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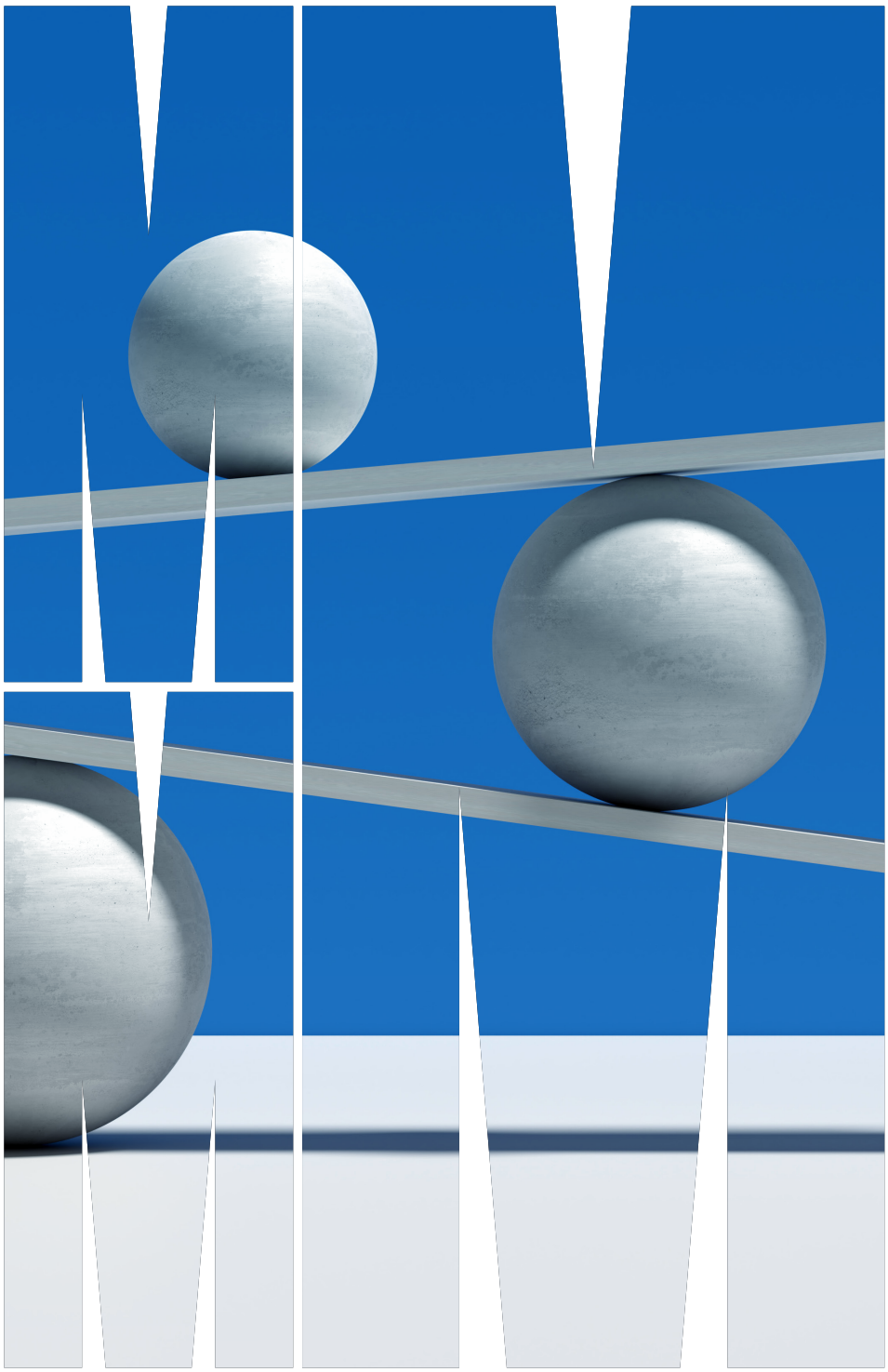

STILL STANDING: HOW TEACHER SHORTAGES AND TURNOVER SHAPE THE WORK OF THOSE WHO STAY

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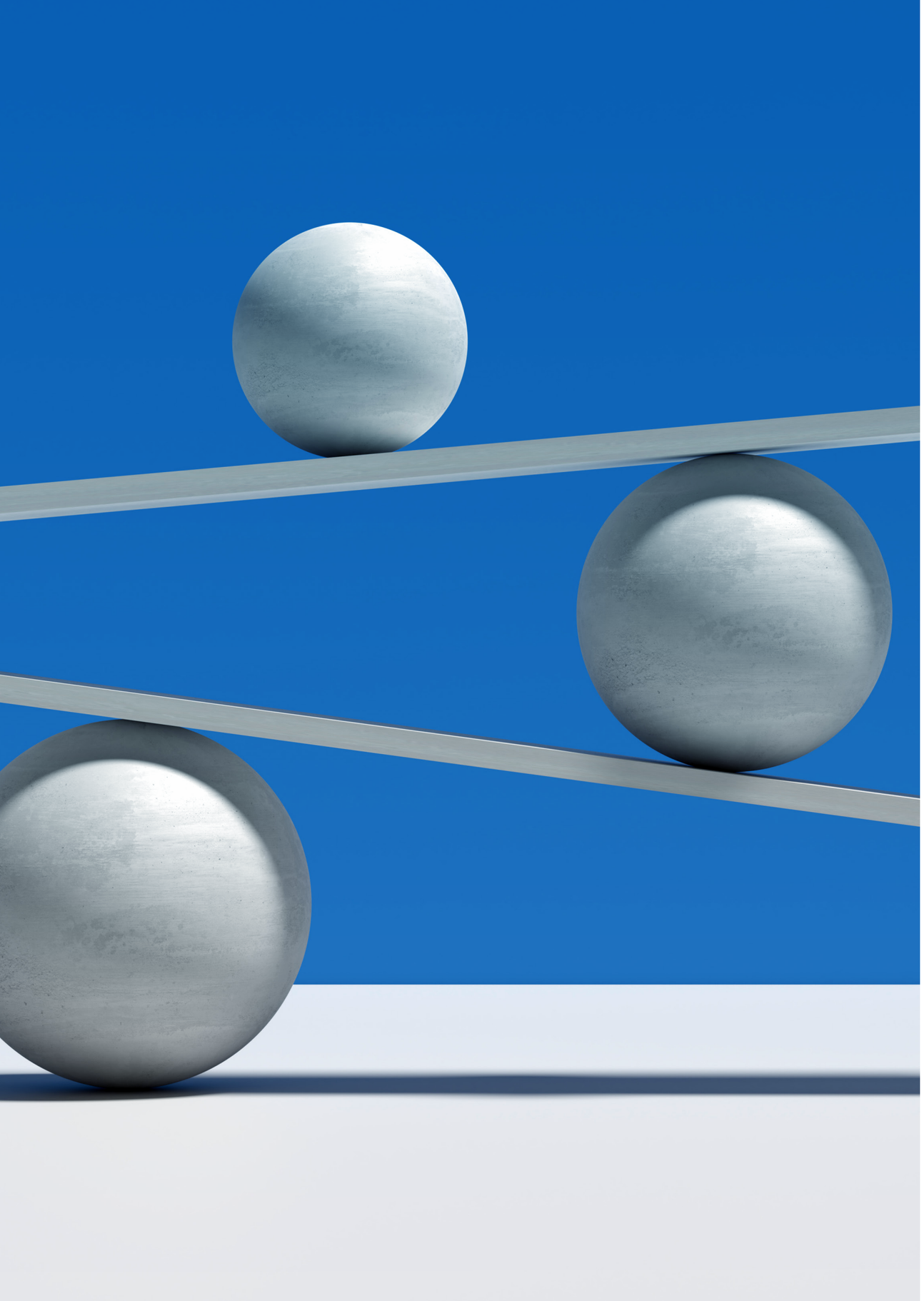

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Executive Summary

Schools across Australia are experiencing significant staffing pressures, with teacher shortages now widely recognised as a systemic and enduring issue, particularly in lower income and disadvantaged communities where attracting and retaining qualified teachers is most challenging.

