Further needed to boost country teaching

During the 2021 EBA the SSTUWA won the claim to review part of the Country Teaching Program, an incentives package • to assist with the attraction and retention of teachers, school leaders and school psychologists to country schools.

This work is about to progress and has now received unexpected stimulation following the recent announcement from Education Minister Sue Ellery to staff some country schools with a one year only additional incentive; in fact, just 48 schools.

Whilst any measure to incentivise working and living in country schools should be welcomed, here are some of the obvious concerns arising from this recent • announcement:

- Equity within the same town is impacted. Primary teachers working in Kalgoorlie, Port Hedland and Broome will not receive the same financial incentives as their secondary colleagues. There are no primary schools on the list.
- This is the second time in as many months the state government has built financial inequity into pay packets.
- (The first was the introduction of the $104,000 threshold impacting higher • salary grades.)
- There are more than 50 district high schools in the state, they have all suffered with staffing attraction and retention challenges over the last few years as the staffing shortage has come into effect. Most have been ignored from this package.

Housing issues are not addressed and prevalent in most of these locations. A reduced supply of Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH) across the state now exists, security for members and their property remains a big concern in many areas, and the stories of poor maintenance and support continue. Whilst the state budget has committed funds to GROH, there appears to be little impact and no evidence of improvement at the time of writing.

There is a rental crisis in the metropolitan area. The announcement is in part hoping Perth-based teachers in rental accommodation will leave their jobs and their homes and then try to find something in 12 months when they return. Teachers who are currently buying their own homes in Perth may have tax implications if they choose to rent it out, or if they chose not to rent it out, they will have both a mortgage and rent to pay. Either option diminishes financial incentive.

If a teacher is currently Perth-based and thinking of leaving to take up this offer the right of return may not exist; it is left to a principal to make that decision which could create an unwanted and difficult position in mid- November for their own school.

The total cost of this package is $12.4 million, although there is no guaranteed long-term return to country-based members nor the communities they commit their lives to.

If the government wishes to address the staffing crisis and the inequities our country teachers and students face, a review of all schools with an appropriate budget is needed and this must be built into the agreement so that the issues are genuinely addressed.

The staffing crisis in our schools is global and may well be worse elsewhere across Australia, but this is just a comparative reference, of little value to our own situation.

Our focus must be on what we are doing for our staff and their country communities. To suggest it is worse elsewhere is just a diversion to minimise our own set of problems. We have known of the building staffing crisis facing our country and metropolitan public schools for a number of years.

The public education review the SSTUWA Executive has commissioned aims to articulate systemic issues government has allowed to build over successive years.

Hopefully this package indicates the state government is aware and now willing to do something to address the needs of the big issues facing the bush, such as staff attraction and retention, housing, workload and equity for students.

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