

MEDIA RELEASE

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Better mental health support needed for teacher retention

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New Start Well report finds early career teachers' mental wellbeing and resilience can be improved by strengthening support with peers, and identifies need for a program to support early career teachers in order to improve retention.

The Hunter Institute of Mental Health has today released new research findings which examine the mental health and wellbeing of early career teachers, highlighting the importance of peer support in the profession.

The research was conducted by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health over a 12-month period with more than 450 people responding to the survey. Supported by the Teachers Health Foundation, the Start Well study investigated strategies to help improve resilience and retention in the teaching profession.

Director of the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, Jaelea Skehan, said supporting the mental health and wellbeing of early career teachers is essential.

"We know that the first few years of a teacher's career can be particularly challenging," Ms Skehan said.

"Some teachers are spending years training at university only to leave the profession after a short period of time. We need to find ways to support early career teachers through these difficult years so that they stay in the field."

Ahead of the research, clear gaps in the knowledge of early career teachers and the factors contributing to them leaving or staying in their careers, were identified.

"We wanted to learn more about their experiences and find ways to support their mental health," Ms Skehan said.

The research generated several recommendations and strategies to support early career teachers and what can be done to better support them in becoming confident and fulfilled professionals.

"We hope to use the research findings to trial and develop a program for the education setting which will support early career teachers' mental health and reduce the numbers who leave the profession," Ms Skehan said.

NSW Teachers Federation Membership and Training Officer Nicole Calnan said starting out in the teaching profession involves a wide range of demands on teachers' time.

"Finding your feet in the profession involves building relationships with colleagues, students and communities; managing workload, process and procedures; as well as working through the accreditation process," Ms Calnan said.

"Social and professional support from a range of sources, including the employer, is essential during this time."

"Early career teachers bring enthusiasm to the profession but it's important to acknowledge that it's a big transition from university to employment as a teacher."

Principal Investigator of Start Well, Dr Gavin Hazel, said early career teachers have many positive and rewarding experiences as part of starting their career but are challenged in managing their workload and getting the right support.

“Analysis of the research responses revealed early career teachers experience particular pressures over their perceived workloads, maintaining a good work-life balance and accessing mentorship,” Dr Hazel said.

“This study showed peers can provide valuable support, complementing existing schools’ supports.

“To support the mental health of early career teachers, we need a multipronged approach which works with the education system, schools and teachers at all levels of their careers.”

Dr Hazel said the research highlighted where early career teachers did not have strong work/life balance and support, they were more likely to be undecided as their ongoing role in the teaching profession.

Ms Calnan said it was important to nurture early career teachers and manage expectations versus reality.

“Early career teacher wellbeing is important because they are the next generations of the profession,” Ms Calnan said.

“Research like Start Well provides the Federation with insight to understand the particular challenges they are facing, what they are experiencing, and where there are opportunities to strengthen or add support.

“This important research is a welcome addition to our understanding of early career teachers.”

The Start Well research found that early teachers are feeling overloaded and feel they don’t have enough time to complete their work. However where teachers had a good work life balance and higher levels of social support, they were less likely to consider leaving the profession.

“Bringing people together, sharing experiences and building networks can be a simple but powerful way to build support for teachers,” Ms Calnan said.

“It’s important the employer develops resources and programs that build wellbeing as part of an induction process as this would be beneficial for both early career teachers and those who support them.”

To read the full report of the Hunter Institute of Mental Health’s Start Well project results, visit www.himh.org.au/startwell

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The Hunter Institute of Mental Health has built a reputation as a leading national organisation dedicated to reducing mental illness and suicide and improving wellbeing for all Australians. For more than 20 years the Institute has been delivering successful, evidence-based mental health and suicide prevention programs from their base in Newcastle, NSW. Visit www.himh.org.au

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