Forty-two percent of principals in lower secondary schools report experiencing teacher shortages that impact instructional quality, almost double the OECD average (TALIS, 2024). In primary schools, approximately one third of teachers (36%) work in schools where principals believe that shortages of qualified teachers have reduced instructional quality (Friedman et al., 2025, p. 10). The situation is particularly complex for schools serving lower income students or disadvantaged communities. Teacher shortages and high staff turnover have far-reaching consequences, generating complex and cumulative effects that extend well beyond staffing numbers. These pressures undermine teaching quality, workforce stability, and leadership continuity. As such, the challenge extends beyond the headline issue of teacher supply to affect every level of school functioning, from classroom practice to sustained leadership.

METHODOLOGY

In this Australian Research Council project, *The Impact of Teacher Shortages on Teachers Remaining in Hard-to-Staff Schools* (2023–2026), we utilise an ethnographic case study design to examine the lived experiences of teachers working during a period of unprecedented workforce shortages. This project foregrounds the lived experiences of teachers who stay, offering new insights into teacher retention beyond supply-focused analyses. By addressing retention in this way, the findings provide a much deeper understanding of how education systems, as well as individual schools, support teachers who continue to work under these conditions. Data were collected using a range of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, work shadowing, walking interviews and participant journals. Fieldwork was conducted across nine state schools in three Australian states and involved 58 teachers and school leaders.

KEY FINDINGS

This research contributes to debates on teacher retention by identifying the conditions under which teachers stay, endure, or ultimately leave, rather than focusing solely on exit or intentions to leave. At the same time, it reveals the personal and professional costs of staying, challenging celebratory narratives of resilience and commitment that underpin many teacher status campaigns aimed at improving public perceptions of the profession. Through its ethnographic approach, the study provides a more nuanced foundation for retention-focused interventions, one that attends to the everyday realities of work in disadvantaged schools, including the organisational pressures, relational demands, and moral commitments that shape teachers' capacity to remain in hard-to-staff contexts over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations are informed by the findings of this project and reflect the lived realities of schools operating under sustained workforce pressure. Addressing teacher shortages requires shifting system priorities from recruitment alone to a stronger focus on retention, particularly in hard-to-staff schools. This involves recognising the key 'walking point' moments across a teacher's career and supporting factors that keep teachers in the profession, such as professional purpose, supportive leadership, resourcing, autonomy and collegiality. Schools facing persistent shortages manage far more than merely vacancies; for they navigate turnover, constant induction and mentoring, out-of-field teaching, increased workloads and disrupted student relationships. Strengthening school-level capacity to stabilise staffing is therefore essential. System responses must also include robust, evidence-based evaluation of recruitment and retention initiatives, as the long-term impacts of current strategies remain unclear. Improving workforce stability requires coordinated, context-sensitive action across the system.

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Introduction

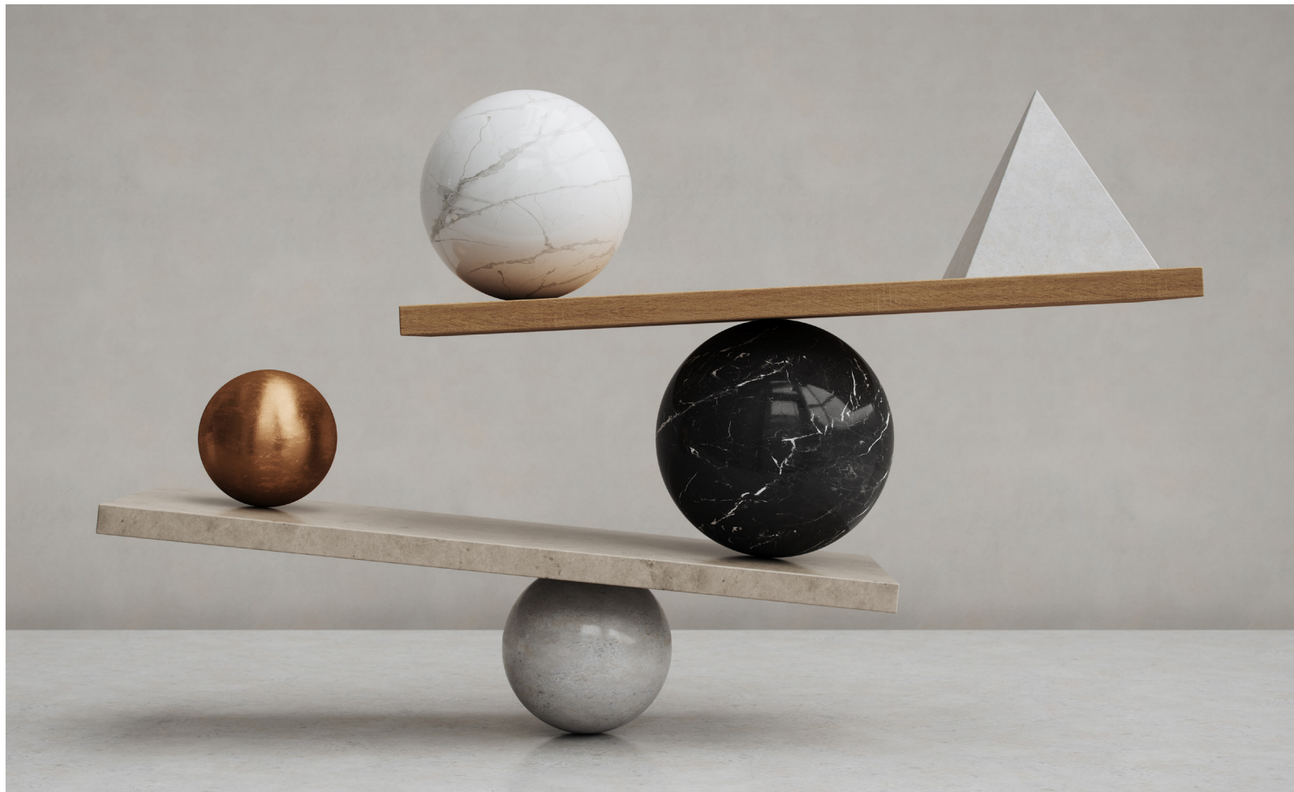
Many countries, including Australia, are confronted with the mounting problem of teacher shortages (See et al., 2020; see also Mills et al., 2024).

Considerable attention has been given to understanding the supply and demand conditions of the teaching workforce, especially declining pipelines of teachers, prompting measures including financial incentives and expanded pathways to teaching (McPherson et al., 2024) as well as a growing body of research addressing teacher intentions to leave the profession (McKay et al., 2022).

In contrast to studies that focus primarily on why teachers leave, this research documents the experiences of teachers who stay and the wide-ranging impacts of teacher shortages on both staff and schools. The findings show that shortages generate ripple effects across school communities, creating challenges far beyond the immediate task of filling vacancies. In the hard-to-staff schools we examined, leaders and teachers were required to manage multiple pressures simultaneously, ongoing turnover and attrition, continual induction of new or temporary staff, increased out-of-field teaching, stretched workload capacity, and relational disruptions that affect teacher wellbeing. Drawing on their testimonies, our study identifies strategies and practices that have supported schools to recruit and retain staff. Yet these approaches are not without their limits. While they offer valuable insights into what has helped schools navigate these pressures, they also introduce new and often complex challenges that require ongoing attention and support.

This report presents illustrative examples of how schools are responding to the teacher workforce crisis, while also examining the challenges and limitations of these responses. In doing so, it reframes teacher shortages by considering not only their immediate impacts but also the more hidden and long-term consequences they generate for teachers and schools. The purpose of the study is to provide timely, workforce-informed insights that can strengthen teacher retention at a moment of acute pressure.

