Contracts for School Leaders

With contracts for Leaders on the agenda in WA, what have experiences been like elsewhere in Australia where contracts have been introduced?

Queensland.

The former Newman government introduced a wide range of radically conservative measures and were about to impose contracts on doctors and school principals prior to being tipped out of government.

Their aim was about control and compliance with government policy and the introduction of contracts was seen as the vehicle to attaining those goals.

The Doctors Dispute

The dispute about contracts for doctors in the public health system provides many insights into the problems of contracts and the attitude and tactics of that government. It might just have some messages for school leaders in Western Australia.

The issues raised by doctors included:

- The power of the employer to unilaterally vary the contract
- The command-and-control nature of contracts that threaten medical professionalism
- Dismissal without any access to independent arbitration
- Job security
- Income put at risk through the employer setting unachievable key performance indicators
- Unilateral changes of rosters without regard to management of fatigue
- Unilateral transfer of doctors from one location to another.

The tactics used by the government are also noteworthy:

- Adopt an extreme position and then make concessions that still leave employees worse off, but feeling that they have had a win
- Vilify doctors when they continue to oppose the changes
- Threaten them with replacement from interstate or overseas
- Seek to negotiate directly with doctors, claiming their unions aren't properly representing them.

Now with those indicators, one just might start to doubt the value of contracts for school leaders, especially applied under a conservative government.

The Queensland Teachers' Union and principal contracts

The QTU is opposed to contracts for principals and deputy principals. That has always been its position. The only separate employment agreements they have agreed to were to provide for payments to Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) National Partnership Agreement principals and executive principals. Both forms had rights of reversion and neither took principals outside the scope of awards or collective agreements (or mainstream industrial laws).

It is important to note that in excess of 90 per cent of all school leaders are members of the Queensland Teachers' Union and the vast majority support their stated position, especially after the Newman government experience. A recent membership survey is showing job security as the single most important issue for members. They can see no reason why principals and deputy principals should have to sacrifice that most important condition.

In late 2013, the QTU conducted a ballot of members for industrial action if the department sought to implement a number of its "Great Teachers=Great Results" actions. One of them was the introduction of contracts for principals and deputy principals.

Over 23,500 members voted, with 92 per cent voting in favour of industrial action.

Whilst the ballot was conducted in 2013, it re-affirmed that those membership decisions still stand and will be acted on if necessary. Some principals have mused about whether or not the membership would support them on this issue. The answer was yes.

Members are opposed to contracts and job insecurity for all members and are well aware of the damaging effects of combining principal/deputy principal contracts with unreasonable key performance indicators (KPIs) on the entire education system.

In Queensland leaders continue to oppose contracts for principals and deputy principals.

In the next article we will look at the Northern Territory and see how a seemingly bright start to contracts has over time become a fairly grim reality.

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