President's address to November State Council Conference



Welcome to our November State Council and Conference

This State Council will be the last one before yet another federal election. In reflecting on what I said immediately after the 2019 federal election, which was to the effect that there would be no change to school funding for at least three years, I see that in fact I was wrong. There have been changes, just not the ones we wanted.

Since May 2019, the federal government has created a number of additional funding sources for private schools to ensure that they are not in any way disadvantaged by life in general, really.

For example, the $1.2 billion Choice and Diversity Fund became operational in 2019. It was set up to ease the transition for those few private schools set to lose funding due to the implementation of the current funding model. This of course allowed the then minister, Simon Birmingham, to claim that the model was needs based. The fund provided a soft landing between now and 2029 for those schools. Following the bushfires in 2019-20 a significant amount of money was made available, from this fund, to private schools in those areas of NSW and Victoria worst affected by the fires. No money was provided to public schools in the same areas suffering the same effects.

In the lead up to this election, no mention of education funding has been made from the Liberal National Party (LNP). There is no reason to expect that there will be any change to its position, given that the federal minister has stated that the funding wars are over. This is critical for us in public education, given that the bi-lateral agreements are up for negotiation next year. If we don't get an opportunity to renegotiate from the parameters of a new funding model, public schools will be further set back for another four years.

I can't let any comment about the current federal government pass without mention of the fiasco which was Glasgow. I know it is tempting and the government would like us to see this as a petty episode from which we should just move on, but I think its important to understand what has been lost here. Australia – has, for all of my life and longer, punched above its weight in international matters. When the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights was being drafted, the drafting committee was chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt and comprised draftees from eight other countries, one of which was Australia. One of eight, at a time when participation in such an activity was highly sought after. When the UN was officially formed, early in 1945, it had 21 signatories, followed by a further 26 a few months later. Australia was part of the original 21.

Since then, irrespective of which party was in government, Australia has played an active role in the UN and has always been highly regarded internationally.

That began to change after John Howard was elected, mostly because of the criticisms by the UN, directed at Australia's actions across a number of fronts.

What we saw then was the beginning of the now familiar pattern of LNP politicians, aided and abetted by sections of the media, making loud and public criticism of anyone expressing differing views from their own. The UN did not escape that criticism and the Australian government was quite happy to stay silent during the Trump assault on the UN in all its forms,

as well as deriding international treaties and reducing its overseas aid commitments.

To be fair, I thought the Glasgow embarrassment would be confined to the net zero commitment; the one that says we don't have to do anything to reach net zero – no legislation, no planning, no funding, no change to our lives because yet to be invented technology will do it for us – this from a man who has de-funded the CSIRO and who has punished our universities, during the whole of the COVID pandemic, to the point where 40,000 lecturing and other staff have lost their jobs.

But no, as we know, it was much worse. We were subjected to an extraordinary display which ended in the PM taking that step too far in the heat of the moment– releasing a private text message in an effort to portray the French President as a liar – thereby revealing himself to the world as a person not to be trusted; a person who will use whatever means at hand to save his political skin at home.

It will take some time to rebuild that lost trust. And I see we're off to a good start – the PM said on radio this morning in response to a direct question that he has never lied in public life.

The SSTUWA always respects our members' right to choose where their vote goes. However, the complete lack of a moral compass within the current Coalition, on both an individual and a collective level, leaves one fearing for the future if it is re-elected and given a signal that its behaviour is acceptable.

Obviously, the election outcome is critical for us in public education. Continuation of the current funding model will exacerbate the huge divide which currently exists. Bilateral agreements are due to be renegotiated in 2022 for 2023 – 27. It's essential that that funding model changes.

Even more so for us in WA as, whoever wins the federal election, won't change the serious issue we have in the form of the state government's commitment to a bilateral agreement which cuts the proportion of state spending against the SRS – from 84.4 per cent in 2018 to 75 per cent in 2022. The only positive aspect of the bilateral is that private school funding was cut from 26.3 per cent to 20 per cent over the same period. However, that funding, instead of being re-directed to public schools, was lost from the education budget.

The SSTUWA has commissioned research from highly respected economist Adam Rorris who is an eastern states-based education economist.

This research will form the basis of one of the SSTUWA's most important campaigns as we move into 2022. It is critical for us to get a commitment from the state government to increase the proportion of its funding against the SRS. Adam Rorris' report is available to you and is essential reading. It demonstrates exactly the magnitude of the problem facing public schools in this state.

Adam has usefully depicted the structure of the various funding arrangements affecting public schools as a beehive, with each of the major factors briefly explained.

His key findings make for depressing reading. The four per cent reduction, while not sounding like much, equates to a loss of $327 million per annum by 2022. By 2025 it will still be in excess of $300 million per year.

That translates to approximately $1,100 per student in 2022 down to $1,030 per student in 2025. Remember, no private school suffers from this particular cut – it is solely reserved for the public system.

