Reporting from the frontline of remote schools



The commitment of public educators to overcome vast distances and a sense of isolation were apparent to an SSTUWA group who visited remote schools in WA's Gibson Desert region recently.

SSTUWA President Pat Byrne and organisers Natalie Swinbourn and Ian Daw travelled to visit the various campuses of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School.

These included Warakurna, Tjukurla, Wanarn, Wingellina, Jameson, Warburton and Blackstone Remote Community Schools (RCS).

The annual trip was to thank members for their commitment to the SSTUWA, provide support to them and investigate local issues.

Ms Swinbourn said issues members made note of included repairs not being made in a timely manner to government employee houses, and faults with appliances, such as stoves.

Security of housing and school sites, internet speeds and the difficulties these present with accessing the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education were also issues, as was workloads due to the complexities of students moving between campuses regularly.

A further challenge members reported is having to do collaborative activities between campuses in members' own time due to the lack of available relief staff.

Ms Swinbourn acknowledged the ongoing issue members had particularly during school holiday periods and losing holiday time due to travel time.

"The isolation in these areas is extreme," she said.

"It is like being in another world. We travelled over 2,000km during the week to visit the schools and there was a campus we were unable to visit due to it being eight hours from the next closest campus.

"The closest regional centre for them with shops and regular flights back to Perth is 330km away on gravel roads.

"They don't have access to normal shops for food and are constrained by the regularity of the truck, which varied from every

two to eight weeks.

“(Getting) fresh fruit and veg can be a challenge in some of the areas because of this.”

But she praised the members for their excellent work.

“The teachers were very positive and are out there to make a difference,” Ms Swinbourn said.

“They are very committed to improving Aboriginal education and hope to have a positive impact on the communities. There is a great sense of team and people banding together to look after each other.

“There are some key Aboriginal Elders assisting the staff in various locations to understand the culture of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and this is having a positive impact on the progress of students and their attendance at school.”

Blackstone RCS middle primary teacher Daniel Cahill appreciated the SSTUWA visit.

“It is always good to touch base and to be reminded that the SSTUWA is there for us if we have any queries,” he said.

Ms Swinbourn encouraged educators in similar remote schools to join the SSTUWA to receive support for any issues they encountered.

She said current members should continue to contact SSTUWA Member Assist with issues, alongside working with their branches at the local level.

“Be proactive in bringing the issues to the attention of the admin team,” Ms Swinbourn added.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026