

Education Research Paper

The Bureaucratisation of Public Education in NSW

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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 NSW 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 the public education system. 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. As one principal told Save Our Schools, the Department is “directly policing principals...the so-called reforms came attached with handcuffs”. 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 87.3% in primary schools and 39.1% in secondary schools. The increase in primary schools was nearly six times the increase in teachers (14.8%) while the increase in secondary schools contrasted to the reduction of teachers by 8.5%.
 - The change for teachers may be underestimated because of a change in the classification of teachers in 2018. However, the increases in administrative staff far exceeded those of teachers over the period 2002 to 2018 when the same classification applied.
- The increases in administrative staff also far exceeded the increase in enrolments – nearly nine times the increase in students in primary schools (10.3%) and over 25 times the increase in secondary students (1.5%).
- Administrative staff now comprise 24.9% of school staff in primary schools compared to 17% in 2002. Administrative staff in secondary schools increased from 15.2% to 21.3% of all staff.
- Central and regional office staff increased by 69.1% which was twenty times that for all teachers (3.4%) and ten times that of students (6.7%).
- Detailed figures for staff in central and regional offices are available only from 2015. The number of executive (management) staff increased by 329.5% to 2019. This was 75 times the increase in students over the period which increased by only 4.4% while the number of teachers fell by 4.1%. Total non-school staff increased by 39.2%.
- Only three or four of over 50 branches of the NSW 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 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 in NSW 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 on administrative and clerical staff and other non-teaching staff in schools was over three times that on teachers since 2002 – 62.6% compared to 17.1%. It has soaked up over one-third of the small increase in government funding for NSW 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 NSW 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.