While government policies and incentives shape system-level responses to shortages, our approach highlights that meaningful and sustainable action also arises from how schools interpret, adapt and enact these measures within their local contexts. By foregrounding teachers' and leaders' everyday creative problem solving, what Wessell Powell et al. (2019, p. 171) describe as "teachers' local, personal and creative enactments of values and expertise day to day", this report identifies context-specific practices that have helped schools navigate significant staffing instability. By sharing both the possibilities and the limitations of these approaches, this report aims to support policymakers and school communities in developing more grounded, long-term, and context-sensitive responses to teacher shortages.



Shortages in Australia

The TALIS 2024 Australian Report, drawing on data from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey, provides further insight into the growing challenge of teacher shortages across schooling systems internationally, including Australia.

It revealed a notable upward trend in the number of principals reporting that these shortages are significantly impacting the quality of instruction. Among the countries surveyed, Australia stood out with one of the steepest increases and highest prevalence of principals indicating that teacher shortages were adversely affecting teaching and learning: "In Australia, 42 per cent of lower secondary teachers taught at schools where the principals reported that a shortage of qualified teachers hindered quality instruction" (Friedman et al., 2025, p. 10). This figure was 19 per cent higher than the OECD average (23%) and 28 percentage points higher than in 2018 (14%).

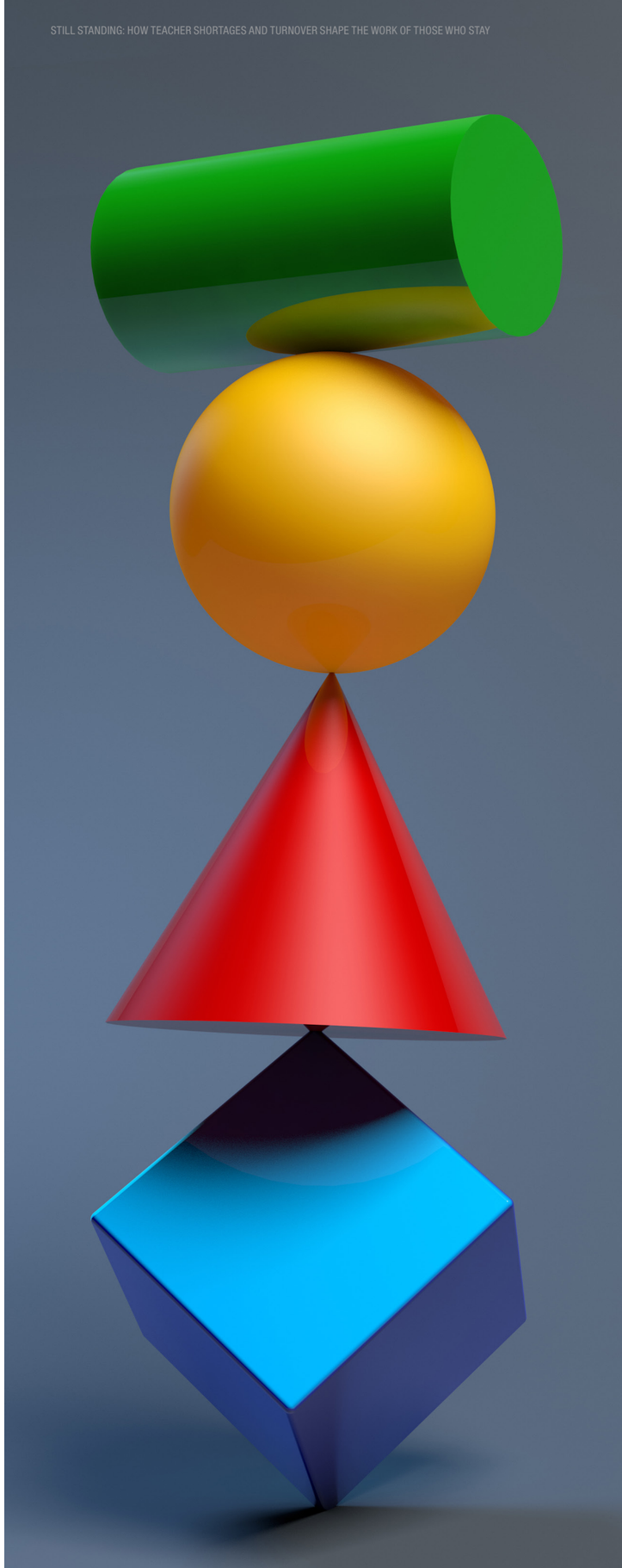
While Australia's reported teacher shortages were not significantly different from other high-performing PISA 2022 countries such as Japan (36%) and Estonia (30%), principals in Singapore (11%), Korea (9%), and Shanghai (China) (4%) expressed far less concern about shortages affecting instructional quality (Friedman et al., 2025, p.10). In Australian primary schools, approximately one-third (36%) of teachers worked at schools whose principals believed that a shortage of qualified teachers reduced instructional quality. Again, the impacts of teacher shortages increased since the previous TALIS reporting period, "from 11 per cent in 2018 to 36 per cent in 2024" (Friedman et al., 2025, p.11).

The Australian Federal Department of Education estimated there will be a shortfall of 4,100 secondary teachers by 2025 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022), while the Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report 2021 (Victorian State Government, 2023) projects a shortage of 5,036 teachers by 2028. These figures reinforce what research has been documenting for some time: persistent challenges in quality teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention (Lampert et al., 2016; Halsey, 2018), particularly in hard-to-staff schools and vulnerable communities. Recognising the scale and severity of the problem of teacher shortages, the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (NTWAP) (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023) offers a multifaceted approach to teacher workforce challenges, acknowledging various interrelated priority areas, from teacher supply strategies as a remedy to address teacher workforce shortages to addressing initial teacher education and highlighting teacher retention and the status of the profession. While this action plan represents a federal intervention into the issue of teacher shortages, Australia's states are constitutionally responsible for the teacher workforce. The increased national attention raises questions about whether state or federal educational authorities are responsible for addressing teacher shortages.

Notably, newer framings emerging at the national level in the NTWAP (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a) address the retention and status of the teaching workforce, as well as aspects highlighted in the existing literature and AITSL's conceptual work on teacher supply and demand (AITSL, 2021). Importantly, these new framings encompass a range of more expansive focal points that include the support of teachers and the teaching profession through efficient induction and mentoring processes, promoting teacher wellbeing, investigating the influence of school culture on attrition and retention rates, ensuring access to quality professional development opportunities, and elevating teacher status (AITSL, 2021, p. 17). Furthermore, this conceptual framing also extends to macro-level factors that impact the teaching workforce, such as teacher pay, workplace conditions, teacher workloads, increased casualisation, improved salary and career trajectories, and changes in teachers' responsibilities (AITSL, 2021, p. 15) with additional priority areas also including the need for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and a less transient teaching workforce for hard-to-staff schools, including those in rural and remote contexts.

In response to federal and state policy efforts that combat teacher shortages, many associations have released communiqués, reports and other publications where they compare policy papers with their own experiences and knowledge of the crisis and reflect on the measures that need development to attend to the work lives of the teacher workforce. In response to the NTWAP, for example, the Australian Primary Principals' Association (APPA) supported government efforts, yet warned that the proposed foci of action also raised important questions that needed to be answered for the plan to be more effective. According to APPA, teacher and principal retention measures in the NTWAP do not seem to recognise "several factors contributing to the intensification of teachers' and principals' work" (APPA, 2023, p. 2). In addition, APPA warns against trying to set up policy initiatives in a top-down dynamic that can undermine the importance of local context. This, the APPA argues, constricts the adaptability of important measures and impacts professional initiative and creativity. In a more recent statement (2025), APPA posits the issue as one of adequacy, not only sufficiency. To resolve the issue of retention, they argue it is crucial to attend to *fit for purpose* strategies, beyond the accomplishment of supply goals.

