney, coined as [GERM \(Global Education Reform Movement\)](#). It is characterised by corporate management policies, test-based accountability of schools and fostering competition between schools to drive improvement in education outcomes. One manifestation of GERM is a bloated bureaucracy to police compliance with regulations, collect and record information and monitor performance.

Public school systems in Australia have seen an enormous increase in bureaucracy since the turn of the century. So-called school reforms beginning in the 1990s promised less bureaucratic control but instead have intensified bureaucracy at all levels of public education systems. This paper shows the large growth of bureaucracy in the Victorian public education system which has absorbed nearly all the small increase in funding since 2002.

## 2. Administrative staff increases far exceed student and teacher increases

Non-teaching staff in schools and out of school increased by much more than students and teachers in both primary and secondary public schools in Victoria since 2002. Total non-teaching staff in primary schools increased by 94.8% and by 91.5% in secondary schools compared to an increase in students of 22.3% and 12.3% respectively. The increase in non-teaching staff was also far greater than the increase in teachers in primary schools of 35.3% and by 16.6% in secondary schools [Chart 1].



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.

The largest increase in non-teaching staff was for administrative and clerical staff who increased by 102.9% in primary schools and 98.5% in secondary schools. The increase in primary schools was nearly five times the increase in students and was nine times the increase in secondary students. The increase in administrative staff in primary schools was nearly three times the increase in teachers while the increase in secondary schools was six times the increase in teachers.

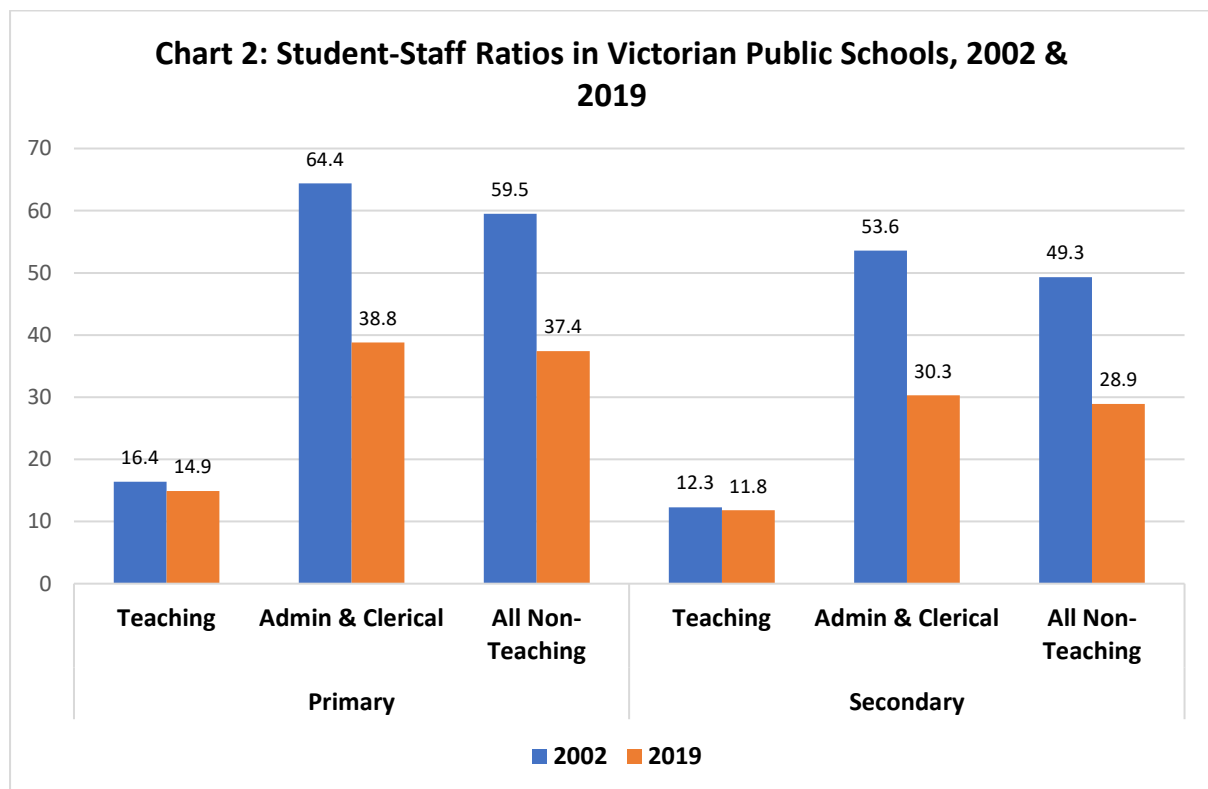
There was a significant increase in specialist support staff in secondary schools of 29%. This increase largely reflects increases in teacher aides, such as for disability students, and IT support. There was reduction in specialist support staff in primary schools of 1.8%.