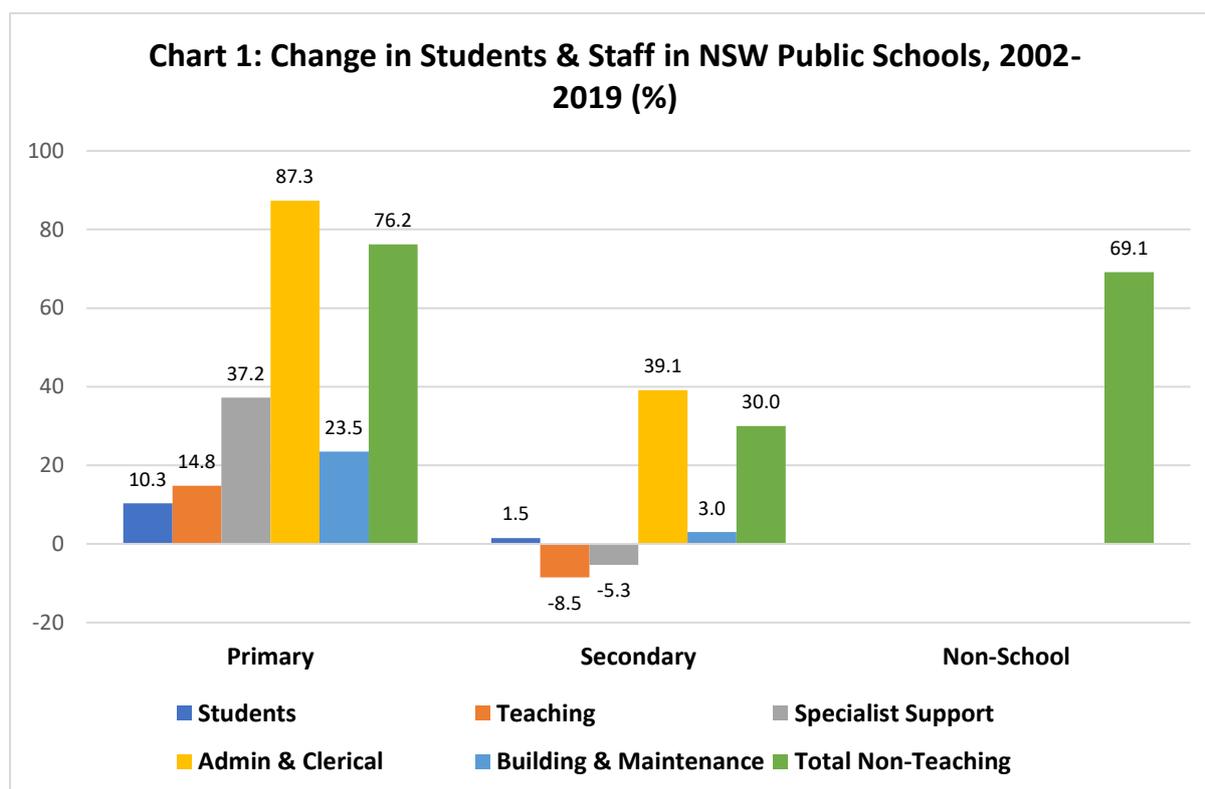
1. Introduction

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 NSW public education system which has accounted for much of the small increase in funding since 2002.

2. Administrative staff increases far exceeded 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 NSW since 2002. Total non-teaching staff in primary schools increased by 76.2% and by 30% in secondary schools compared to an increase in students of 10.3% and 1.5% respectively. The increase in non-teaching staff was also far greater than the increase in teachers in primary schools of 14.8% and a reduction in secondary schools of 8.5% [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 87.3% in primary schools and 39.1% in secondary schools. The increase in primary schools was nearly nine times the increase in students of 10.3% and over 25 times the increase in secondary students of 1.5%. The increase in administrative staff was nearly six times the increase in teachers in primary

schools of 14.8%. The large increase in secondary schools is in stark contrast to the reduction in teachers by 8.5%.

However, the changes in teaching staff are likely to be affected by a change in the NSW Department of Education payroll system in 2018 which enabled better identification of teachers that should be included as 'generally active' in schools. This change coincided with a sharp drop in the number of primary and secondary teachers in 2019 compared with 2018. Primary teacher numbers fell by 2,530, secondary teachers by 2,406 and the total by 4,936.

The change in the system of recording teacher numbers from 2019 suggest that the previous system was over-estimating the number of teachers because it included both temporary absent and casual teachers which are excluded from the ABS definition of teachers 'generally active' in schools. One effect of the change is that the increase in primary school teachers between 2002 and 2019 may be greater than indicated in Chart 1 and the decline in secondary school teachers may be less than indicated if the respective figures for 2002 are over-estimated to any significant degree.

Nevertheless, the increase in administrative and clerical staff has far outstripped the increase in teachers even if the figures were substantially revised. The same classification of teachers was used from 2002 and 2018 and in this period the number of primary school teachers increased by 24.6% compared to an increase in administrative staff in schools of 70.4%. Secondary teachers increased by 1.3% compared to an increase in administrative staff of 46%.