Other organisations like the Australian Education Union (AEU) have also proposed several measures to counter the crisis of teacher shortage. Prior to NTWAP, in September 2022, the Victorian branch of the union published *A Ten-Year Plan for Staffing in Public Education* in response to what was already perceived as a crisis. Acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic had aggravated a situation that had been ongoing for much longer, Victoria's AEU (2022, p. 15) called for measures that attended to fundamental pressures "such as excessive workload; providing adequate resources to support all students; reducing the risk of occupational violence; eliminating insecure employment; and offering fair and reasonable salaries, as well as new financial incentives…". Among their list of proposals for retention, some stand out. For instance, retention payments for long-standing staff as a form of recognition for their excessive workload; the funding of programs for early-career teachers to be mentored and supported; flexibilization of the work schedule; and the provision of accommodation options where housing is an issue. These state and federal associations and unions place at the heart of the shortages the issue of inequity, for which the voice of each local community is essential in helping to solve the crisis.



Hard-to-Staff Schools

In the context of the teacher shortage crisis, many schools have come to describe themselves as hard-to-staff (McPherson et al., 2024)

However, to argue that all schools are equally hard to staff would be remissive of the importance of context and of the vast inequity that makes it much harder for some schools to deal with the issue of sustained shortages and high turnover. Mills et al. (2024) have proposed the language of 'hardest-to-staff' to underscore how "[t]he effects of this so-called crisis are not equally distributed, hardest felt in socioeconomically disadvantaged and geographically isolated communities" (p. 288). Hardest-to-staff schools have historically suffered from longstanding vacancies and high turnover, issues which have been further exacerbated by the current national teacher shortages, prompting their increased marginalisation (Mills et al., 2024).

High levels of poverty are a key factor in determining whether a school is hard to staff, with disadvantage and geography intersecting in complex ways. While regional, rural and remote schools in Australia often experience staffing challenges associated with isolation and limited access to services such as housing and health facilities, urban and metropolitan schools can also be difficult to staff due to negative bias surrounding schools with high levels of linguistic and cultural diversity (Blackmore et al., 2024; McPherson et al. 2024). In terms of severity and particularity, this distinction has allowed for a renewed understanding of the challenges faced by teachers, who tend to have more limited access to resources (Dadvand et al., 2024), as they can face increasingly intense workloads associated with the teaching profession in general.

These challenges have been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged schools (McPherson et al. 2024). In New South Wales, for example, the pandemic had significant negative impacts on teachers' self-efficacy, student engagement and morale, as the rapid shift to learning from home substantially intensified workloads in ways that did not subside after lockdowns ended (Fray et al., 2023; McPherson et al. 2024). These challenges have been compounded by a worsening housing shortage, which restricts communities' ability to attract teachers and their partners, alongside enduring place-based stigma that discourages teachers from transferring to, or remaining in these schools (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Eacott, 2024; Lampert et al., 2023).

The uneven impact of staffing shortages is particularly evident in traditionally hard-to-staff contexts, where schools often lack any supply of qualified relief teachers to cover classes, even in the short term, once teachers leave the profession (Lampert et al., 2023). These shortages are especially acute in specific subject areas, including STEM fields (most notably Mathematics and Technology) and Special Education. In low SES schools, out-of-field teaching is increasingly common and often falls on the shoulders of early-career or novice teachers, whose self-efficacy, confidence, and intentions to remain are significantly affected (Du Plessis et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2024). These challenges are compounded by the capacity of some private schools to offer financial incentives and professional opportunities that public schools cannot match, further entrenching staffing inequities (Lampert et al., 2023). At the same time, teachers in historically disadvantaged schools require extensive, critically reflexive preparation; yet some hard-to-staff public schools report that over 50% of their workforce is within the first five years of teaching. Staffing necessity has also accelerated early promotion into leadership roles, often without adequate support (Lampert et al., 2025).

Study Design

This research examines changes in the teacher workforce as a complex, systemic, and multifaceted issue shaped by education policy, workforce structures and broader social conditions, including economic and spatial inequality.

While the most visible manifestations of these changes are acute teacher shortages, where schools are unable to fill positions, collapse classes or leave students unsupervised, equally prevalent are less visible forms of workforce instability. Many schools operate with precarious staffing arrangements, described by participants as a 'house of cards', in which teachers double up on roles, relief staff are unavailable to cover absences, and early-career teachers cycle rapidly in and out of classrooms. These conditions produce quieter, but nonetheless persistent disruptions to school functioning and professional cultures.

Our ethnographic analysis of teacher shortages in hard-to-staff schools serves a different purpose from supply and demand workforce analyses or policy responses to the workforce crisis. Whereas workforce reports quantify such things as vacancy rates and attrition patterns, ethnography explains how shortages are lived, interpreted, and managed within everyday school life. Rather than treating teacher shortages as labour market imbalances to be solved through incentives or pipeline reforms, this approach understands them as socially organised conditions of work that shape professional practice, relationships, organisational capacity and teacher agency, particularly within contexts of structural inequality. In disadvantaged schools, shortages and their effects are intensified by intersecting factors such as poverty, unmet wellbeing needs, reduced resources and access to specialist support. Ethnographic accounts demonstrate that hard-to-staff schools are not exceptional cases within the workforce, but institutional sites where structural inequality is concentrated and managed through teachers' labour. It shows that shortages are not only expressed through unfilled positions, but through the hidden organisational costs of persistent workforce instability, including workload intensification, role expansion, emotional labour, and moral strain borne by remaining staff. While policy responses tend to focus on whether classrooms are staffed, ethnographic accounts reveal how shortages erode collective capacity even when positions are nominally filled. Leadership attention is diverted from instructional improvement to crisis management, experienced teachers absorb additional mentoring and supervisory responsibilities, and professional norms are stretched as schools rely on temporary, casualised, or out-of-field staff.

To collect data, two members of the research team spent up to one week engaging in purposeful conversations (Edwards, 1999) with long-standing teachers, deputy principals and principals who could paint a picture of the school and the changes to their own roles as they work through the shortages. In total, 58 purposeful conversations were conducted, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. These conversations broached topics such as teachers' work-life stories, organisational practices, school administration, collegial relationships, professional learning, teaching and learning, and engagement with parents and communities.

We also followed some of them using a method known as 'work shadowing' (Lampert et al., 2020) while they taught and completed other activities, hoping to gain some insights about the ways they relate to their workplaces, supplemented through a set of walking interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011). Researchers accompanied teachers from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., allowing observation of informal interactions and giving participants opportunities to recount specific incidents, challenges, and successes. Field notes were used to document observations and interviews and were synthesised to contextualise data from the purposeful conversations.

Finally, we invited participants to share in writing what 'a day in their life' looks like, especially because we were curious about how teachers today keep a balance between their work and their personal lives. This included 26 daily journals, in which participants provided hourly accounts of their work and home lives from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., illuminating the intersection of professional and personal demands.

OUR SCHOOLS

School sites were selected based on their self-identified status as experiencing challenges related to high teacher vacancies, high teacher turnover or attrition, difficulties sourcing casual relief teachers, and serving a disadvantaged school community. To identify schools, we paid attention to the following:

- **Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) value**

  ICSEA values are provided through the MySchool website as a point of comparison for national socio-educational advantage. These help track school performance and identify areas in need of improvement. NAPLAN scores, students and parents' education, parents' professional background… are some of the factors that come into play when calculating the ICSEA score of a school. Those schools lower than the average tend to be the ones serving diverse communities under great external pressures which weigh heavily on their daily activities.

- **Geographical location**

  The research agrees that schools experiencing historical difficulties to attract and retain teachers tend to be located in areas where disadvantaged communities live, where there is a lack of essential services and/or far away from the main urban centres. For this reason, we focused our search on schools in rural, very remote, metropolitan, and outer metropolitan locations. As a result, we have explored a wide spectrum of experiences that relate directly to where the schools exist and who they cater for.

As a consequence of these considerations, we were able to include a total of nine schools in three states to participate in this research study. Led by our interest in the experiences of primary and secondary school teachers, we included a variety of primary, P-12, 7-10 high schools and two colleges with multiple campuses.