Senior officers and members have begun to explain these findings to politicians. It is fair to say that none has any idea of how school funding works and certainly no clue about the extent of the funding shortfall or the role of a state ALP government in this.

We will be continuing to build the awareness – with both state and federal politicians before and after the federal election and we'll keep asking for your help in this.

We have seen that governments do respond to public pressure, to union campaigns. The campaign to change wages policy is an example of that.

We had been told in 2020 of the decision to extend the $1,000 cap for a third bargaining round, with COVID being blamed this time.

In June, public sector unions committed to work together to overturn that salary cap and engaged in a public campaign to achieve that goal. At State Council we heard from representatives of a number of unions about the impact the cap was having on their members and on the public services that they provide.

Since then, our members have joined in – and are still joining in – the Alliance has stayed strong and while we have a long

road to travel, things are looking more positive than they were in June.

The SSTUWA initiated a three-pronged strategy.

Working with our partners CGM we established a strong public facing campaign using the well-known Putting Our Kids First brand to speak to the community about the inherent unfairness of the salary cap. The campaign used newspapers, radio, TV and social media to ensure the community realised the threat that uncompetitive salaries for educators posed to public education in both schools and TAFE.

We joined with our Public Sector Alliance partners to demonstrate to the government that there was a unified approach to the issue of the $1,000 salary cap – with 100,000 union members ready to work together to get it removed.

Perhaps most importantly of all we saw the way our union works when we are united in a common cause.

Thousands of members rallied behind our Give the Cap the Boot campaign.

Whether it was at District Councils, at union rep training, during visits from the Premier or at workplaces all across Western Australia, we saw our Give the Cap the Boot shirts worn proudly and headgear with the slogan The Only Cap I'll Wear could be seen from Broome to Busselton, from Kununurra to Katanning.

Members also volunteered to be part of our campaign crew – putting their hands up to visit local MPs and have constructive chats with them about the salary cap campaign and recurrent funding for schools and TAFEs in their electorates.

I have absolutely no doubt that all of those actions – plus direct lobbying by the Public Sector Alliance unions at numerous meetings – had a direct influence on the announcement from the Premier/Treasurer made as part of his budget speech on 9 September.

Since then, unions have been engaged in an intense consultation process which had face-to-face hearings as well as written submissions prepared.

Our face-to-face consultation took place on 4 October. Senior officers and three great SSTUWA members made in-person submissions to the Public Sector Wages Policy Review.

On 22 October, the SSTUWA forwarded its written submission, a copy of which is on your tables, as well as the formal UnionsWA submission.

We were extremely fortunate to have Matt Burt – principal of Broome Senior High School, Melissa Gillett – a collegiate principal/substantive secondary principal in the metro area and Leah Boeheme – principal of Quairading District High School, to join us in addressing the review.

Their knowledge of the day-to-day impact on staff of the suppression of their wages made a clear impact with the review team as did member comments such as:

"I've been teaching for almost five years now. Ever since I've started, there has been a cap of $1,000 pay increase per year for teachers. This represents a net pay decrease when considering inflation."

Our message was simple – the SSTUWA seeks a return to bargaining in a fair, reasonable and timely manner on the issue of salaries.

The SSTUWA supports the Public Sector Alliance position which is for unions to be able to seek an annual salary increase of four per cent or $2,500, whichever is the greater, with each union free to bargain in the best interests of its members. Today all of you will be asked to support that alliance at an event at Perth Town Hall. Make no mistake, the unity demonstrated through this alliance is having a significant impact on government thinking.

We do not yet know what the review will recommend. What we do know is that our collective actions were crucial in having this process pulled forward by two years.

As a union, with our agreements expiring in December, the SSTUWA is now in the vanguard of the process of getting back to a proper bargaining framework around salaries.

In parallel to the Give the Cap the Boot campaign, the SSTUWA has been engaged in negotiations around the 2021 General Agreements for schools and TAFE.

In July, we conducted a State of our Schools survey – the first we have done for some years. Unsurprisingly, it showed that teacher workload and workload-related issues were the most critical concerns for our members.

The findings were stark. Of those people who responded, 87 per cent cited workload, 60 per cent cited health and well-being and 21 per cent school violence as their greatest concerns.

A sobering 91 per cent said workload was high or very high. Stress levels were high to very high for 89 per cent of respondents

The impact on individual members, their colleagues and their families was clear.

“I’m not paid enough for the amount of hours and stress and I’m too tired to keep a healthy work and family life balance,” said one member, who captured the views of so many, so very eloquently.

Nearly one in five respondents was working over 60 hours per week, almost 35 per cent between 50 and 59 hours per week and over 30 per cent between 40 and 49 hours per week. Such burdens are unmanageable and unacceptable.

