Director-General out of line and out of touch

The comments targeting “lazy” teachers, reported in the West Australian on 31 January, reveal a Director-General, who has overseen the biggest cuts ever experienced in WA education, completely out of touch with the consequences of those cuts for principals and teachers in schools.

As a result of government budget cuts almost 1000 teaching and non-teaching jobs have been lost in the last year, including Level 3 Classroom Teacher time used specifically for teacher mentoring and professional development. Approximately 200 more jobs will be lost this year through the government’s voluntary separation package

Principals have indicated they have had to cut attraction and retention programs, literacy and numeracy support, professional development programs and many other initiatives. All of this means larger class sizes, particularly in secondary schools, and teachers having to deal with students at educational risk without the assistance of sufficient teachers, EA's and other support staff and programs.

Add to this the fact that 2015 sees the introduction of huge system changes - year 7 in high schools, new WACE requirements, the Student Centred Funding Model and a one line budget in schools - all being done on the back of the cuts - and it is incomprehensible that the DG should begin the year displaying such total insensitivity to the added stresses being felt by principals and teachers.

There are already legislative processes in place to deal with underperforming employees whether they be teachers, gardeners, principals or directors. What is absent is adequate resourcing to support these processes.

What the Director-General was quoted as saying is that she wants to be able to express a loss of confidence in a teacher and then dismiss him or her. To consider introducing a system that denies the fundamental right to procedural fairness shows a failure of leadership at the highest level.

Further, the Director-General appears to be conflating poor performance with mediocrity. There is a significant difference between the two in the context of dismissal from employment.

Assuming the West Australian has quoted her accurately, she implies that the introduction of classroom observation is for the sole purpose of dealing with poor performance. This is contrary to the expressed intention of the AiTSL Framework and to the message being given by the department to its principals.

Classroom observation is one of many tools available and, if used properly, is about supporting teachers to reflect on and improve their own performance. To be successful, it requires trust and confidence in both the person you are working with and the purpose of the process being undertaken.

The Director-General's comments have ensured that this trust and confidence will not be present.

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