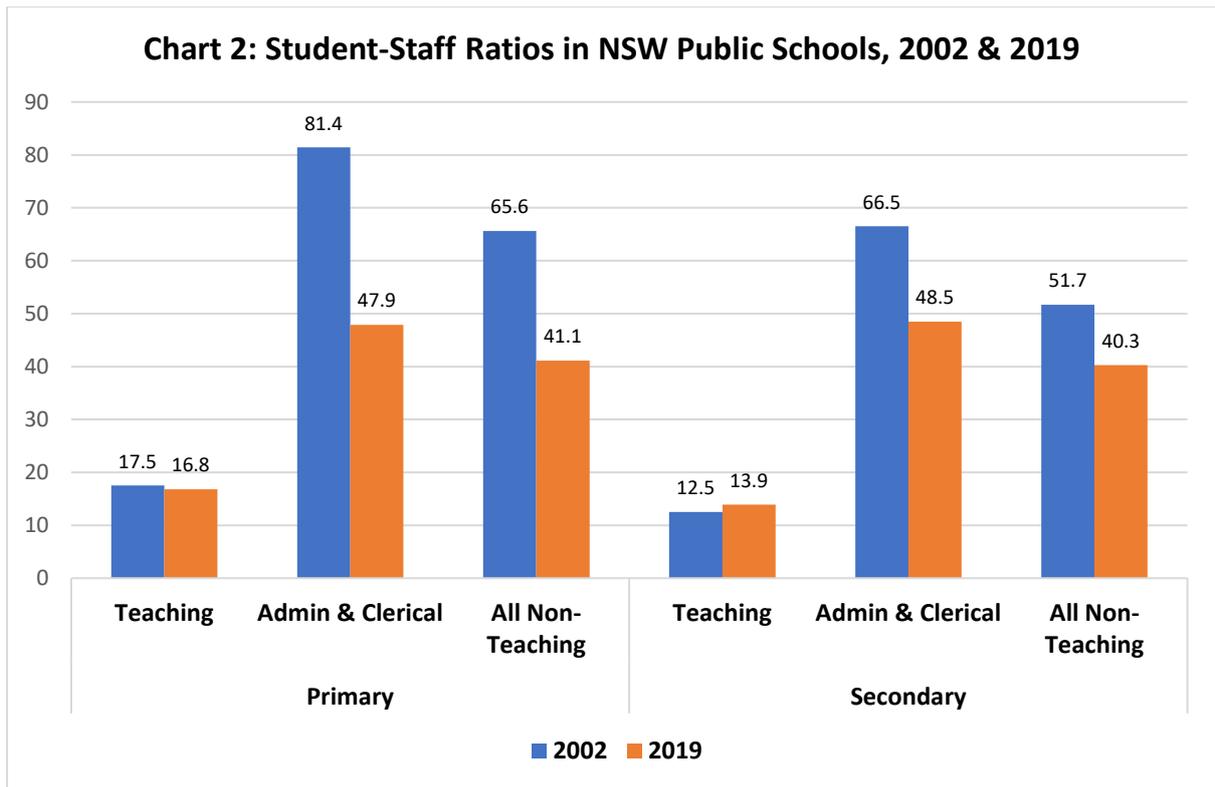
There was a significant increase in specialist support staff in primary schools of 37.2% between 2002 and 2019. This increase largely reflects increases in teacher aides, such as for disability students, and IT support. There was reduction in specialist support staff in secondary schools of 5.3%.

The increase in central and regional office staff of 69.1% was over ten times the increase for all students of 6.7% and 20 times the increase in teachers of 3.4%, although this increase may be underestimated as noted above.