OUR TEACHERS

Our participants, as mentioned before, are teachers and school leaders invited to share their experiences and practice in times of unprecedented shortages. As Table 1 suggests, we were inclined to receive participation from longer-standing teaching staff who had hopefully remained working in the same school for extended periods of time. Out of 58 participants, 46 have worked in schools for more than six years. Indicative of the greater trend in the teaching workforce (AITSL 2025), female representation consists of two thirds of our participant sample.

SCHOOL	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	TOTAL
PARTICIPANTS	**5**	**6**	**5**	**7**	**7**	**6**	**7**	**6**	**9**	**58**
Women	4	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	6	39
Men	1	3	1	3	3	2	2	1	3	19
Teacher	4	5	4	6	4	5	6	5	8	47
Leader	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	11
YEARS TEACHING										
1–5 years	1	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	8
6–10 years	1	1	0	0	1	2	2	0	2	9
11–15 years	0	1	3	2	2	1	1	0	1	11
15+ years	3	1	2	5	2	2	3	4	4	26
Unknown	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	4

Table 1: Participant summary data

Teachers and Leaders Voices

Analysing testimonies from teachers in Australia's hardest-to-staff schools, we used an ecological perspective (Zavelevsky & Shapira Lishchinsky, 2020) to show how personal, professional and practical factors shape decisions to remain in the profession. Teachers describe both the pleasures of their work and the pressures that create potential 'walking points' (Lampert et al., 2025).

Our findings highlight the precarious nature of teacher retention: many who currently stay acknowledge they may leave if challenges outweigh rewards. Recognising this precarity is essential for sustaining the profession. There is no single solution to retention, but understanding how fragile these decisions can be, and how close many teachers are to leaving, underscores the urgency of addressing this issue, particularly given the significant effects of teacher turnover on student wellbeing and instructional quality (Friedman et al., 2025).

"If not me, who?"

(MAURICE, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

"When you've got schools like this where people genuinely are here because they care and they stay here because they care, that care factor becomes a really big thing, further explaining that I kind of almost cynically look and I go, "the staff who are coming out, nine times out of ten are coming out because there's a really great relocation bonus". And I go, "is that the staff that we want?""

(RICHARD, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

The most common reason participants gave for staying in schools with high vacancies and turnover was a strong moral imperative to continue teaching despite difficult conditions. These moral commitments acted as sustaining factors that often outweighed any disliked aspects of the job, including poor working conditions and burnout linked to attrition. Within schools, collegiality and friendship also played a significant role in why teachers remained, either in a specific school or in the profession more broadly. This was especially important in rural and remote communities, where isolation, loneliness and disconnection are known to push teachers away (Seelig & McCabe, 2021).

"It's that social connection. They have that group they can go out with, have a drink with, go out for dinner"

(ANGELIQUE, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

"It's connection. [People stay] when you've got a happy culture within your staff"

(EARL, REMOTE SCHOOL)

"It's these people who have become like the older people, like, have become my family, my chosen family, and that's why I've stuck it out"

(SIOBHAN, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

"The magic wand to want to stay somewhere, people need to get involved in community to be able to make friends and have a lifestyle outside of work as well."

(MAGDA, REMOTE SCHOOL)

"Supporting, building a family and a community that you know, people feel valued and want to stay. We have conversations all the time about and this is not necessarily a magic wand but [as a school leader] I consciously reflect on how I manage performance. I don't want to piss that person off because they can just quit and get a job tomorrow somewhere else."

(IVAN, URBAN SCHOOL)

Some teachers stayed because they did not see themselves as 'quitters', a view more common among longer-serving staff who contrasted their loyalty with that of younger colleagues. In one New South Wales school recovering from several difficult years, strong, active leadership motivated teachers to persist. Hard-to-staff schools face not only instability from shortages and turnover but also from inconsistent leadership and strained relationships between management and staff.

"I'm the kind of person that likes to work, so a lot of work doesn't turn me off. I guess the people who just come into the profession don't like the hard work… they're not seeing the rewards that come if you would've stayed longer"

(MEREDITH, URBAN SCHOOL)

"She's our substantive principal. Fantastic. Runs a very good ship. We've now got [name], he's in his second week here with us. Again, fantastic. He's been out doing duties every day, you know, morning, recess, lunch, and afternoon busting. So, all those sorts of things. The culture here is growing. The relationship with leadership is a lot better than what it had been prior to me coming here."

(MAURICE, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

"If they've been here for like ten years or whatever, and they're growing through this challenging, horrible, state that our school is in. [They are] growing in resilience, growing in their own ability to be able to cope, if they don't, why would you want to teach here?"

(SUSAN, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

"I've been part of the change [at this school]. So, I think it's almost like you want to stick it out because you want to be part of this change. I could find a job elsewhere if I wanted to, but I've worked really hard to build the music program to where it is now, and I don't want to just drop that and run."

(OLGA, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

"Teachers recounted practical and logistical reasons for staying in teaching even when times get tough. Some teachers stay for circumstantial, practical and pragmatic reasons such as caring responsibilities. In previous years I have worked 0.6 at times, where I've had two days a week off and that was allowing me to be a stay-at-home dad with my son."

(GABRIEL, URBAN SCHOOL)

"[My partner] will get quite good maternity leave from next year. So, we'll stay next year. Also, because the housing for education is really good here. I think I pay thirty dollars a week comes out of my pay. Then once she has to go back to work, I think it will be easier for us to move down to where both of our parents are"

(FERDINAND, REMOTE SCHOOL)

A significant finding of our study is that these dimensions are in delicate and precarious balance. A reliable, stable salary or reasonable housing may help teachers stay, but practical decisions are not void of emotion, as teachers prioritise family responsibilities or weigh salaries up against the effects of stress to themselves and their families (Brandenburg, 2024; Eacott, 2024). For many teachers, deciding to stay is a balancing act as they choose between material conditions and emotional connections. Despite the positive reasons why teachers stay, retention is still dependent on this balance.

"I don't plan on leaving but I do wonder how it's all going to go down"

(FELICIA, RURAL SCHOOL)

"At this point, I go back and forward every day and I know I can't keep doing this amount of workload without burning myself out. I want to stay in education. I love education. I love the public-school system but if it keeps going on like this I just, I can't do it."

(MELANIE, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

WORKAROUNDS THAT HIDE THE CRISIS

Some initial responses to teacher shortages have evolved into longer-term organisational routines that obscure the scale and impact of workforce gaps. One example is out-of-field teaching, which Wyatt and Hobbs (2024) describe as a longstanding strategy for managing shortages. Similar patterns appear in the medical workforce (Dixon-Woods et al., 2024), where practitioners undertake roles outside their original training. These adaptations reveal the cascading challenges produced by shortages, from overseas recruitment to reduced subject offerings, showing how schools increasingly rely on stopgap measures that mask deeper systemic issues.

"Someone's got to take that class. We need a teacher in front of that class. We had quite a bit of absence last year. It got to the point where some of our learning specialists were taking two classes together. So, it was a room of forty-five students and one teacher, right. Not ideal, not great for anyone. But at the end of the day, those kids need a teacher in front of them."

(TIM, URBAN SCHOOL)

Managing recruitment (Blackmore et al., 2024) has increasingly involved drawing on early access pathways such as Permission to Teach and Conditional Accreditation programs, introduced to address shortages by allowing schools to employ paraprofessionals before they gain full teaching qualifications. Schools have also relied more heavily on specialist equity-focused initial teacher education programs, including Teach for Australia and other alternative entry routes. These approaches bring some benefits: Permission to Teach appointments can supply schools with staff who offer valuable real-world experience and strong local connections, while fast track programs like Teach for Australia and Nexus help boost teacher numbers and introduce high-achieving candidates to the profession.

However, as these programs expand, they bring new challenges. Many preservice teachers entering through these pathways have limited professional experience, shifting the burden of high workloads onto the teachers responsible for inducting, mentoring and supporting them. Schools also share the risk that, once accredited, these early-career teachers may move to another school or leave the profession entirely after completing their contracts. Several school leaders and teachers expressed frustration at investing significant time and resources into developing teachers who do not remain in their school long term.