Negotiations on the General Agreements continue. Tomorrow we will consider potential options should further actions be necessary. Later today Meredith Peace will give us a briefing on what our colleagues in Victoria have been doing in the context of COVID lockdowns and a simultaneous GA campaign.

Of course, our colleagues in Victoria, as well as those in New South Wales, have faced enormous challenges as those states underwent extensive lockdowns amid outbreaks of the Delta variant of COVID-19.

Back in March 2020 we had literally hundreds of calls from anxious and angry members concerned at the gap between the safety messaging for the public and the safety messaging for schools – in particular, regarding social distancing.

In April 2020 we had 7,541 members reply to our survey on the impact of COVID-19, with 88 per cent feeling unsafe or very unsafe in their workplace.

This union argued for improved hygiene practices in place, and for teachers’ concerns to be addressed, especially by the National Cabinet who failed to consider the implications of its decisions on schools until forced to do so by the combined efforts of the AEU and IEU. Governments, eventually, attempted to tackle the issue but were frankly hopeless in doing so.

This was well before the possibility of vaccinations was even on the horizon and, perhaps naively, I thought that such a development was both urgent and would be welcome.

And now, we have a situation where vaccinations are mandated and we are in conflict with some of our members who are demanding that we protect their right not to be vaccinated. Since announcing our position on mandatory vaccinations, we have seen 65 members resign from the union. We expect some more between now and at the beginning of the school year, but that it will settle after that. Certainly, that has been the case in Vic and NSW.

Our message is clear. We support vaccination. We would prefer it wasn’t necessary to mandate it but it is – in the interests of public health. Everyone who does not have a genuine medical reason for not being vaccinated should get the vaccine. It is simply a matter of thinking about the health of our colleagues and our students.

For this reason it is disappointing to see the position taken by the PFWA in this regard – linking teacher shortages with mandatory vaccination. This is irresponsible in that the PFWA position has framed teacher shortages in this context as increasing principal workload, thus prioritising that ahead of staff and community safety; and short-sighted in that it misrepresents the real reasons for teacher shortages, thereby allowing the employer to avoid dealing with the underlying issues which have pre-dated COVID by many years.

Further, the PFWA – almost alone among Australian unions – sits on the fence regarding the question of mandating. It would rather that we educate not mandate. Well wouldn’t that be lovely.

This is a failure of leadership in a situation where principals who, as the employer’s representative at the worksite, will have to implement the government’s position in dealing with a range of different groups of people and individuals coming onto the school site. The comments of the PFWA president in the press last month were astonishing. He said that there was no point in principals and teachers being vaccinated if unvaccinated students and others were able to come onto the school site.

This demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of the reasons for vaccinations in the first place.

How can you seek support for safer workplaces in every sense, including dealing with violence and harassment, yet at the same time take a position against the best medical advice on protecting the health of all staff in schools.

If you want to seek even broader protections for teachers – as the SSTUWA does in areas such as ventilation in schools – how can you expect to be taken seriously if you stand against the health advice on vaccinations?

Let’s be clear here – this union will stand by any member who has a legitimate exemption from the Chief Health Officer and who is victimised; we will do our best to ensure that every opportunity is given to members to access vaccinations in time to meet the deadlines. However, people should not expect their fellow union members to fund legal challenges or take industrial action to support efforts to avoid vaccination.

Moving back to the salary issue, we do not yet know what the review panel will recommend. The SSTUWA has been assured that it is a genuine review, looking for authentic feedback. Well, we have an opportunity today for a further demonstration of our commitment to achieving a decent wages policy and I’m sure we’re all looking forward to that.

Whatever the outcome on salary caps, we will have plenty to work on in the General Agreement negotiations and with a forthcoming federal election. The Australian Education Union is lobbying hard to ensure Labor has a strong position on funding. Electorate information will be available outlining the benefits public schools would receive if the federal government ensured that every school was funded to 100 per cent of the SRS.

As we have learned here in WA, we can take nothing for granted, whichever side of the political divide is in government. At this stage there is no public commitment from the ALP although privately it has committed to fund at 100 per cent, though with no clarity about how that will happen – the timeline, who will be expected to pay for it, etc.

Since June we have seen an uptick in members to add to the approximately 1,200 new full fee-paying members in the past 18 months or so; we are starting to see an increase in school leader membership too, especially of deputy principals – a 15 per cent increase over the last 12 months.

A further membership drive to bring in new members to add their voices to our campaigns is underway and we’ll hear about that tomorrow.

A union is all about its members; about what they do for each other, about the collective and not the individual. We have seen that writ large in recent times. It is therefore highly appropriate that we will welcome three new life members later today. One of them, sadly, will receive that honour posthumously. All of them embody the true spirit of unionism in different ways.

It is a spirit we will need to demonstrate over the coming months. I’m confident it’s a spirit we all share and that we’re ready for potentially a long campaign.

Pat Byrne
President, SSTUWA

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