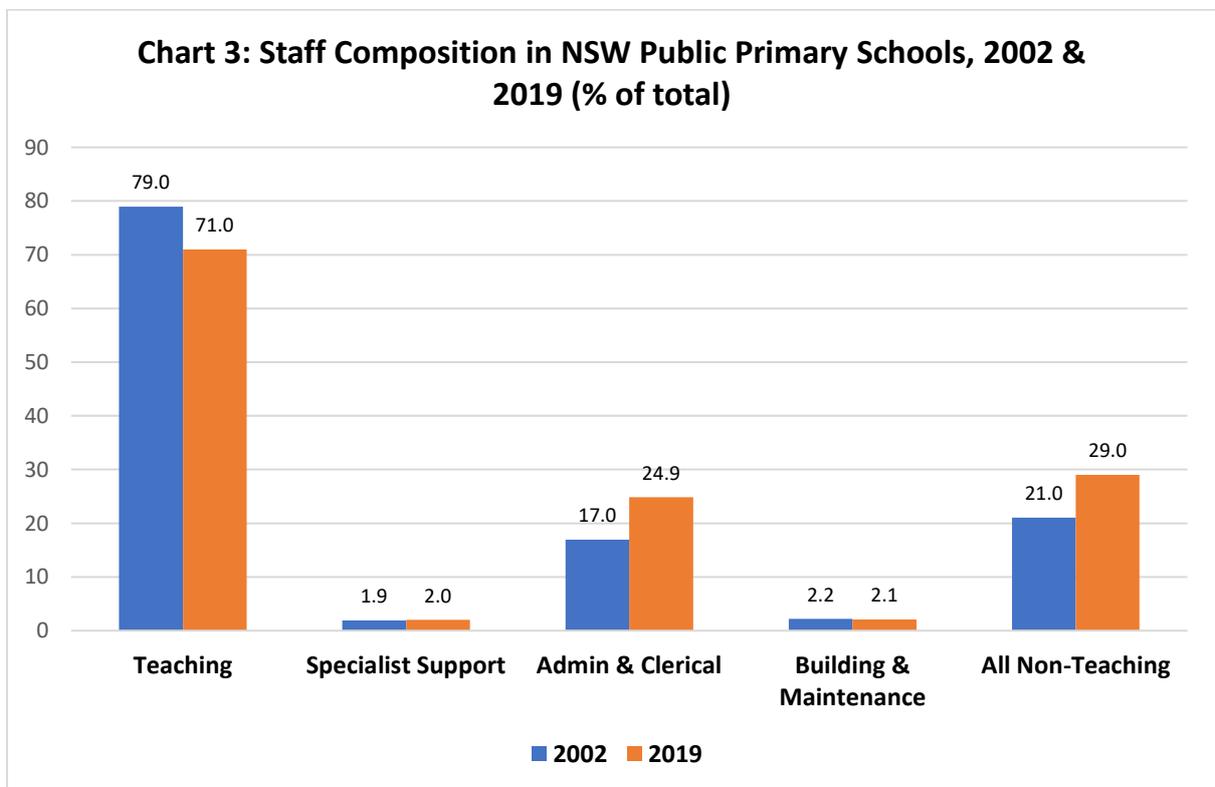
As a result of these changes, there was a large reduction in the ratio of students to administrative staff and all non-teaching staff in schools in contrast to little change in the student-teacher ratios [Chart 2]. The student/administrative staff ratio in primary schools fell from 81.4 to 47.9 – a reduction of over 40% - while the student/teacher ratio fell from 17.5 to 16.8, a reduction of 4% although it is likely to be an under-estimate for reasons discussed above. Overall, the student/non-teaching staff ratio fell from 65.6 to 41.1, a reduction of 37%.

The student/administrative staff ratio in secondary schools fell from 66.5 to 48.5 – a reduction of 27% - while the student/teacher ratio increased from 12.5 to 13.9, an increase of 11%. The student/non-teaching staff ratio fell from 51.7 to 40.3 – a reduction of 22%. There was also a large reduction in the student/non-school staff ratio from 411.1 in 2002 to 259.5 in 2019 – a reduction of 37%.

The composition of school staff has changed significantly as a result, although it may be affected by the change in the method of recording the number of teachers from 2018. The proportion of teachers in primary schools dropped from 79% in 2002 to 71% in 2019 [Chart 3]. Administrative staff increased from 17% to 24.9% while there was very little change in the proportion of specialist support staff and building and maintenance staff.



