Why state schools need 500 more teachers over four years


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Pat Byrne
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The chaos and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 last year sharply brought into focus several areas of need in the West Australian public education system.

While schools scrambled to move whole curriculums online and teachers worked overtime to minimise disruption for their students, there were some issues that just couldn't be addressed in the circumstances.

Chiefly among these was the impact on students who didn't have access to the fast internet or the devices necessary for online learning, particularly those in lower socio-economic areas.

Many teachers discovered their school's broadband barely kept up, with frozen screens and spinning coloured wheels causing endless frustration and disruption for teachers, students and their parents, who were doing their best to help their children at home.

And while WA public schools stayed open for vulnerable students and children of essential workers, there was still considerable disruption for all pupils, and the issues that COVID highlighted will follow us into the new school year.

For some students, the disruption to their education will mean they are struggling in some areas. For others, the fear and uncertainty caused by COVID may still be contributing to high anxiety and other mental health issues.

As WA children head back to classrooms next week, the State School Teachers' Union of WA is calling on our politicians to put our kids first and ensure that children are at the heart of both WA's recovery and our preparedness for any further outbreak.

We've seen in the Eastern States how quickly the situation can escalate, and while we have been extremely lucky in WA, COVID outbreaks still remain a risk.

We need our schools and our students to be prepared.

That's why our key asks of the major political parties ahead of the March election focus on more teachers, better IT access, more support for students with health issues and safe working environments for staff and pupils alike.

Students who have fallen behind will need more individual attention to assist them to catch up. This, along with snowballing enrolments in public schools and looming teacher shortages in some areas and subjects is why we are calling for 500 extra teachers to be employed over the next four years.

Central to the COVID issue, but already well known in our schools, is equitable access to technology for all schools and all students, particularly those in regional or low socio-economic areas.

Schools need improved infrastructure and students need access to fast internet and devices, and they need to know how to use them to support their learning.

It is not only the education needs of children our members are concerned about, but their mental health needs as well.

That's why we are calling for 100 FTE psychologists to be employed across the system to support every child who needs help.

We also want teachers to be given more support in how to deal with mental health issues among their students, particularly in extreme cases where they contribute to violence and other serious behavioural problems. While violence in our schools was certainly an issue before COVID, our members' experience is that it has exacerbated the issue.

The State Government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic — for example with its encouraging first steps on rejuvenating TAFE — has left WA better placed than many to recover strongly.

Giving students the extra attention, IT access and mental health supports they need to move on from the pandemic will be a crucial part of that recovery.

The emergence of COVID-19 exposed underlying problems of equity within our public education system. These need to be addressed as a matter of fairness and common sense.

Pat Byrne is State School Teachers' Union of WA president

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PAT BYRNE

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Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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