The increase in central and regional office staff of 72.2% was four times the increase for all students of 18.2% and nearly three times the increase in teachers of 26.3%.

As a result, there was a large reduction in the ratio of students to administrative staff and all non-teaching staff in schools in contrast to little change in the student-teacher ratios [Chart 2]. The student/administrative staff ratio in primary schools fell from 64.4 to 38.8 – a reduction of 40% – while the student/teacher ratio fell from 16.4 to 14.9, a reduction of 9%. Overall, the student/non-teaching staff ratio fell from 59.5 to 37.4, a reduction of 37%.

The student/administrative staff ratio in secondary schools fell from 53.6 to 30.3 – a reduction of 39% - while the student/teacher ratio decreased from 12.3 to 11.8, a reduction of 4%. The student/non-teaching staff ratio fell from 49.3 to 28.9 – a reduction of 41%.

There was also a large reduction in the student/non-school staff ratio from 429.5 in 2002 to 294.9 in 2019 – a reduction of 31%.

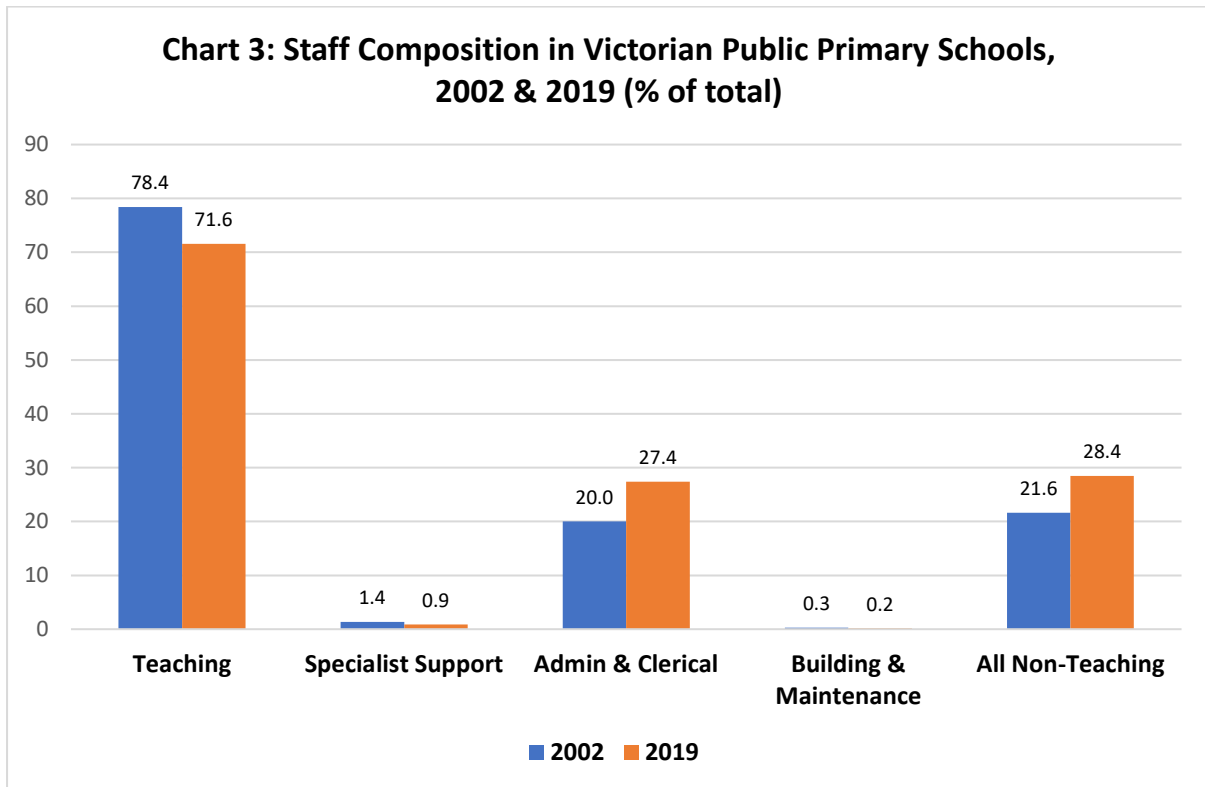


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.

