

New course tackles teacher burnout at the source

Teacher burnout is taking talent from our classrooms. Almost half of serving teachers say they have considered leaving the job due to stress and the Australian Council of Deans of Education predicts a huge shortage of teachers within three or four years, as more teachers abandon the profession in the face of increasing stress.

A new course aims to address the crisis by offering teachers and teaching executives training in mental health targeted at managing the stresses associated with the profession.

The first of its kind in Australia, Australian Catholic University's **Graduate Certificate in Mental Health for Teachers and Educators** will be available online from this year as a post-graduate qualification for teachers.

Dr Debra Phillips, who developed the course, said the demands of delivering classes during the pandemic had brought to a head the ongoing crisis in teacher mental health.

Teachers who are already coping with the tremendous emotional burden of the job, the unrelenting workload and the unrealistic expectations of students and parents have faced the added pressures of switching to online classrooms often without adequate preparation or support.

“The pandemic kick-started us to research what was needed, to get something ready and put it out into the public domain. This course is a timely, ethical response to the growing awareness around teacher stress and workload, exacerbated by the pandemic and its lockdowns,” said Dr Phillips.

Dr Phillips said teachers often came into the profession fired up with the capacity of a good teacher to change students' lives but lost their passion through exhaustion and demoralisation. One in five teachers leaves the profession within their first year, and this trend is expected to continue over the next five years.

“When the fire goes, the desire to do anything is no longer there because there is nothing left to give. You have lower staff morale in schools, and that feeds into the school climate. Teachers no longer have the energy to be innovative or creative.”

Research shows teacher wellbeing is critical to student wellbeing. “Quality student outcomes are dependent on teachers’ robust mental health, and without it, student academic achievement can come undone,” said Dr Phillips.

While many universities offer courses that enable teachers to identify and manage student mental health and wellbeing, there has been little available for teachers themselves. Dr Phillips said many teachers were unaware that their energy was draining away until they hit burnout which is a symptom of eroded mental health.

The new course will aim to provide educators with a foundational knowledge of the factors that surround, impact, and influence mental health and wellbeing over the many different stages of their teaching career. As well as classroom teachers, Dr Phillips expects teaching executives, school counsellors, youth justice professionals and early childhood educators to enrol.

“They will learn to identify the workplace and socio-cultural factors that create unease and distress – to target the ones that individual teachers can control and let go of the ones they cannot control.

One aim of the course is to ask teachers to reflect on why they came into teaching in the first place – and often it’s related to this idea that teaching is a vocation with a spiritual dimension. The units are structured to reignite that fire and to help teachers to locate it once again. For many, the pandemic especially has eroded that desire, and the fire to teach has waned. We know that it can be rekindled.”

Dr Debra Phillips is available for interview.

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