Regaining a voice for public education

SSTUWA
State School Teachers' Union of WA



By Pat Byrne
President

Teachers know best on what is happening in schools right now.

Consider this quote, which comes from one of over 400 school leaders and union reps who completed our survey Managing Teacher Relief in WA Public Schools:

"Teacher burnout is very real, resulting from the continuous system-wide demands that assume we are working under normal conditions.

With rolling waves of staff members having to isolate the reality of the situation is that we are exhausted just managing to keep the core teaching and learning operating. Add to that NAPLAN, the running of events, reporting to parents, performance management, SEN reporting, NCCR reporting etc. and you have a perfect storm for mental and emotional burn-out.

The exhausting task of finding relief, the leap of faith that they will be quality relief teachers and the risk of burn-out for these teachers are very real. Some of our most trusted relief teachers are being asked to pay back DOTT in multiple classrooms, teaching multiple year levels in a day, and the reality of that situation is that quality teaching and learning is suffering."

Teachers know all too well that COVID-19 is not the cause of the problems being faced today; the pandemic is just an exclamation mark on a cry for help that has been welling up for many years.

Teachers also know this is no temporary situation with an easy fix. Consider this quote from another survey respondent:

"We are unable to fill permanent job roles and the load is simply being shared amongst staff as internal relief. Specialist teachers are leaving without replacements, allowing whole programs to end in this country town."

Or, indeed, this one:

"The teacher shortage (and subsequent flow on of workload) has simply reduced the passion for teaching for myself and many colleagues like myself with decades of service. Burn out has increased at an unprecedented level in an attempt at maintaining the system we once had."

Red flags are flying. The warnings are clear. Those who know best realise public education is at a crossroads.

We need to listen to what our teachers and leaders are saying; we need to examine the evidence as to what is happening in our schools: what is the state of public education in WA currently? And what effect is this having on our teachers and leaders?

Most critically, how do we best support teachers and leaders at an individual level but also with an eye to the long-term health of the profession?

To address these questions, the SSTUWA has commissioned an independent review of public education in WA.

The review will be chaired by Dr Carmen Lawrence. Dr Lawrence served as WA Education Minister in the late 80s and in February 1990 became the first female Premier of an Australian state when she became WA Premier.

Subsequently, Dr Lawrence served in the Keating Federal Cabinet. Dr Lawrence was also a member of the original Gonski panel which established the Schooling Resource Standard as a fairer basis for funding school education in Australia.

In 2022 Dr Lawrence was appointed Officer of the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours for "distinguished service to the people and Parliaments of Australia and Western Australia, to conservation and to arts administration".

Dr Lawrence will be joined in the review process by fellow panel members Dr Scott Fitzgerald of Curtin University, Colin Pettit, former Commissioner for Children and Young People and Robyn White, former principal of Perth Modern School. Pamela Pollard will be the executive officer to the panel.

The review's draft terms of reference are:

1. What is the state of public education in WA currently?

Focus issues:

a. How have state government policies regarding the structure of public education since 2010 affected the operation of government schools in WA?

b. How have curriculum content, pedagogical expectations and reporting and accountability processes changed during this time?

c. What changes have occurred to the community expectations of our school leaders and teachers?

d. What has been the impact of COVID-19?

2. What has been the effect of these changes on school leaders and teachers in WA?

For example:

a. Attraction and retention challenges:

- The recruitment of new teachers to the profession.
- Appropriate career opportunities.
- The development and selection of school leaders.
- Principal and teacher morale and well-being.
- The changes to teacher and principal workloads.

b. Respect for teacher professionalism:

- The effect of current accountability mechanisms.
- The ability to apply professional judgment.
- The commercialisation of curriculum products.
- The impact of technology.

c. The impact on schools'/teachers' capacity to deliver:

- The core curriculum; and
- An equitable education provision across diverse student populations and regions.

3. How do we best respond to the needs of teachers and school leaders in addressing these issues?

The SSTUWA obviously has strong opinions on the causes of public education's current fragile state and will of course be making a submission to the panel.

The panel will take evidence from both national and international experts, as well as canvassing views from relevant stakeholder groups, including parent bodies.

Once the panel has established a process and timeline for its work, schools will be informed and staff invited to make submissions. This will involve a combination of written submissions and face-to-face meetings.

I am confident the review panel, under the leadership of Dr Lawrence, will bring to bear the highest levels of expertise and scrutiny.

This will be a review tasked with delivering workable solutions. The public system educates two-thirds of children across Australia.

Those children deserve the very best from elected leaders – a strong, viable and best quality system.

There is a sense of that mission having faltered in recent years, that the voice of teachers and principals has been lost with the imposition of business and market models of education.

This review is an opportunity for WA professionals to regain that voice.

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