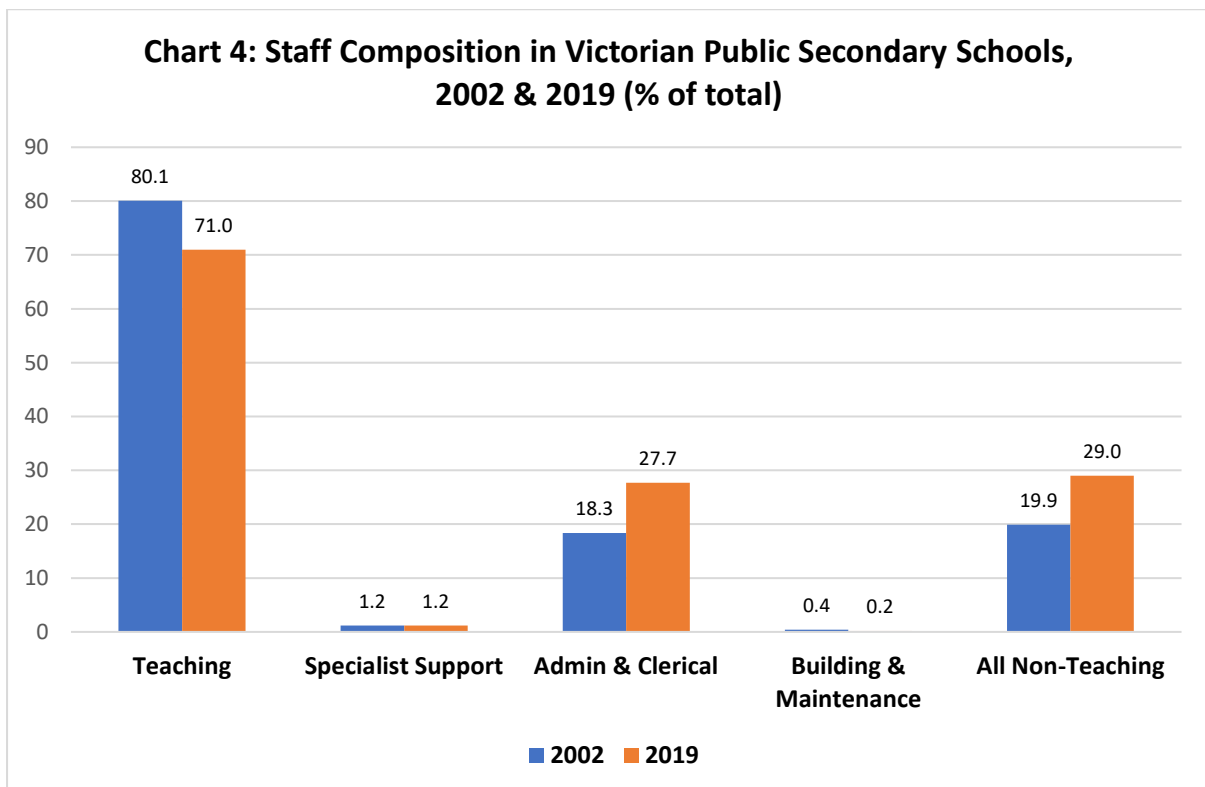
The composition of school staff has changed significantly as a result. The proportion of teachers in primary schools dropped from 78.4% in 2002 to 71.6% in 2019 [Chart 3]. Administrative staff increased from 20% to 27.4% while there was very little change in the proportion of specialist support staff and building and maintenance staff.

The proportion of teachers in secondary schools fell from 80.1% to 71% while the proportion of administrative staff increased from 18.3% to 27.7% [Chart 4]. There was little change in the

proportion of specialist support staff and no change in the proportion of building and maintenance staff.