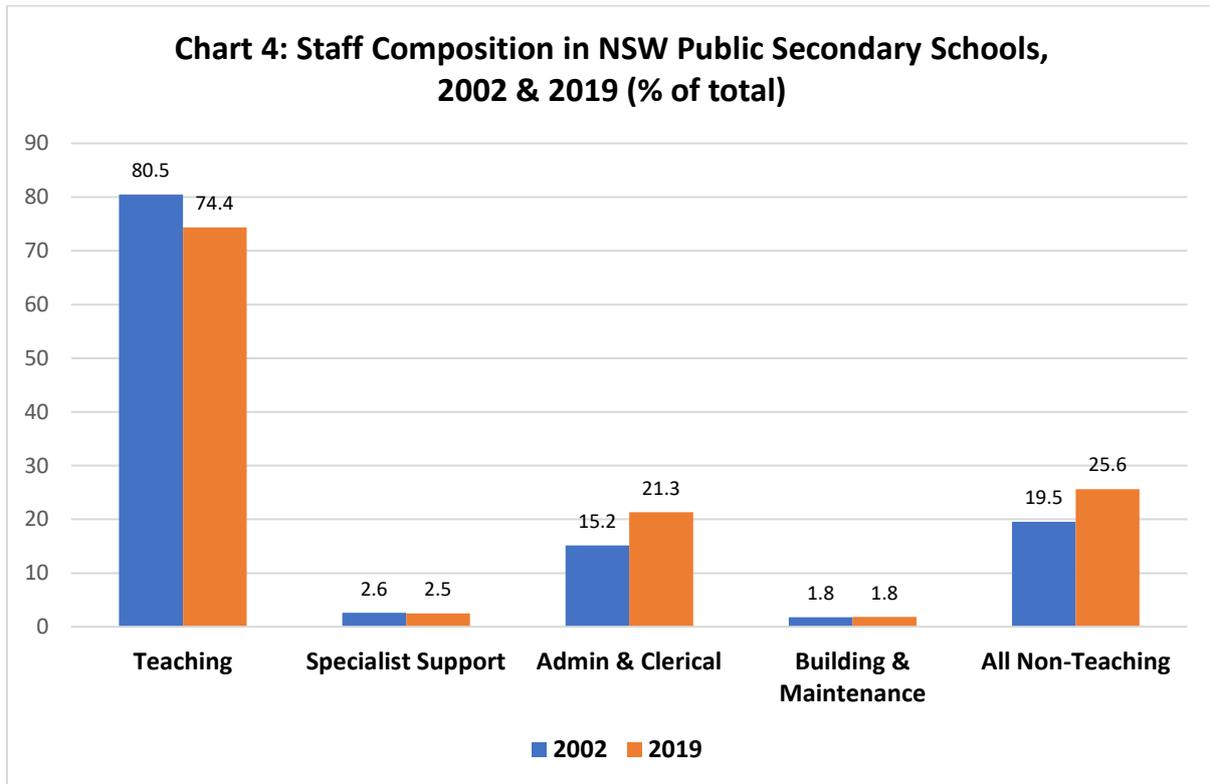
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.



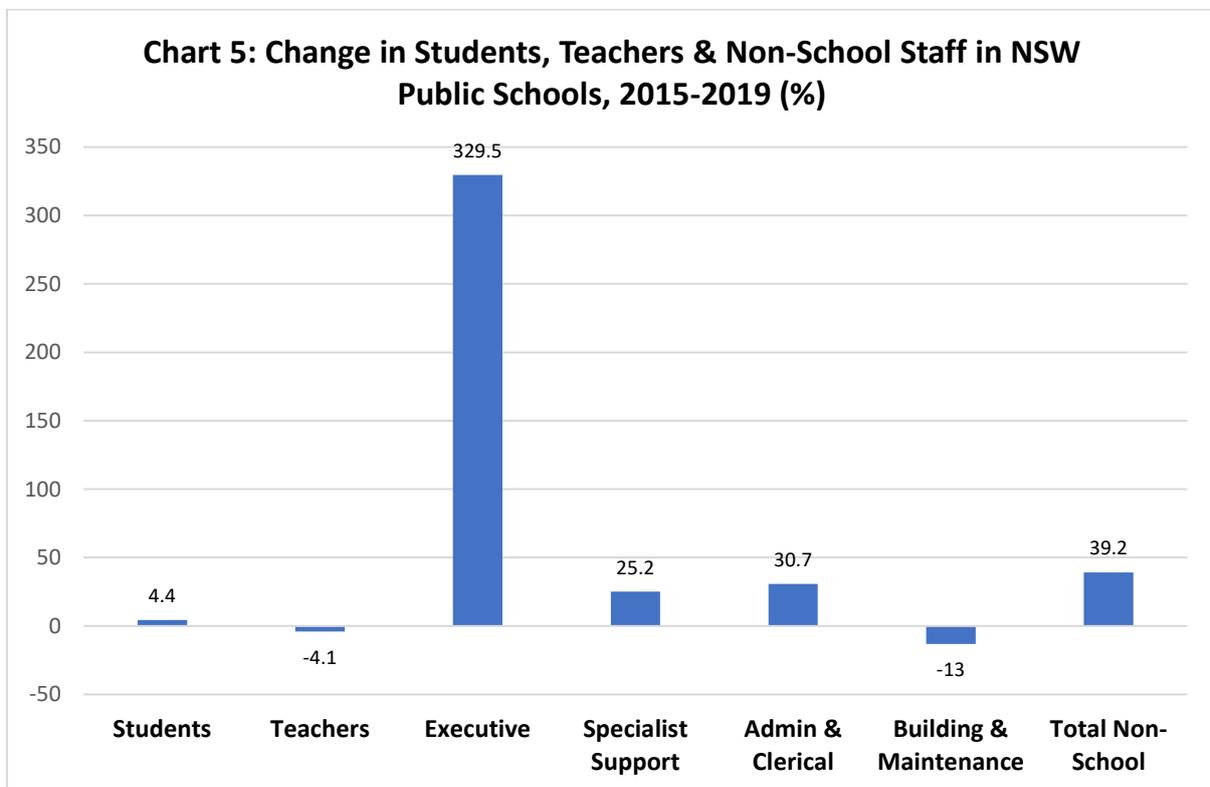
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.

