The restoration of public education

By Pat Byrne
President

With Labor forming government, public education has been handed a reprieve from what may well have been an existential threat to the entire system.

Had the Morrison Government been returned there is no doubt it would have doubled down on its efforts to reduce the public education sector to a shell.

Every policy the Coalition had, from overfunding private schools, to decimating TAFE (in the eastern states in particular), refusing to give people certainty about early education, giving JobKeeper funds to private but not public universities and comments about public school teachers being duds, was designed to run down the public system. I suspect there would have been every chance under a re-elected Morrison Government of a move to school vouchers and academies.

Now, at least, we have some hope of a sympathetic ear. Repeated commitments made during the campaign to 100 per cent of Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding is a positive sign. However, we will need to ensure that the positive words are matched by actions and that the commitment to public education lasts past 6pm on polling day.

What we need now is a proper plan for the future of public education. We also need a healing in our country. Hopefully Antony Albanese's strong commitment to the Uluru Statement points us in the right direction.

We need better treatment of and for women. We need action on climate change – a core issue for so many voters, but not highlighted in the campaign as much as it should be.

The SSTUWA and AEU will have strong roles to play in this process.

Unity is our strength, and while we may have disagreements along the way, we are united in our belief in the delivery of a fully-funded public education system that provides everyone in our community the opportunity for a quality education, where students at both schools and TAFEs are taught with care and compassion.

Our members have shown extraordinary commitment to that belief since the foundation of this union 124 years ago.

Outside of wartime and the Great Depression, it might well be that the past two years have been the toughest our members have experienced. At times 2022 has perhaps been even worse than the previous two years.

Seemingly endless changes in COVID-19 guidelines and rules; teachers, leaders and lecturers expected to be educators, triage specialists for their students and a conduit to parents about isolation, all at the same time, with many school staff reduced to doing nothing more than deal with the impact of the pandemic.

If any positives emerges from these testing times, it has been the fortitude of our members. We often get notes from retiring members about how for them union membership has been about being part of something bigger, contributing to the welfare of their peers while often not actually needing union back-up themselves.

In the context of recent challenges, the SSTUWA acknowledges and thanks you, our members, for your incredible solidarity and mutual support.

What is becoming clear is we will need that unity as we move forward and try to fully understand and address the massive impact COVID-19 has had on young people.

There are obvious issues directly related to schooling and these flow onto TAFE. As just one small example, what possible help can NAPLAN tests (which as we know are already massively flawed) provide when they are carried out in schools where many of the teachers and students are not even present?

Behind the blatant impacts are all the hidden effects such as mental health and well-being, where the consequences

inevitably flow into classrooms in the form of bad behaviour and violence.

It would appear too that many students are not even in school anymore.

According to research commissioned by Save the Children Australia one in 25 Australian students dropped out of school during the pandemic.

The research says Perth had the nation's highest dropout rate, where two thirds of teenagers in the electorates of Burt, Canning and Brand "dropped, delayed or deferred studies". Across Western Australia the school dropout rate was nine per cent.

The report shows that nearly half of all teenagers spent less time studying during 2020 than they did before the pandemic, 16 per cent reported higher study-related stress and 56 per cent described their "low or very low motivation to study'' during lockdowns and home schooling.

One in eight teenagers said they had limited internet access during the pandemic, affecting their ability to study online.

On 18 May The Australian newspaper reported the following: Save the Children Australia warned that a generation of children was "losing its drive and ambition" with kids in poorer suburbs the least able to get help for mental health issues.

"The impacts of the pandemic were felt more in low socio-economic communities where they were less likely to seek help from services, and more likely to drop out of school," said acting chief executive Mat Tinkler. "That has consequences for their long-term job prospects and income levels.

"The social and economic cost of inaction is a generation of children who are more disadvantaged, disengaged and disheartened than ever before.''

That report encapsulates the need for broad-ranging examination of what we need to do to rebuild public education.

Those of us in the system know all too well that many of the structural issues – including funding, salaries, workload and well-being – were there before COVID-19 arrived. The pandemic didn't start the rot, it exposed and exacerbated it.

There is strong evidence that the broader community, especially parents, know the damage that has been done and want to see action to address the situation, with the Save the Children report suggesting only 17 per cent of parents feel governments have done enough to address the issues children have experienced, including across learning and development delays. I will have more to say about this at State Council.

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