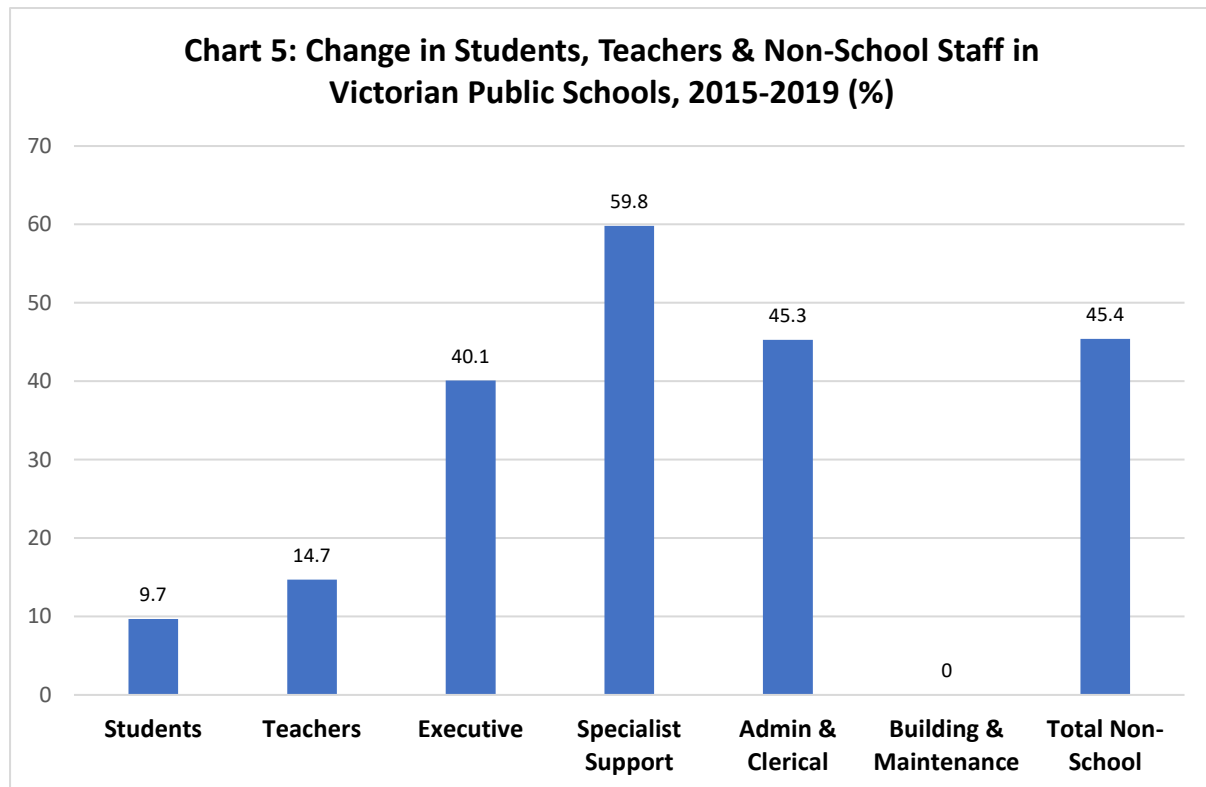


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.

Detailed national figures for out-of-school staff are only available from 2015. The number of executive (management) staff increased by 40.1% in just four years, from 147 in 2015 to 206 in 2019 [Chart 5]. This increase was much greater than the increase in students of 9.7% and an increase in teachers of 14.7%. Administrative and clerical staff increased by 45.3% and specialist support staff by 59.8%. Total non-school staff increased by 45.4%, about five times the increase in students.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.

### 3. Increased accountability and regulation of public schools

Increased government accountability requirements and regulations have driven the huge increase in administrative staff in central and regional offices and in schools as well as placing increased administrative workloads on principals and teachers. The promise of more school autonomy and less bureaucratic control has turned into a monster of more bureaucracy at both the central and school levels.

Public schools are subject to widespread accountability measures covering financial management, student well-being, behaviour management and safety, teacher appraisal, compliance training, school review processes, curriculum standards, student progress based on standardised test results, workplace health and safety, and auditing. This requires increased monitoring and administration by managers and staff in central and regional offices. The system has resulted in a strengthening of central control over schools and a focus on management and administration rather than direct support for teaching and learning.

The Victorian Department of Education is focused primarily on administrative and compliance roles rather than curriculum, teaching and learning support. Its detailed [organisational chart](#) shows that the vast majority of its branches are devoted to administration of finance, policing compliance to regulations, performance monitoring, human resource management and other corporate functions. It has eight divisions with about 40 branches but only three appear to be directly involved in supporting teaching and learning.