The proportion of teachers in secondary schools fell from 80.5% to 74.4% while the proportion of administrative staff increased from 15.2% to 21.3% [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 over 300% in just four years, from 635 in 2015 to 1,081 in 2019 [Chart 5]. This increase was vastly greater than the increase in students of only 4.4% over the same period and a decline in the number of teachers by 4.1%, although the latter may be distorted by the change in recording the number of teachers. Total non-school staff increased by 39.2%, about nine times the increase in students.

3. Increased accountability and regulation of public schools

Increased government and system 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 NSW Department of Education is focused primarily on administrative and compliance roles rather than curriculum, teaching and learning support. Its detailed organisational chart as of early August 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 over 50 branches but only four branches could be considered as directly involved in supporting teaching and learning. No member of the leadership team of the Department is an educator.

We previously criticised this misplaced organisational focus in [The Bureaucratisation of Public Education in Australia](#) which was published in early August. Since then the detailed chart on the organisation of the Department has been taken down from the website and replaced by a chart that shows only the top structure. The change may be coincidental, but it nevertheless shows that the Department is intent on reducing transparency of its structure and hiding the extent of its focus on promoting GERM rather than directly supporting teaching and learning. There is a contradiction between the accountability it imposes on schools and its own lack of transparency and accountability.

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 the Department is “directly policing principals....the so-called reforms came attached with handcuffs”. A retired principal who continues to work in and around schools told Save Our Schools:

After nearly 40 years in the NSW public education system I have never heard my principal colleagues speak with so little joy and pride in their work. They speak of unrelenting

compliance impositions; dictated school targets; repeated requests for data that the Department can access and distractions that do very little to support the core work of teaching our young people.

It feels like a deliberate campaign to derail school leaders from “leading” what is of primary importance – educating and caring for students.

Another principal said:

The workload of school leaders continues to increase and we just can’t keep up. There are too many unrealistic and dictated impositions from politicians and others that have no knowledge or experience in school leadership. Education is not and should not be a business dictated by mandated targets, compliance or contracts. It’s a delicate art of relationships and of contextual decision making to change the lives of students and create a better and more equitable future for all.

It is the same for classroom teachers. One teacher told Save Our Schools:

There is too much top down reform dictated by people who have minimal or no experience in teaching and leading a school. There is nothing wrong with using data to improve, but this needs to be driven on the ground by teachers at the coal face. When you have top down reform that does not include teachers in a genuine consultative and collaborative process, you get compliance driven agendas that do not improve student learning. Teachers are now spending increasing amounts of time taking screenshots and photos to prove they are doing their jobs. It is tick-a-box tasks that take time away from teachers doing their core work of teaching. Ultimately, it is our students who suffer.

