

Education Research Paper

The Bureaucratisation of Public Education in Australia

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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.

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. Both Coalition and Labor governments have adopted GERM and expanded bureaucracy in public education.

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 90.2% in primary schools and 82.6% in secondary schools. The increase in primary schools was 3½ times the increase in teachers (25.3%) and the increase in secondary schools nearly seven times the increase in teachers (12.4%).
- The increases in administrative staff also far exceeded the increase in enrolments – six times the increase in students in primary (14.5%) and secondary schools (13.6%).
- Administrative staff now comprise 27% of school staff in primary schools compared to 20% in 2002. Administrative staff in secondary schools increased from 17% to 25% of all staff.
- The increase in central and regional office staff of 56% was three times that for all teachers (19%) and four times that of students (14%).
- Detailed figures for non-school staff are available only from 2015. The number of executive (management) staff increased by 70% to 2019. This was over ten times the increase in students and teachers over the period which increased by only 6.4% and 6.5% respectively. Total non-school staff increased by 23.5%, nearly four times that of students and teachers.
- Very few branches of state departments of education are 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 3rd 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 remain large at three to four years of learning at age 15. The increased bureaucracy has soaked up the small increase in funding for public schools since 2002 that would have been better used in directly supporting teaching and learning. Spending on bureaucracy has prevailed over spending on student learning.

Increasing bureaucratisation is not the way to improve school performance and student outcomes. Public schools continue to face large shortages in teachers in key subject areas with the result that many are teaching out-of-field. Australian governments must eradicate GERM and focus on providing the necessary high quality human and material resources for public schools to reduce the large achievement gaps.