The accountability regime required the employment of more administrative staff in schools to manage recording and reporting of statistics and information. They include business managers and administrative and clerical staff. This has led to complex management systems in schools as evidenced in school management charts.

The work of principals and teachers is highly regulated and subject to compliance procedures. One principal told Save Our Schools that central office is “micro-managing schools” and that “more and more accountability and evaluation become counter-productive” for teaching and learning. A teacher said that “teachers no longer have freedom to explore and learn with students....teaching is rigidly controlled, we have gone backwards under the accountability regime”. Another teacher said:

Our days are increasingly regulated. We’re not trusted as professionals to spend our time doing what we know is required for us and our students....

....the way the Victorian Department of Education and Training deals with teachers and schools can be described as ‘high levels of monitoring and compliance, and low levels of support’.

Despite the increase in administrative staff in schools, the administrative load for principals and teachers has increased. School leaders and teachers are working longer hours on accountability measures. Filling out endless forms for central office is part and parcel of the life of principals and teachers. As one teacher told Save Our Schools: “It is unrelenting. Even on leave I have had to complete compliance documents. The one on protective behaviours is 44 pages long.” Another teacher said that “much of the paperwork is not meaningful...and is just about ticking boxes”.

According to [volume 1 of the Australian report](#) on the OECD’s Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018, 90% of all principals said that their effectiveness is limited by government regulation and policy and 30% said their effectiveness is limited quite a bit or a lot in this way [Table 2.3, p. 29]. Some 96% said their effectiveness is limited by their high workload and responsibility while 63% said their effectiveness is limited quite a bit or a lot. Principals spend 34% of their time on administrative tasks and meetings, which contributes to their high workload [Table 2.2, p. 26]. The [second volume of the Australian report on TALIS 2018](#) found that 89% of public school principals said that administrative work was a major source of stress [p.29].

It is the same for classroom teachers. The [OECD TALIS 2018 report](#) shows that Australian teachers spend significantly more time on non-teaching tasks than in nearly every other OECD country. Australian lower secondary teachers spend 24.9 hours per week on non-teaching tasks compared to the OECD average of 18.2 hours per week [Online Table I.2.27]. The Australian average is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the OECD. Performance of management and administrative tasks contributes significantly to the higher non-teaching hours. Australian teachers spend 6.5 hours per week on management and administrative work which is the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest in the OECD.