"Yeah, so I think it – yeah, I think in total it's about eleven with permission to teach… So, I got permission to teach for now so we can get that sorted."

(KIRK, URBAN SCHOOL)

"I think having a lot of new young TFA teachers as well, so that's one way that we've been staffing the school is by getting all of these young teachers that are inexperienced."

(RACHEL, RURAL SCHOOL)

"And watching that endless flow of you put time and effort into helping these people, and then at the end of their two years when they're qualified and able to, you know, watching them walk out the door. I mean I know one of our tech guys, he just said to me, he goes, this is just bullshit. He goes, why do we invest?"

(VICKY, RURAL SCHOOL)

"I think the mentoring programme works and they're definitely feeling it, but I think even the people who are being the mentors are feeling that pressure of, they've got their own classroom duties to have to worry about, and they're also trying to worry about these people who are struggling."

(ELSA, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

"So, if we're just dumping more and more work on teachers, there's going to be higher absences effectively to get that work done, or to take mental health days because there's so much stuff to get done. I think it's a very tight tightrope that we walk almost every day of how much work do we give teachers versus how much work can we not, if that makes sense."

(TIM, URBAN SCHOOL)

Our findings, echoing Castro's (2023) research, show how schools become trapped in a cyclical dilemma created by external labour market pressures. Teacher shortages produce ripple effects across the system, undermining leadership and organisational functioning. Workforce instability forces schools to respond to unfilled vacancies and high turnover by restructuring practices and redistributing responsibilities. Yet these strategies often intensify teacher burnout, strain relationships and stretch internal support systems. This creates a harmful cycle in which turnover erodes organisational culture, prompting further departures (Holme et al., 2018).

Efforts to reduce turnover frequently emphasise stronger induction and mentoring, particularly given the growing numbers of early-career teachers entering the workforce. However, hard-to-staff schools often lack the capacity to deliver these supports effectively, as changing teaching workforce profiles in schools leave too few experienced teachers available to take on additional responsibilities. The resulting gaps hinder the successful integration of new staff and heighten the risk that they will leave early in their careers. In this way, limited capacity to provide induction and mentoring further exacerbates retention problems and reinforces the workforce challenges these schools face.

Key Findings

The key findings of this project are drawn from nine case sites spanning rural, very remote, metropolitan, and outer metropolitan contexts, encompassing primary, secondary, and multisite schools with diverse student populations and staffing profiles.

Despite significant variation in size, location, and demographic composition, the case sites reveal a set of recurring and contextually specific challenges associated with teacher shortage and workforce instability. These include unfilled vacancies, high turnover, limited access to relief teachers, reliance on early-career and out-of-field staff, declining recruitment pipelines, and the cumulative impacts of staff burnout and low morale. At the same time, schools serving communities with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and/or students from language backgrounds other than English face additional demands related to cultural competence, student complexity, and community engagement.

CASE SITE	KEY ISSUES	
Case site 1 - Rural, 7-10 (multi-site)	• Unfilled vacancies • High turnover • Collapsed classes • High concentration of early-career teachers • Early-career teacher retention • Extreme student and community complexity	• Limited relief teachers available • Low staff morale • Heavy reliance on paraprofessional staff • Out of field teaching • Neighbouring schools compete for new staff
Case site 2 - Rural, K-6	• Limited relief teachers available • Collapsed classes • Shallow recruitment applicant pool • Declining recruitment pipelines	• Teacher burnout • Increasing reliance on paraprofessional staff • Early-career teacher retention • Neighbouring schools compete for new staff
Case site 3 - Metro, 7-12 (single sex)	• Extensive use of leadership adaptations and relational networks to address staffing and organisational constraints	• Devolved responsibility for management and administrative coordination
Case site 4 - Metro, 7-12	• High turnover • Shallow recruitment applicant pool • Teacher burnout • Early-career teacher retention • Neighbouring schools compete for new staff	• Low staff morale • Leadership time diverted to recruitment • Teacher retention • High concentration of early-career teachers
Case site 5 - Remote, Prep-12	• Impact of geographic remoteness • Long recruitment pipeline timelines • No relief teachers • Unfilled vacancies • High turnover	• Frequent class cover • High concentration of early-career teachers • Leadership time diverted to recruitment • Teacher retention
Case site 6 - Metro, 7-12	• Strong pastoral/caring culture • Recent retirement of long serving principal • Issues related to turnover & Permission to Teach programs	• High turnover in middle management • Target alumni as graduate teachers • High turnover – middle leadership
Case site - Rural, 7-12	• High concentration of early-career teachers • Limited relief teachers • Frequent class cover • Early-career teacher retention	• Reliance on multiple employment-based Initial Teacher Education / Permission to Teach programs • Leadership time diverted to recruitment • Extensive teacher mentoring and induction
Case site 8 - Outer Metro, 7-12	• High turnover • Frequent class cover • Limited relief teachers • Increasing student enrolments	• Low staff morale • Out-of-field teaching • Leadership time diverted to recruitment
Case site 9 - Rural Prep-6, Rural 7-12 (multi-site)	• High concentration of early-career teachers • Early-career teacher retention • Transience of relief teachers • High turnover	• Extensive teacher mentoring and induction • Frequent class cover • Collapsed and split classes • Neighbouring schools compete for new staff

Table 2: Case sites, summary data and key issues

Together, these findings highlight both the uneven distribution of workforce pressures across school contexts and the common structural conditions shaping schools' responses to the teacher shortage.

- Teacher attrition and shortages have significant effects on the teachers who remain in high-turnover schools (the 'stayers'). Persistent workforce instability disrupts instructional continuity, increases workload, and undermines collegial relationships and organisational functioning across multiple dimensions of school life. These conditions shape teachers' professional practice and emotional wellbeing and play a critical role in influencing their decisions about whether to remain in the school or the profession.
- Workforce precarity has emerged as a systemic issue, with implications for the sustainability and quality of teaching in schools. Increasingly, schools are finding ways to fully staff their schools through such things as employment-based pathways, the use of provisional teachers or those with Permission to Teach, Education Support Staff and other initiatives. While schools are doing their best to have a teacher in front of every class, a stable, quality, committed teaching workforce will require a complex shift in teacher status, teaching conditions, role definition (including autonomy) and teacher agency.
- Teacher shortages do not stem from a single cause but arise from the interaction of personal, organisational, and system-level factors. These pressures look different across schools and contexts. By examining teachers' lived experiences within this broader ecological landscape, it becomes clear that workforce instability reflects deeper structural pressures on the profession, pressures that require coordinated responses ranging from school-level strategies to broader system reform.
- Policy responses to teacher shortages indicate the need to integrate recruitment and workforce supply with more emphasis on teacher retention, especially in hard-to-staff schools. Addressing working conditions, workload sustainability, and systems-level supports are essential to stabilising the workforce and reducing turnover, alongside continued attention to recruitment.
- Schools experiencing workforce instability, particularly in hard-to-staff contexts, are engaged in far more than filling vacancies. Persistent shortages require them to manage multiple pressures at once, including high staff turnover, continuous cycles of induction for new or temporary teachers, increased reliance on out-of-field- teaching, elevated workloads for existing staff, and ongoing disruption to student relationships and learning continuity.
- Teachers' work is undergoing significant transformation, with implications for retention. While policy attention has been given to early-career teachers who enter the profession so that expectations and skills are broadly aligned with contemporary role demands, many mid- and late-career teachers experience a growing misalignment between their original professional aspirations and the realities of their current work. This divergence contributes to accumulating dissatisfaction and creates identifiable walking points, at which continuing in the profession becomes increasingly untenable.
- Informal and incidental mentoring in hard-to-staff schools is widespread and intensifying. As workforce policies have prioritised attracting and recruiting new teachers, hard-to-staff schools, where many early-career teachers begin their professional path, have become key sites of induction and support. While many value supporting new colleagues, the cumulative demands of repeated induction cycles encroach on workload capacity, contributing to frustration and, in some cases, resentment.
- Teachers' work in hard-to-staff schools is increasingly sustained through practices of care exploitation, where professional commitment, relational care, and personal vulnerability are implicitly relied upon to maintain school functioning. These arrangements contribute to cumulative exhaustion, burnout, and decisions to leave the profession. While excessive demands on teachers' time are a significant concern, the findings show that emotional and relational strain are equally consequential.
- Work–life conflict is a significant issue for teachers in hard-to-staff schools, despite the historical positioning of teaching as compatible with family life. The findings show that both time-based and strain-based conflict are shaped by heavy workloads, emotional demands, and professional cultures that sometimes normalise extensive care labour. These conflicts are not individual failings but rather are embedded in structural and gendered inequalities in care responsibilities, disproportionately affecting women and contributing to workforce instability.