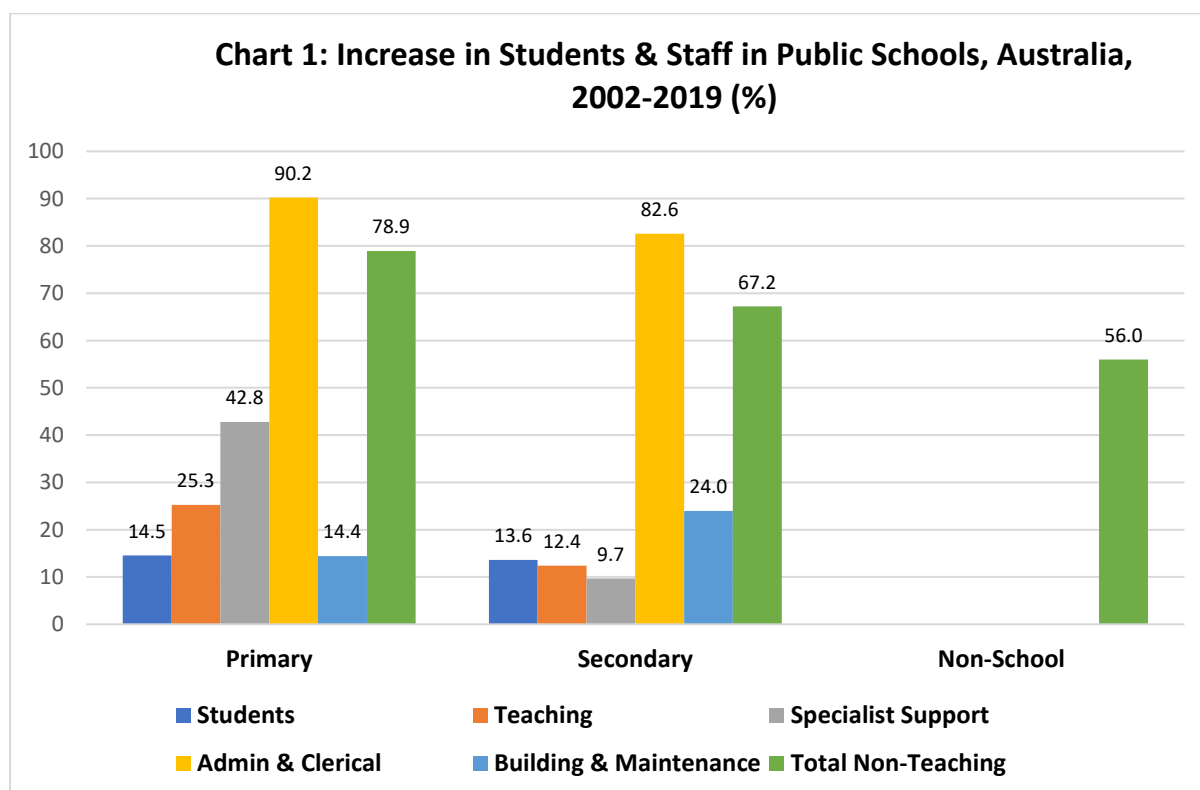
1. Introduction

Accountability has been the buzzword of education policy in Australia and around the world for the past 30 or more years. Public education systems have been re-structured in a myriad of ways to ensure accountability for school performance and improvement. Resources have been allocated to auditing the use of funding, measuring and monitoring student learning, and ensuring compliance with regulations and standards. Implementation involved the employment of more staff at both central office and in schools to collect, record, evaluate and report information on various aspects of school operations and student performance. It vastly increased the administrative tasks of school leaders and teachers.

To date, there is little analysis of the impact of accountability systems on the staffing of public education systems in Australia. Data published annually by the Australian Bureau of Statistics provides a window on the trends. As far as we are aware, this study is the first time the data has been used to analyse the impact of school accountability measures on the staffing structure of the public education system. It shows a dramatic increase in the employment of administrative staff at the system and school levels that is much greater than the increase in teachers, specialist support staff and students. The increase in administrative staff has likely absorbed much or all of the small increase in funding for public schools 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 teachers in both primary and secondary public schools since 2002. Total non-teaching staff in primary schools increased by 68.9% and by 67.2% in secondary schools compared to increases in teachers of 25.3% and 12.4% respectively [Chart 1].



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.

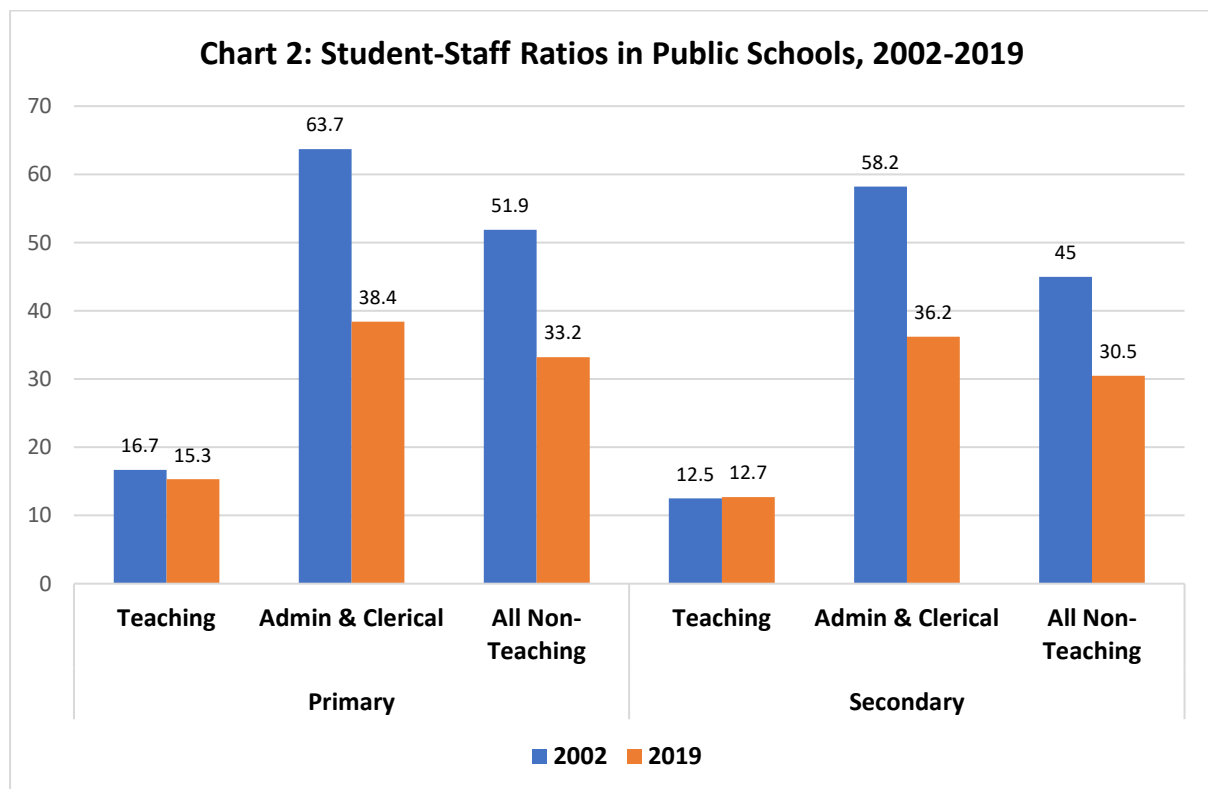
The largest increase in non-teaching staff was for administrative and clerical staff who increased by 90.2% in primary schools and 82.6% in secondary schools. The increase in primary schools was 3½

