Time to lift cap on teacher pay

By Pat Byrne President

Western Australia's economy is handling the impacts of COVID-19 better than anyone anticipated, and we're expecting a multi-billion dollar surplus in the next budget.

But at the same time that our economy is booming, education funding per child is falling and teachers' wages are stagnant.

Despite being in a budget position some other states could only dream of, WA is the only jurisdiction in the country that is cutting its proportion of the Schooling Resource Standard – the minimum cost of educating a child as set by the federal government – with WA funding set to fall to 95 per cent of this amount in 2022. This means WA students in public schools will each be funded by an average of $1,102 less than the minimum amount required.

The most obvious impact of this decrease in per capita funding in WA is that public schools will have less money available to spend on specialist programs and suitably qualified teachers to deliver those programs; classes on average will be larger, reducing teachers' capacity to provide individual attention to students; specialist assistance will not be available; and schools will be unable to fund essential, up to date software and hardware which facilitate online learning.

Also cause for concern is that the education system will not be immune to the looming skills shortage.

We're already seeing some early warning signs that teacher numbers are not keeping up. As reported in The West Australian, schools are already struggling to find relief teachers because they're being offered longer term contracts to fill gaps in the system, where schools cannot find enough teachers.

In addition, the numbers of people completing a secondary school teaching qualification fell by 60 per cent last year, meaning far fewer graduates will be coming into the system in the next couple of years.

At the same time, student enrolments in public schools continue to increase, meaning WA will need approximately 4,500 additional teachers over the next five years.

With many businesses expanding, and overseas migration significantly curtailed, private companies are desperately seeking workers.

We need to do everything we can to ensure WA has a quality, well-staffed, well-resourced education and training system to deliver those workers.

Increasing the use of visas to bring in overseas workers to fill positions, as organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry WA are suggesting, while filling the immediate need, is short-sighted; we need to be educating, training and upskilling our young people to ensure that we have a skilled local workforce.

To do that well, it's imperative we keep and attract the best teachers and TAFE lecturers in our schools and TAFEs. Attracting more students into TAFE through lower fees is an excellent strategy, but only if there are enough lecturers to teach them.

And to make sure of that, we need good salaries and conditions, in both schools and TAFEs.

If we don't, there is a risk that current teachers will be lured away from education by the higher wages being offered in other occupations. Teachers, like other public sector workers, reluctantly accepted the state government's $1,000 a year wage cap during uncertain times to relieve the pressure on the budget.

But I think we can all agree, the pressure is well and truly off.

As a result of the wages cap, WA teachers are now paid less than their counterparts in other states, increasing the chance of our teachers being tempted to move east for better paying positions.

WA public sector workers need to be able to return to a fair bargaining process that takes these competitive pressures and other factors into account when negotiating pay increases.

We are already seeing the beginnings of a teacher shortage. If the current wages policy continues, teacher shortages will become far worse, and our children will not get the support and skills they need for the future.

It’s time to lift the cap.

Skills Summit

The SSTUWA was one of the few individual unions present at the state government’s Skill Summit on 30 July. This gave the SSTUWA the opportunity to emphasise the key role of public education in addressing long term skill shortages in the WA economy as well as representing our fellow unions of the Public Sector Alliance.

The SSTUWA strongly endorsed the vital role state schools and TAFE play in educating 70 per cent of WA’s future workforce and reinforced the need for full and fair recurrent funding for both of these crucial sectors.

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