Snapshot – Turnover in Hard-to-Staff Schools

Teacher turnover is a form of workforce instability within the Australian teaching profession.

Rather than tracing the causes of attrition, we follow Jabbar and Holme's (2025, p. 2) call to understand "how turnover affects the social fabric of organisations", tracing how marketisation and teacher shortages intensify competition between schools, generate continuous recruitment pressures, and complicate retention in contexts where staffing is already fragile.

Teacher shortages across the public system have amplified these challenges, particularly for disadvantaged schools. As vacancies increase, teachers have more opportunities to move to schools perceived as more desirable. While this mobility benefits some, it places hard-to-staff schools at a disadvantage as they struggle to compete in a tight labour market.

"So this is the thing, our staff here is probably fifty percent who are long-term staff and then there's this fifty percent where, since the beginning of last year, even this year, we've already had turnover of staff"

(DEBORAH, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

Similarly, Richard stated the following:

"…we always kind of celebrate this fact that we have, we get up to full staff again at the start of the year, and they pull up the list of the new staff and it's like fifteen people. And I go, there's a really big issue if, yes, we're back to full staff, that's so great, but that's fifteen new bodies in a teaching staff of, like, sixty or seventy."

(RICHARD, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

Recruitment in these contexts is far from straightforward. Leaders described an exhausting cycle of advertising, interviewing, inducting, and often re-inducting staff, which sometimes led to appointments made out of necessity rather than fit. In the words of Ivan,

"We were choosing between what I would colloquially say 'a warm body or nobody' and that's a really hard decision."

(IVAN, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

They also spoke about the strain this created, while emphasising the need for strong internal systems to support less experienced hires:

"Yeah, there was only a handful [of teaching jobs advertised] that we would have had zero candidates. So, we're still saying 'no' to some people…We probably have bent our standards a little bit, but we haven't dropped them entirely. And we, we're backing ourselves to manage people once they're in the door."

(KIRK, URBAN SCHOOL)

Teacher agency within a competitive labour market further shapes turnover patterns. With greater choice, teachers increasingly prioritise proximity, work-life balance, supportive leadership, or career progression, factors that place already challenged schools at a disadvantage. Here is Richard, school leader at a regional school, who argued that

"A lot of staff just go, why would I deal with a school that isn't giving me anything in terms of my career progression, where the behaviour is terrible, where I can't actually teach, where I'm in a town, you know, [LOCATION NAME] not bad, but there are better towns around."

(RICHARD, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

The consequences of persistent turnover extend well beyond staffing shortages. Participants described erosion of school culture, weakened professional relationships, and intensifying burdens on those who remain. Leadership turnover was especially destabilising, as can be appreciated in Rebecca's testimony:

"Even prior to the five years that I've been here, it's been a massive turnaround of principals. There hasn't been, like, a real steady, long haul of a principal in the position…I think it's just really hard to feel inspired to stay here and put your best in when the people leading you aren't doing the same"

(REBECCA, REGIONAL SCHOOL)

In our accounts, turnover reflects what Holme et al. (2018, p. 65) describe as "chronic" and "cumulative". This ongoing cycle embeds instability into the everyday operations of schools, reshaping teachers' work, professional relationships, and organisational capacity. Across the three sites, turnover emerges not merely as an individual or organisational issue but as a structural condition, one that stratifies working environments and deepens inequities across the education system.

Snapshot – Induction in Hard-to-Staff Schools

The induction of new teachers is a long and established policy concern within Australian education systems, framed as central to teacher retention, professional standards, and workforce sustainability with Australia's National Teacher Workforce Action Plan identifying mentoring as a key focus area.

Often, the terms 'induction' and 'mentoring' are used somewhat interchangeably, with induction being the institutional process of orienting newcomers to the profession including compliance with policy and development of teaching practice, while mentoring refers to the labour associated with supporting novice teachers through their induction and transition to the role of teacher. With so many education support staff, conditional and provisional teachers (including those not yet qualified but on Permission to Teach), and with the sheer number of new staff in and out of the hardest-to-staff schools, both induction and mentoring (formal and informal) take on even greater significance. We found this heightened need delivers both opportunities and challenges, which we outline in the following paragraphs.

Some school leaders and teachers identified induction and mentoring as a rewarding part of their work, offering them the chance to introduce new teachers to their school culture, their ways of working and contributing in greater ways to teacher preparation. As one teacher explained, a lot of the new teachers

"don't bring a lot of experience with them, so as experienced teachers, you need to help them, guide them"

(RACHEL, RURAL SCHOOL).

Jason framed this similarly:

"Where I oversee or observe my colleagues and help them get better at those things… I think there's a pretty cool sense of, like, we do this together".

JASON (URBAN SCHOOL)

As a positive part of their jobs, many experienced teachers expressed a deep sense of responsibility and pleasure in supporting new teachers. They saw it as their professional and personal contribution to the profession.

For some schools, a number of which themselves have a majority early-career teaching staff precisely because of teaching shortages, reasonably inexperienced teachers themselves have to become mentors very early, before they themselves have gained experience. Elton became a middle leader after less than two years, saying,

"for me as someone who's still kind of figuring out my own practice really… I'm still kind of figuring it out myself".

ELTON (RURAL SCHOOL)

In addition, the sheer magnitude of new teachers being hired every year (and often constantly throughout the year) can lead to additional stress on the longer-standing workforce. Margot (rural school) for example said "When you've got quite a few, and I've had quite a few in the past, it's a lot". Supporting new staff increases not just the work of formal mentors (i.e., those with formal roles or workload) but everyone's work because new teachers will always have questions and needs. Nonetheless, incidental mentoring can also be pleasurable, but it can be exhausting. Margot, who had no time release explained that she mentors out of the goodness of her heart saying,

"They wanted me to come and observe their classes all the time, and it just so happens that it doesn't really work. But like, today would be the one day they'd really want me to go and observe their class, and it means I have no planning time."

(MARGOT, RURAL SCHOOL)

There are complex feelings around the number of new teachers coming in and out of schools. This includes gratitude and willingness to help, as well as some ambivalence about supporting new teachers who may well leave after two years, and who sometimes are being better renumerated, or workloaded than the mentors themselves. Katie said

"we couldn't do it without (the new teachers) but it is extra work …to coach them and mentor them and answer their questions and do the planning for them and all that stuff".

KATIE (RURAL SCHOOL)

Vicky phrased this more strongly, explaining that

"They go, we do all this extra, we support these guys, and then they leave. And there's that whole level of, why are we supporting them and putting an amount of time into actually getting them through, for them not to be even contracted beyond the length of their program. And there is a huge frustration amongst the older teachers that you know, there are a few of them that have said, I just can't be bothered anymore."

(VICKY, RURAL SCHOOL)

Melanie reiterated the dilemma, saying

"Last year we did over a hundred inductions across the two campuses. We would have teachers coming in sometimes for a term, sometimes for less than that and we would have to sort of induct them and work with them to get their head around our teaching strategies, our pedagogical methods, and just our standard behaviour. Then they would stay for a few weeks or a term and then they would be out the door, and we would have to induct the next person. So, at the moment, we have a cohort of students who are very untrusting towards new teachers because they're used to a high turnover."