times the increase in teachers and it nearly 7 times the increase in teachers in secondary schools. The increases in administrative staff also far exceeded the increase in enrolments – six times the increase in enrolments in both primary and secondary schools.

There was a significant increase in specialist support staff in primary schools of 42.8%. This increase largely reflects increases in teacher aides, such as for disability students, and IT support. There was also a small increase in specialist support staff in secondary schools, but it was less than the growth in student enrolments. Specialist support staff comprise only a very small proportion of all school staff.

The increase in central and regional office staff was three times the increase for all teachers - 56% compared to a 19% increase for all teachers. The increase in central and regional office staff was four times the increase in total enrolments of 14%.

As a result, there was a large reduction in the ratio of students to non-teaching staff in schools in contrast to little change in the student-teacher ratios. The student/non-teaching staff ratio in primary schools fell from 51.9 in 2002 to 33.2 in 2019 – a 36% reduction – while the student/teacher ratio was reduced from 16.7 to 15.3 – a reduction of only 8% [Chart 2]. The student/administrative staff ratio in primary schools fell from 63.7 to 38.4 – a reduction of nearly 40%.

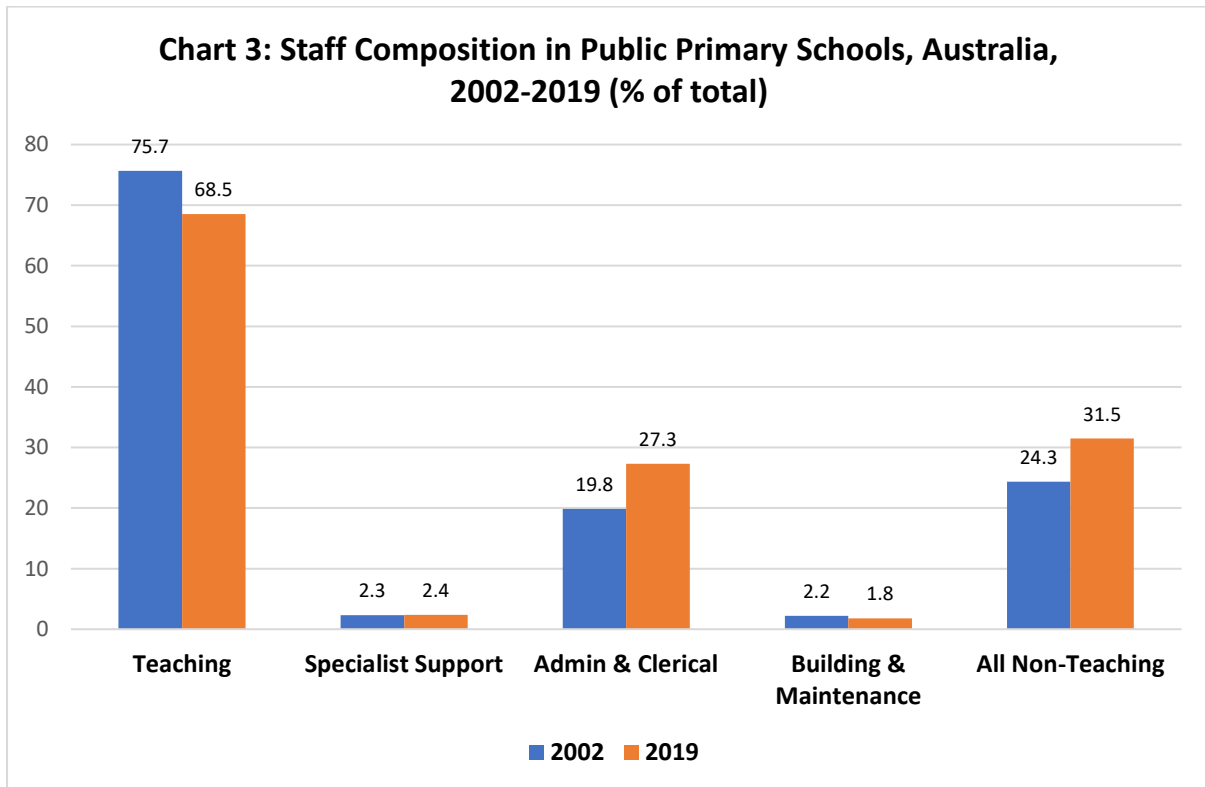


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.

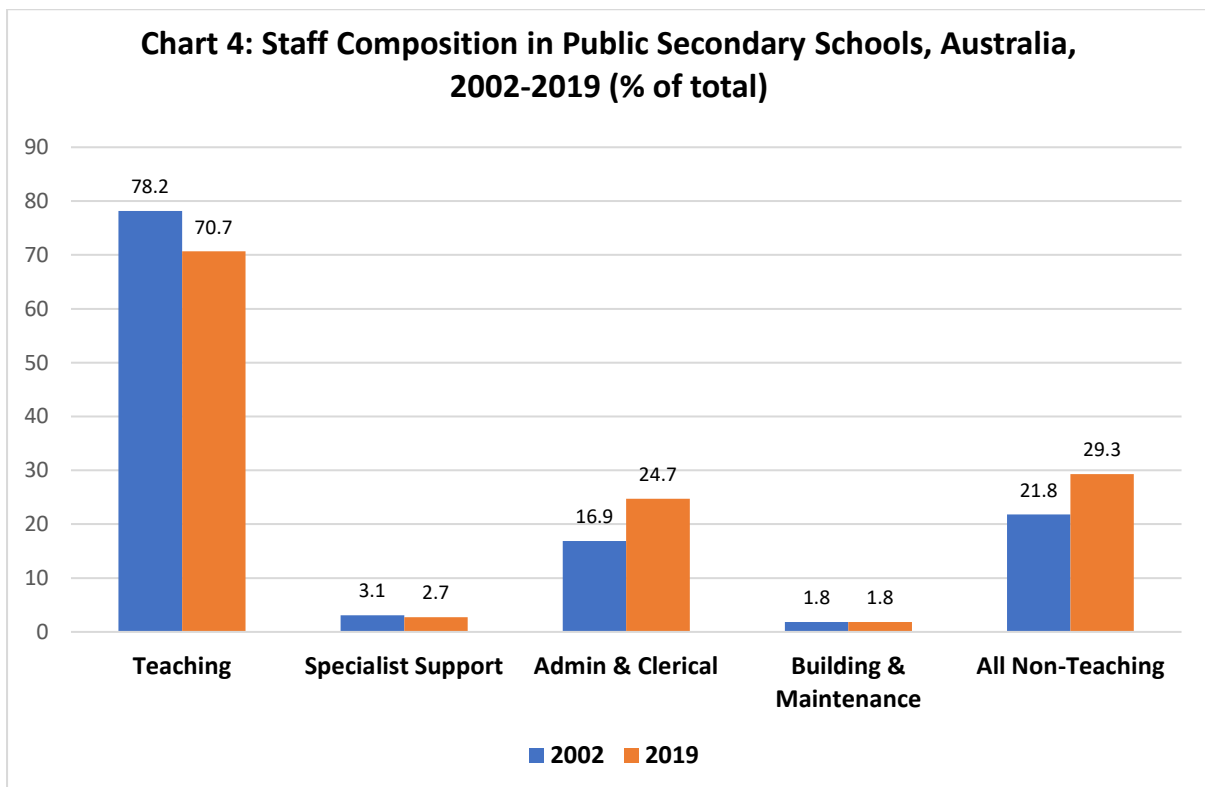
The student/non-teaching staff ratio in secondary schools fell from 45 to 30.5 – a reduction of 32% - while the student/teacher ratio increased from 12.5 to 12.7, an increase of 1.6%. The student/administrative staff ratio fell from 58.2 to 36.2 – a reduction of 37.8%. There was also a large reduction in the student/non-school staff ratio from 282.1 in 2002 to 206.5 in 2019 – a reduction of 26.8%.