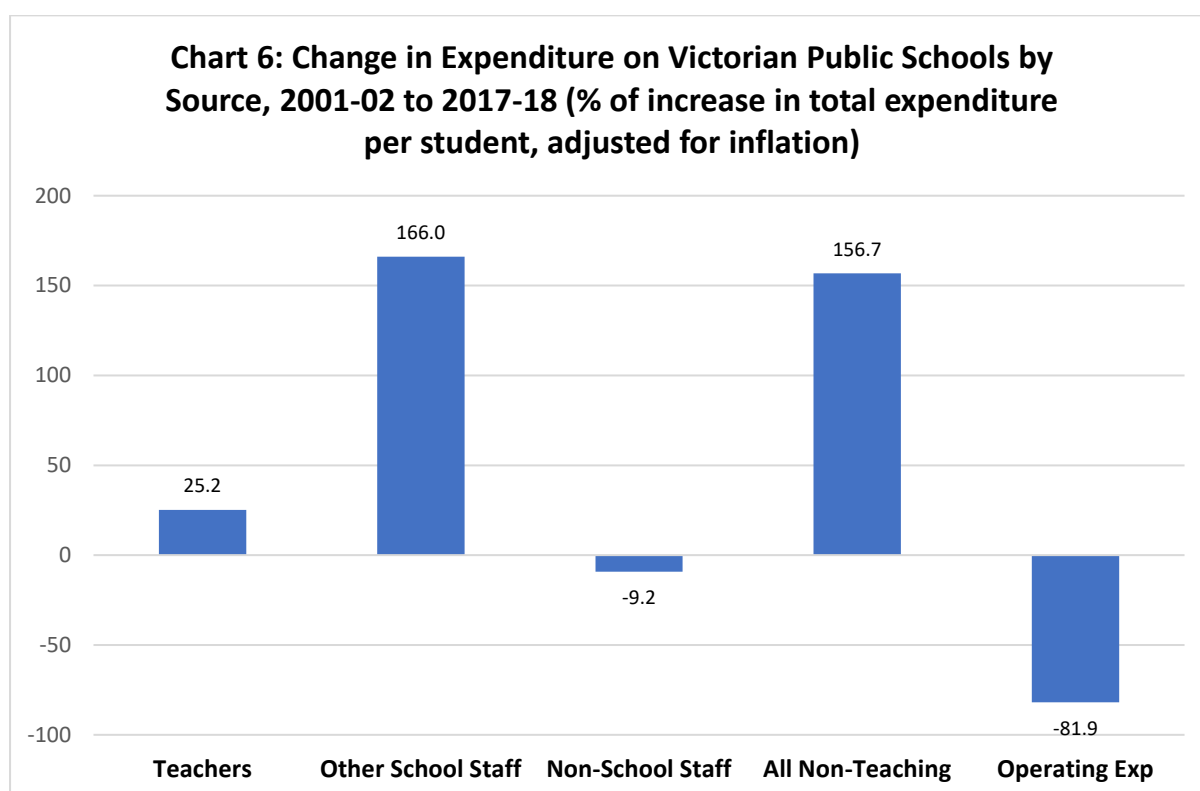
The [second volume of the Australian report on TALIS 2018](#) found that 55% of all lower secondary school teachers said that they have too much administrative work and 38% cited keeping up with changing requirements from state and/or national authorities as a source of stress (pp. 28, 29). Time spent on administrative tasks detracts from preparation time for classroom teaching, feedback on students’ homework assignments, teacher professional learning and collaboration, and student counselling. Thus, it ultimately leads to students missing learning opportunities. It also reduces teacher job satisfaction and results in increased teacher attrition.



#### 4. Increased expenditure on bureaucracy

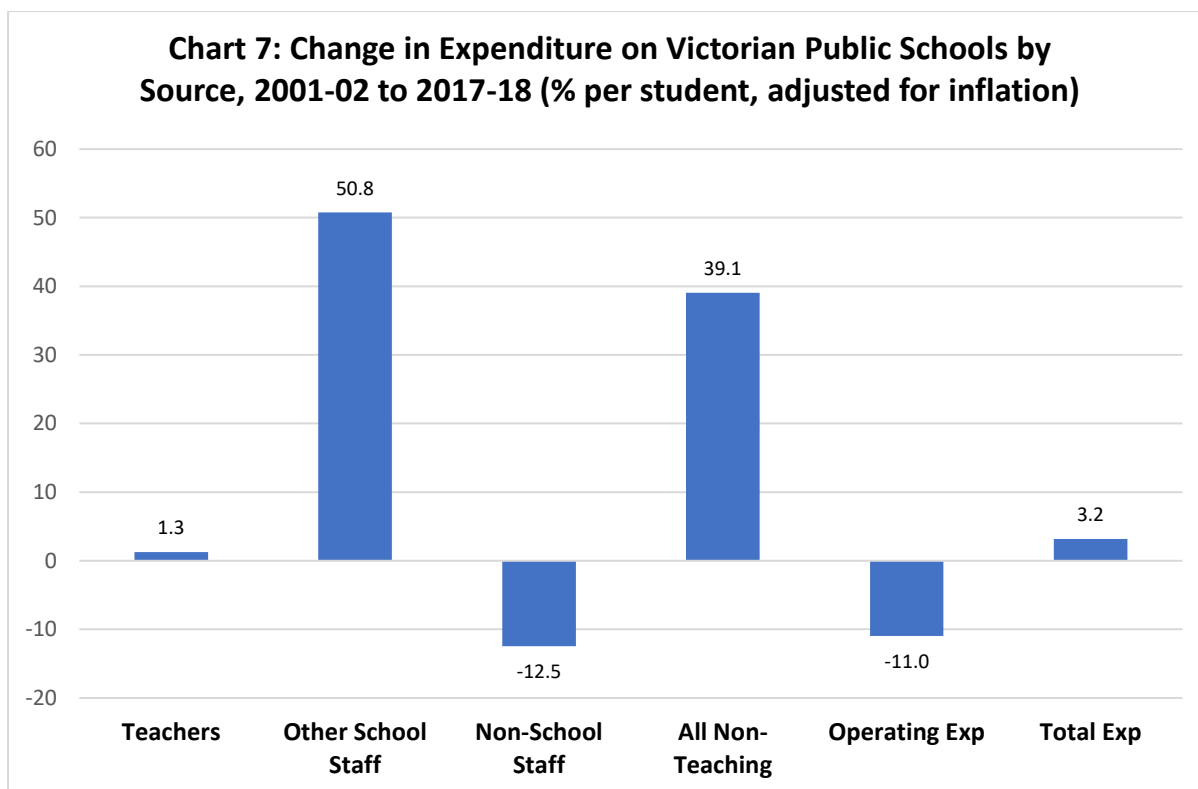
Over the 16 years from 2001-02 to 2017-18, government funding of public schools in Victoria, adjusted for inflation, increased by only \$381 per student, an increase of a miserly \$24 per year. Only one-quarter of this increase was attributable to teachers [Chart 6]. The rest of this small increase was soaked up by administrative and clerical staff and other non-teaching staff in schools.

