Alkimos College: WHS, HSRs and SSTUWA

By Hazel Doran

In a desire to bolster Alkimos College's work health and safety (WHS) systems, the college recently held an election to appoint health and safety representatives (HSRs) for all staff throughout the school.

This seemingly commonplace process was, in fact, the first of its kind, due to new provisions and improved structures within WA's WHS legislation that empower workers to decide how the HSR election takes place and how much union involvement they would like.

Active union involvement is encouraged, with union organisers allowed in the room during meetings with the person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU).

Alkimos College was the first Department of Education (DoE) school to have active involvement of the SSTUWA WHS organiser throughout every stage. Here's how it happened:

Stage one: initiation The SSTUWA representative for Alkimos Sarah Dinan got the ball rolling, contacting the union for guidance on how to begin the HSR election process.

SSTUWA's WHS organiser provided Ms Dinan with information on what was required by the school, to be shared with the school's principal, Nancy McNally.

The school then made a request to the DoE to begin negotiations over work groups. Once this request is made, as per the prescribed process outlined in the WHS Act, the DoE must begin negotiations within 14 days (if reasonably practicable to do so).

A work group generally consists of workers who perform similar roles within the workplace, with similar health and safety concerns, to be represented by one or more HSRs.

Stage two: negotiations

At Alkimos College, a meeting was held with SSTUWA and United Workers Union (UWU) WHS organisers, union worksite representatives and the school's principal to negotiate the number and types of work groups within the school and how many HSRs each group would require.

Three separate work groups were identified during this meeting. They were:

- Teaching and administrative staff covered by the School Education Act 1999 (the Act).
- Non-teaching staff.
- After-hours workers.

It was decided that one HSR would be required for the staff covered by the Act, one for the after-hours work group and two HSRs required for the non-teaching staff group.

UWU facilitated separate elections for the non-teaching and after-hours work groups, while it was agreed that the SSTUWA organiser would conduct the election process for the teaching work group.

This healthy competition encouraged candidates to take a more engaged role in the election and consider the roles and duties of an HSR in depth.

To be eligible for the position of HSR of a work group, a worker must:

- Be a member of that work group.
- Not be disqualified from being an HSR under section 65 of the WHS Act.

If the number of HSR candidates equals the number of vacancies in the work group, the election of an HSR does not need to be held and each candidate is taken to have been elected as an HSR for the work group.

Stage four: elections

Once the nomination period closed, the SSTUWA WHS organiser contacted all staff within the teaching work group, detailing the three HSR nominees and calling for staff to vote on their preferred candidate.

Voting was non-compulsory, open to all members in the work group and took place over a full calendar week. As per WA's new WHS legislation, the nominee with the highest number of votes won the election and could accept the position of HSR. To ensure transparency, the WHS organiser liaised with the school's principal throughout the entire voting process and had a senior officer of the SSTUWA check the votes.

For those who balk at the thought of having to set up an online ballot for an HSR election, never fear; the election call- out and e-voting were conducted entirely over email – no need for complicated programs or systems.

And, while this email voting was the preferred method of the workers in the teaching group, this is by no means a prescribed process. For example, UWU ran physical ballots for the HSR elections they oversaw, on the direction of the members of those work groups.

From the initial meeting calling for nominations, to the voting period and then communications of the outcome to the work group, the HSR election at Alkimos was just over two weeks long.

Ms McNally found the process, as facilitated by the SSTUWA, to be efficient and timely, with input from the WHS organiser ensuring that Alkimos staff were clear on the steps involved and kept in the loop the entire time. "I would definitely recommend to other principals that they consider the involvement of union officials in the HSR election process – it certainly made the process a lot easier," she commented.

Post-election

Once an HSR has been elected, duties begin immediately, though some powers cannot be enacted until they are properly trained. In the case of DoE schools, SSTUWA runs five-day education-specific training courses for HSRs.

An HSR for a work group holds office for three years unless they:

- Resign from the HSR role by giving the PCBU written notice.
- Stop being a worker in the work group.
- Are disqualified under section 65 of the WHS Act.
- Are removed from the position by a majority of the members of the work group.

For more information on education- specific WHS training for HSRs, visit sstuwa.org.au/training

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