The composition of school staff has changed significantly as a result. The proportion of teachers in primary schools dropped from 75.7% in 2002 to 68.5% in 2019 [Chart 3]. Administrative staff

increased from 19.8% to 27.3% while there was very little change in the proportion of specialist support staff and building and maintenance staff.



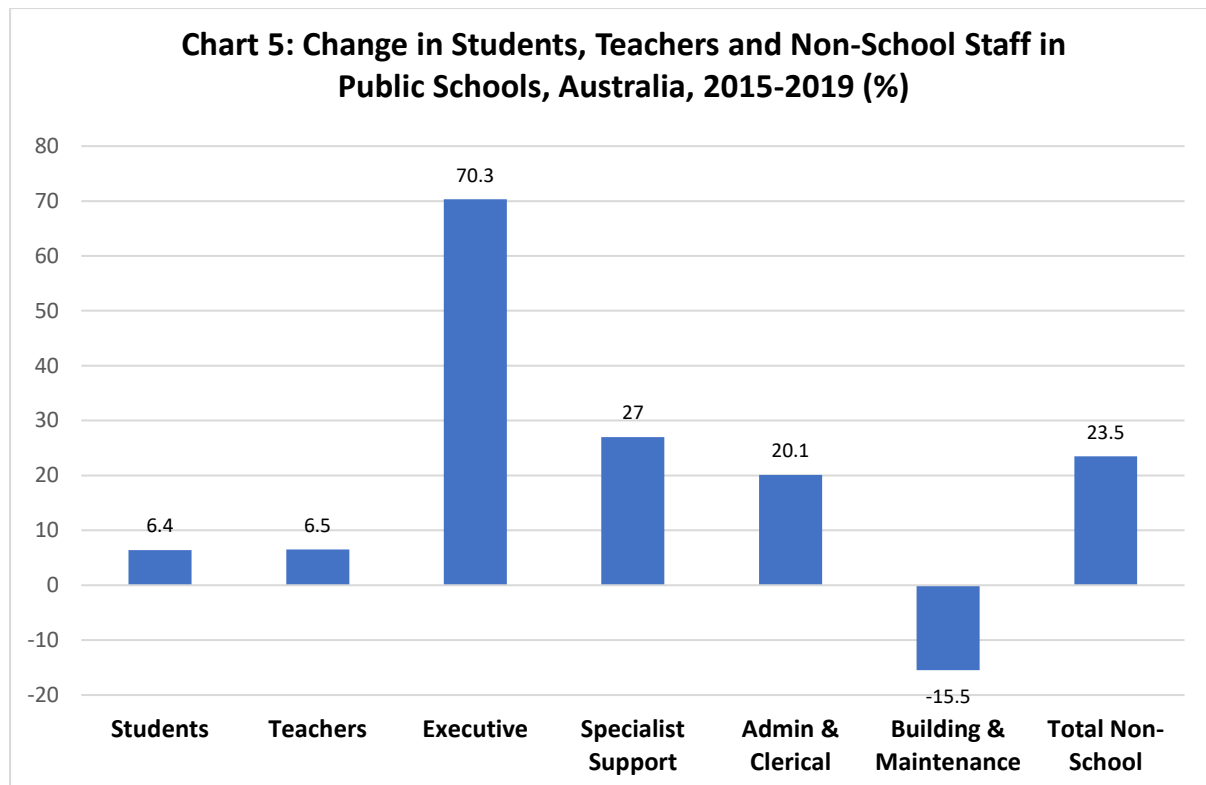
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.