(MELANIE, RURAL SCHOOL)

While state Departments of Education still provide central support for the formal induction of new teachers, the general sense was that there was only so much they could do, especially for rural, regional and remote schools. Our research corroborates the importance of mentoring but suggests policymakers understand how complex the job of mentoring is in unprecedented times of teacher shortages and teacher turnover. The incidental mentoring that falls on more experienced (and even barely experienced) teachers in very hard-to-staff schools should not be undervalued. The balance between the joys and burden of mentoring are sometimes the tipping point in their effect. Mentoring, when built into a system in which mentors have proper time and institutional support, has the potential to improve teacher retention, both for mentors and their mentees. On the other hand, when it adds to experienced teachers' over-work, it can have the opposite effect and become, potentially, a contributing factor in teacher attrition.

Recommendations

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are informed by the findings of this project and reflect the lived realities of schools operating under sustained workforce pressure. Drawing on evidence from diverse school contexts, these recommendations aim to address both the structural drivers of teacher shortage and the uneven impacts experienced across regions and communities. Rather than proposing one-size-fits-all solutions, the recommendations emphasise targeted, context-responsive policy approaches that support teacher recruitment, retention, wellbeing, and leadership capacity over the long term.

- **Rebalance the current labour market emphasis on recruitment and supply towards a more balanced approach that prioritises retention, particularly in hard-to-staff schools.** Recognise and intervene at key 'walking point' moments across the teaching career span, from early-career teachers to long-serving teachers and school leaders, to support more targeted strategies to reduce attrition. Ensure retention approaches are informed by evidence on why teachers remain in the profession, including professional purpose, supportive leadership, autonomy, and collegiality.
- **Responses to teacher shortages should address the cumulative, systemwide effects of workforce instability in hard-to-staff schools, not just vacancy filling.** Schools experiencing persistent shortages are required to manage high turnover, ongoing induction, out-of-field teaching, increased workloads, and disruption to student relationships simultaneously. Longer term workforce priorities should prioritise stable staffing conditions, reduced turnover, and stronger organisational capacity over short-term or reactive measures that increase pressure on teachers and school leaders.
- **Explicitly recognise and support the critical work undertaken at the school level to recruit, retain, manage vacancies and minimise turnover.** Schools are required to address these challenges in real time, often with limited resources. Strengthening school-level capacity in addressing teacher shortages is essential to sustaining staffing stability and improving retention, particularly in hard-to-staff settings.
- **Embed robust, evidence-based evaluation across teacher recruitment and retention initiatives, particularly those targeting hard-to-staff schools.** Despite substantial investment over the past two decades in teacher education pipelines, financial incentives and leadership development, the impacts of these approaches on teacher satisfaction and long-term retention remain insufficiently understood. Strengthening evaluation would support the identification, refinement and scaling of initiatives that demonstrably improve workforce stability.

SCHOOL RECOMMENDATIONS

Although policy responses are central to addressing the broader structural patterns of teacher shortages, schools also have agency at the organisational level. School-level practices that strengthen working conditions can play a critical role in supporting teacher retention in hard-to-staff contexts, as working conditions are consistently identified as a key predictor of teachers' decisions to stay.

- **Provide visible leadership support.** Teachers are more likely to remain in challenging schools when they feel supported by school leaders. This includes leaders being approachable, responsive to teacher concerns, buffering teachers form unrealistic demands and actively helping teachers solve classroom problems.
- **Build strong professional relationships and collegial culture.** Retention improves when teachers work in schools with high trust and collaborative professional relationships. This can be complex in high turnover schools. Leaders play a key role in creating this environment by fostering respect, teamwork, and open communication.
- **Recognise and value teachers' work.** Recognition is a simple but powerful retention strategy. When teachers feel their work is acknowledged and valued by leadership, they are more likely to stay in challenging schools. Many teachers are going above and beyond to maintain positive school environments during workforce shortages, yet much of this effort is invisible and often goes unnoticed.
- **Build a shared mission and sense of purpose.** Teachers in hard-to-staff schools are more likely to stay when they feel connected to the school's moral purpose, particularly around serving their students and communities. Leaders who emphasise a shared mission help teachers see their work as meaningful rather than simply difficult.

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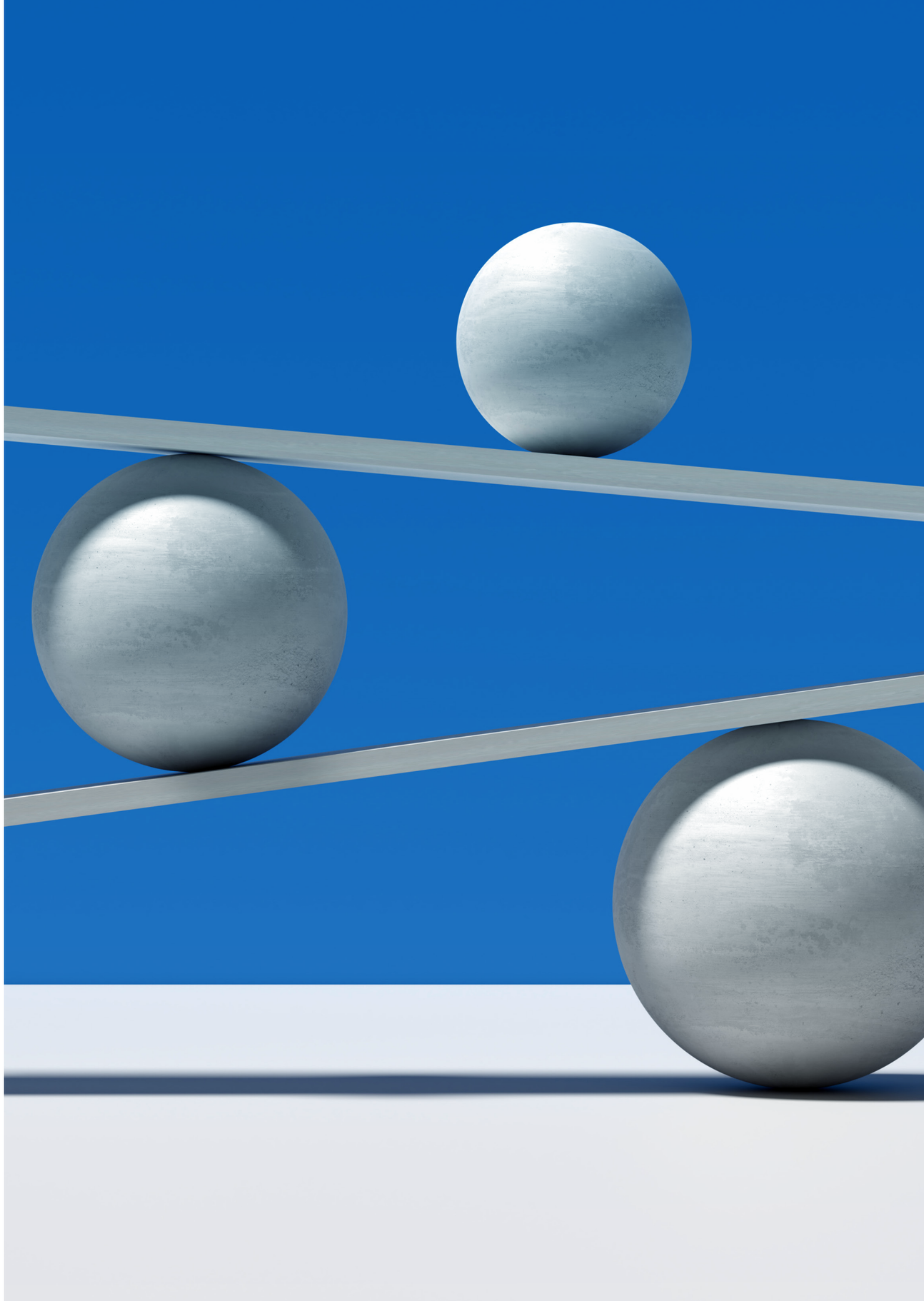

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