Despite the increase in administrative staff in schools to cope with the increased regulatory regime, 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.

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]. One principal told Save Our Schools that “the workload is out of control”.

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 4th 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 3rd highest in the OECD.

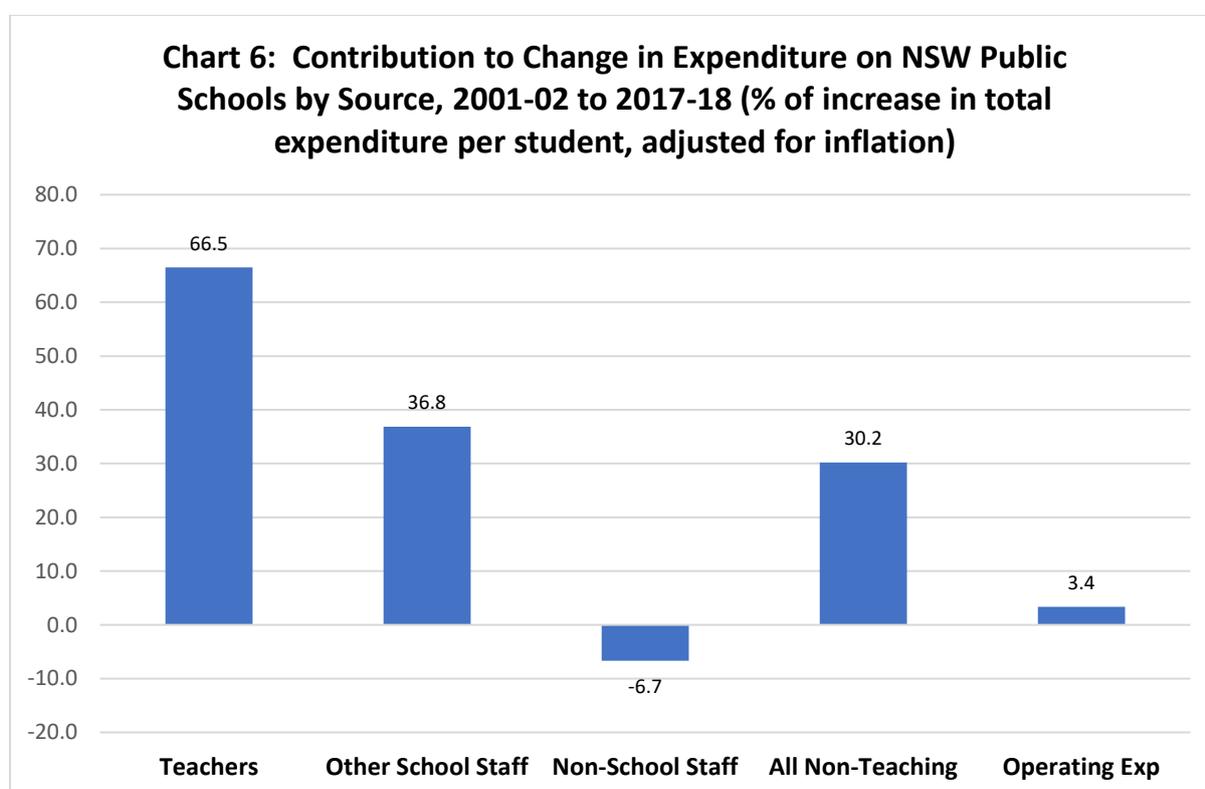
The [second volume of the Australian report on TALIS 2018](#) found that 55% of all lower secondary school teachers said that they have too much administrative work and 38% cited keeping up with

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 NSW, adjusted for inflation, increased by \$2,000 per student, an increase of only \$125 per year. Over one-third of this increase was taken up by increased expenditure on non-teaching staff in schools [Chart 6].

