Securing lasting change for the better

By Pat Byrne
President

The management of COVID-19 with the ever-changing advice and the daily impact on schools and TAFEs threatens to overwhelm every other aspect of our working days.

It is incredibly difficult to find a positive from a pandemic that has disrupted life so much over the past two years or so.

However, there is one truth COVID-19 underlines, that it is incumbent on us as believers in the public education system to seize and to share wherever and whenever we can; to survive such situations society needs a strong, fully funded, respected and properly staffed public service.

It is principals, teachers, lecturers, school support staff, nurses, doctors, orderlies, education assistants, police, quarantine officers, cleaners in public buildings, that have kept Western Australia going during one of the most challenging eras most of us have ever experienced.

This is despite our public sector being disparaged for decades – targeted for endless cutbacks and redundancies by people who cared more about surpluses than services.

Many of the columnists or commentators who have ranted about the health system being in decay or declaring how vital schools are to the economy have previously applauded every budget cut, every voluntary severance package, every slash and burn exercise conducted in pursuit of a AAA credit rating.

Well, the last two years have shown how wrong they were. Those cuts didn't make life better, they made it worse. They left society vulnerable, short on skills, short on staff and short on investment. It is the consequence of those cuts that we are seeing now – across the public sector.

We need to change that and we need to change that now.

We need to restore the role of educator to one that is respected, well paid and fully supported.

We need to stop taking easy options and build our own supply of educators, attracting the best intellects to the profession, paying them appropriately and freeing them from unnecessary and excessive workloads to actually teach people.

With another massive surplus looming the state government needs to sit down and work out what it wants to be remembered for.

It has the chance to create a legacy of a 100 per cent funded public education system. It can thank teachers for their courage, their dedication and commitment by reducing workloads, giving them more preparation time, reducing class sizes and addressing the stress and well-being issues which are deterring new entrants to the profession.

We heard from a former SSTUWA member recently who has turned their back on a 15-year teaching career. Burned out and stressed, they'd had enough of the workload in their regional school. The lack of system support, the absence of proper housing and decent allowances as well as student behaviour issues saw them pull the pin.

Instead, they are undertaking a new career in mining, earning $83,000 a year during the training phase and much more after that for a job with fixed hours and no external stresses.

No wonder we face a teacher shortage – one that pre-dated COVID-19 and will outlast the pandemic. As we struggle through the latest round of ever-changing rules and regulations to battle COVID-19, the workload for those left grows, the stresses increase and the brain drain picks up speed.

We all know that while COVID-19 takes the headlines and makes the job even more demanding, even when we return to

“normal” we will still be dealing with more and more unmanageable expectations.

It is imperative that governments at every level realise that “normal” won’t do. It is “normal” that has given us the current teacher shortages across the country.

We need a new paradigm, a fresh approach. Proper investment in people, real consultation with educators about workload, curriculum and myriad other issues.

2022 will see new bi-lateral funding agreements between the state and the federal government. We must ensure that what emerges from these agreements is a commitment to jointly fund at 100 per cent of the SRS.

That would mean better support structures, more specialist provision and salaries which genuinely attract high achieving students to the profession

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