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The proportion of teachers in secondary schools fell from 78.2% to 70.7% while the proportion of administrative staff increased from 16.9% to 24.7% [Chart 4]. There was a small drop in the proportion of specialist support staff and no change in the proportion of building and maintenance staff.

Detailed national figures for out-of-school staff are only available from 2015. The number of executive (management) staff increased by 70% in just four years, from 635 in 2015 to 1,081 in 2019 [Chart 5]. This was over ten times the increase in students and teachers in public schools over the period which only increased by 6.5% and 6.4% respectively. Total non-school staff increased by 23.5%, nearly four times that of students and teachers.



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.

State education departments are focused primarily on administrative and compliance roles rather than curriculum, teaching and learning support. A cursory inspection of the organisational charts of education departments around the country reveals that very few branches are 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. For example, the [NSW Department of Education](#) has eight divisions with over 50 branches but only four branches could be considered as directly involved in supporting teaching and learning. A whole division with 13 branches is devoted to school performance and operations. The [Victorian Education Department](#) also 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. As one principal told Save Our Schools, central office is “micro-managing schools” and that “more and more accountability and evaluation become counter-productive” for teaching and learning. A [recent academic study of decentralisation and accountability](#) in an Australian public education system concluded:

Decentralisation brought with it a different form of managerialism that included more control and distancing. There seems to be a shift from servicing and support of a client to control, managing and accountability, which changes the relationship between the organisation and the schools. [p. 481]

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.

According to the [Australian report](#) on the OECD’s Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018, 90% of principals said that their effectiveness is limited by government regulation and policy and 30% say their effectiveness is limited quite a bit or a lot. Principals reported that they spend 34% of their time on administrative tasks and meetings. This contributes to their high workload. Some 96% said their effectiveness is limited by their high workload and responsibility while 63% say their effectiveness is limited quite a bit or a lot in this way. One principal told Save Our Schools that “the workload is out of control”.

It is the same for classroom teachers. The [OECD TALIS 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. The Australian average is the 4th largest in the OECD. Performance of management and administrative tasks contributes significantly to the higher non-teaching hours. Australian teachers spend the 3rd highest number of hours on management and administration in the OECD.

[A further report on TALIS](#) showed that over half of all secondary school teachers in Australia say that they have too much administrative work. 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. Conclusion

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 with huge increases in administrative staff that are far greater than the increase in students and teachers. 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. Similarly, the gaps between low and high SES Year 9 students in NAPLAN results remain at three to four years of learning since 2008 when NAPLAN was introduced.

Moreover, the huge increase in administrative staff in schools and in central and regional offices appears to have soaked up the very small increase in government funding allocated to public schools since 2002. Spending on bureaucracy has prevailed over spending on student learning. Over the 16 years from 2001-02 to 2017-18, government funding of public schools, adjusted for inflation, increased by \$1,450 per student or 12%. The increase averaged a miserly \$90 per year. State governments as the primary funder of public schools are particularly at fault for not adequately supporting public schools. Their funding of public schools increased by only \$4 per student since 2001-02 and has been falling since 2009-10.

Increasing bureaucratisation is not the way to improve school performance and student outcomes. Public schools continue to face [large shortages in teachers](#) in key subject areas with the result that [many are teaching out-of-field](#). Australian governments 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.