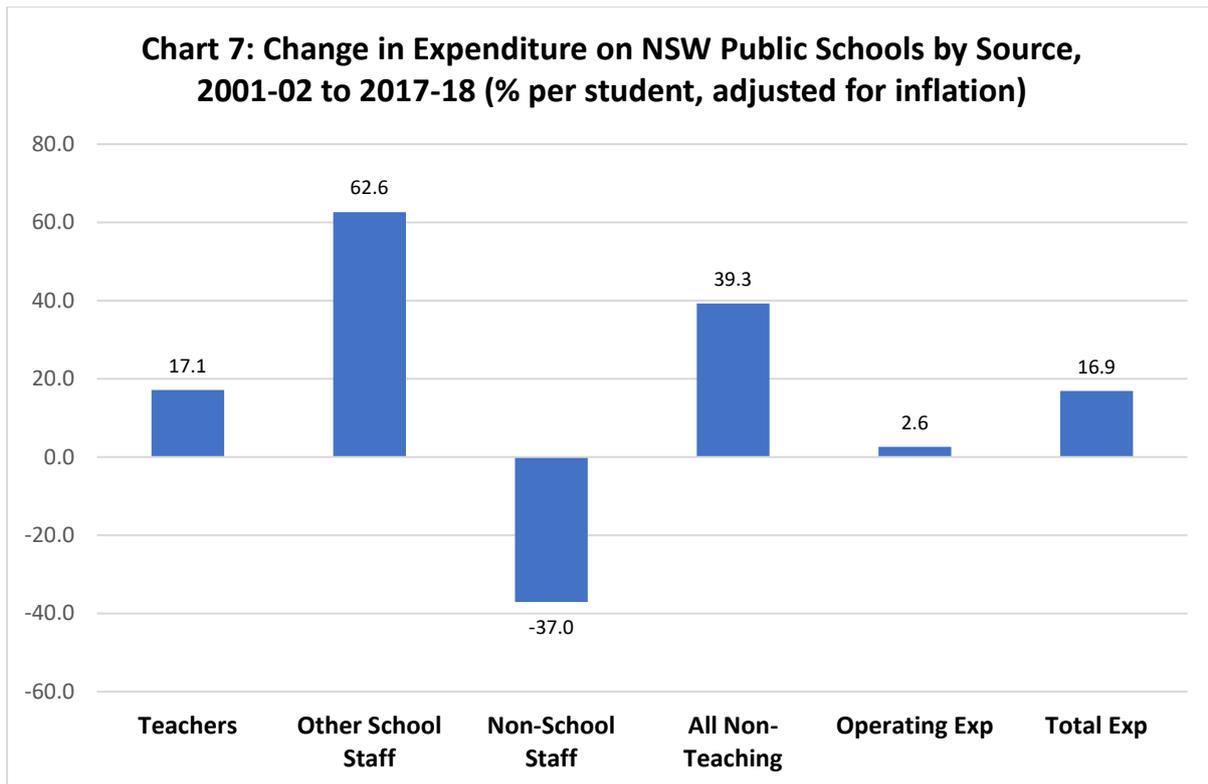
Expenditure on teaching staff accounted for 66.5% (\$1,330) of the increase in real funding and non-teaching staff in schools accounted for 36.8% (\$737) of the increase while there was a reduction in the contribution of non-school staff of 6.7% (-\$133). As a result, expenditure on non-teaching staff in schools increased as a proportion of expenditure on all staff in the NSW public education system from 12.6% to 17%.



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.

The percentage increase in expenditure on administrative and clerical staff and other non-teaching staff in schools was over three times the increase on teachers since 2002. Expenditure per student (adjusted for inflation) on non-teaching staff in schools increased by 62.6% compared to 17.1% 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 37%.



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.

5. Conclusion

The NSW 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 educational 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 NSW 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 huge growth of bureaucracy has been at the expense of more direct support for teaching and learning in schools. 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 over three times that on

teachers. It has soaked up over one-third of the small increase in government funding for NSW public schools. In other words, increased expenditure on bureaucracy was seen as just as important as increasing expenditure on supporting student learning. To this extent, 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 NSW 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.