Expenditure on teaching staff increased by only \$96 of the overall small increase in expenditure compared to the increase for non-teaching staff in schools of \$632 per student, which was 166% of the overall increase. That is, the increase in expenditure for non-teaching staff was nearly double the overall increase in expenditure per student and was only made possible by a reduction of expenditure on non-school staff of \$35 (-9.6%) per student and in operating expenses of \$312 (-81.9%) per student. Expenditure on non-teaching staff in schools increased as a proportion of expenditure on all staff in the Victorian public education system from 13.6% to 19.1%.



**Source:** Derived from figures published in the Report on Government Services.

**Notes:** Expenditure excludes user cost of capital, depreciation, payroll tax and student transport. Nominal expenditure is deflated by the ABS Wage Price Index for Public Education and Training.



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The percentage increase in expenditure on administrative and clerical staff and other non-teaching staff in schools was nearly 40 times the increase on teachers since 2002. Expenditure per student (adjusted for inflation) on non-teaching staff in schools increased by 50.8% compared to 1.3% on teachers between 2001-02 and 2017-18 [Chart 7]. Despite the large increase in non-school staff in central and regional offices, expenditure per student adjusted for inflation fell by 12.5%.

## 5. Conclusion

The Victorian public school system has seen an enormous increase in bureaucracy since the turn of the century. So-called school reforms beginning in the 1990s promised less bureaucratic control but instead have intensified bureaucracy at all levels of public education systems with huge increases in administrative staff that are far greater than the increase in students and teachers. The administrative demands on principals and teachers has been unrelenting and has derailed leadership in schools. Both Coalition and Labor governments have adopted GERM and expanded bureaucracy in public education.

Bureaucratisation has occurred throughout the system - at central and regional offices, schools and for individual teachers. It was driven by the idea that making schools and teachers more accountable to central office and government would improve education outcomes. It has proved to be a fantasy. It has clearly failed.

The large achievement gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged students have increased or remain virtually unchanged. For example, the results from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that 15-year-old students from low socio-economic status (SES) families in Australia have remained about three years of learning behind their high SES peers since 2000. The gaps between low and high SES Year 9 Victorian students (public and private) in NAPLAN results remain at three to four years of learning since 2008 when NAPLAN was introduced.

Of course, public schools must be accountable, but the accountability regime imposed on schools has led to a significant misallocation of resources. The huge increase in administrative staff in schools and in central and regional offices has diverted much needed funding from supporting teaching and learning. Since 2002, the percentage increase in expenditure on administrative and clerical staff and other non-teaching staff in schools was nearly 40 times that on teachers. It increased by more than the total increase per student across the system which was only made possible by reductions in expenditure on non-school staff and general operating expenses. In other words, increased expenditure on bureaucracy was seen as far more important than increasing expenditure on supporting student learning. Expenditure on bureaucracy prevailed over increased expenditure on teaching and learning.

Increasing bureaucratisation is not the way to improve school performance and student outcomes. Public schools continue to face [large shortages in teachers](#) and [many teachers are teaching out-of-field](#). As a result, nearly one-quarter of all students have their learning hindered by the shortages. The Victorian Government must eradicate GERM and focus on directly supporting teaching and learning in schools, especially disadvantaged schools. Public schools need high quality human and material resources to reduce the large achievement gaps.