President's address to November State Council Conference



The following is SSTUWA President Pat Byrne's address to November 2022 State Council Conference, held Friday and Saturday, 11-12 November.

Welcome to State Council Conference.

We are at the end of yet another year which brought far more turmoil than we could have ever expected. We thought that we'd seen the worst of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021 and that we were pretty well prepared - vaccinations mostly done – for the beginning of the year.

That bubble burst in Week 1 of Term 1.

The turmoil hasn't been confined to COVID-19 or to Australia. We look around and see democracy in a fragile state in many parts of the world. This week's mid-term US elections saw several candidates saying openly, even before polling day that they would refuse to accept a result which didn't go their way; statements based not on legitimate concerns about a faulty voting system but on a simple refusal to respect the outcome of a democratic process.

In Italy we saw the election of a government openly aligned to Mussolini – running with almost identical slogans; in France, Marine Le Pen's party of the hard right secured 89 seats in parliament; the UK is a laughing stock; and the Philippines has returned to the Marcos family.

In all of this, the outcome in Brazil gives us hope, particularly for the rainforest which has been subject to unprecedented levels of destruction over the last five years and also for the saving of public education in Brazil, which has been undergoing an administrative and pedagogical transition from public management to that of the armed forces. This has been encouraged by linking funding to the establishment of 180 civilian-military schools in every state of the Brazilian federation – a goal which was to have been achieved by 2023.

While in Australia we haven't seen anything quite as extreme, the political environment is shifting as the hard right becomes bolder. The Robodebt Royal Commission is showing us every day the willingness of the previous government to ignore legal and agency advice and plough ahead in the expectation that people will put up with it.

The past nine years, it is fair to say, have provided some challenges, coinciding as they have with the presence of a federal government contemptuous of public education at best and at worst, openly hostile to its very existence.

The Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison governments demonstrated this hostility through their shameful, inequitable funding policy, through openly partisan efforts to repeatedly disrupt and slant the curriculum to reflect their own political bias and through repeated attacks on the calibre of public school teachers.

The demonstrations of obscene levels of wealth have become progressively worse over the last decade. In the last five years in NSW alone, building programs for private schools have cost $1.5 billion. Cranbrook School recently announced a five-storey upgrade costing $125 million. No longer content with a mere water polo pool, this upgrade is touted as finally

overcoming the educational disadvantage of having only a “25 metre pool that wasn’t very good for water polo”. The swimming pool there looks like it belongs in the Australian Institute of Sport!

In the space of a few months two members of the LNP cabinet, both of whom were occupying the position of federal education minister at the time, publicly undermined public education in Australia.

In March of this year, Stuart Robert, while filling in for Alan Tudge, labelled 10 per cent of public school teachers as duds and actually said that private schools would not have them even “for a second”. His ill-informed speech yet again focused on portraying teachers as the problem, giving government license to reassert control over teachers’ work through greater accountability measures which, in turn, further reduce teacher professionalism.

These comments followed those of Alan Tudge, whose interference in the review of the Australian Curriculum this time last year extended to comments about the then draft national curriculum.According to him, it presented a negative, miserable view of Australia.

He said, “We should expect our young people leaving school to have an understanding of our liberal democracy and how it is that we are one of the wealthiest, most free, most tolerant and most egalitarian countries, which millions have immigrated to. If they don’t learn this, they won’t defend it as previous generations did”.

Politicising teachers and their work in this way influences who comes into the teaching profession – why would high achieving students aspire to teaching as a profession when it is publicly denigrated by the very people who should be our champions and consistently put down by major media outlets over decades?

A study by Associate Professor, Nicole Mockler, at the University of Sydney, of media coverage of teachers and the teaching profession in Australia over the last 25 years found it to be overwhelmingly negative.

Assoc. Prof Mockler looked at more than 65,000 articles in the print media and came up with three key findings:

- The articles charted the rise of notions of teacher quality from 2006 – the Rudd-Gillard education revolution – to 2019 – the onset of COVID-19 saw a change in focus. Over that period of time the focus on quality was far more on teachers themselves rather than on teaching approaches, schools, systems, etc
- Media consistently talks about teaching as simple and common sense, implying that all decisions made by teachers are either right or wrong. “Teachers should” is a widely used phrase. No understanding of the number of decisions made by teachers every day (about 1,500) and the range of complexity of those decisions.
- Media stories were disproportionally negative; good news stories easily outnumbered by negative ones about how teachers, individually and collectively, don’t measure up. Add to that the fact that much of the criticism over a long period of time has come from the top - ministers of education – Brendan Nelson, Julie Bishop, Christopher Pyne, Simon Birmingham, the very people charged with supporting the profession instead engaging in teacher bashing. While the research didn’t say so, in my view it’s not a big step to link the change in parent attitudes towards teachers and principals to that sort of public disparagement.

Blame was effectively placed on individuals – no system responsibility.

The West Australian reported a few weeks ago the extent of the teacher shortage in WA – 175 secondary school vacancies in September; three times the number for last year and the highest number since 2006.

Primary schools had 141 vacancies compared with 19 this time last year.

Vacancies for school principals were 126 in September, compared with 11 last year at the same time. Principal vacancies have been mostly single digit figures since 2006.

We have reports of student teachers in their second and third years of initial teacher education (ITE) filling in in schools – especially regional schools.

Everyone in this room knows the consequences of these statistics; the stress being experienced by those whose job it is to get someone in front of a class; those who have to repeatedly pick up classes because there are no teachers; everyone who has to deal with disengaged students who are getting increasingly difficult because of constant changes to their routines.

Teachers also know this is not a temporary situation with an easy fix. Consider this quote from a member in response to a recent SSTUWA survey regarding teacher relief:

“We are unable to fill permanent job roles and the load is simply being shared amongst staff as internal relief. Specialist teachers are leaving without replacements, allowing whole programs to end in this country town.”

Or, indeed, this one:

"The teacher shortage (and subsequent flow on of workload) has simply reduced the passion for teaching for myself and many colleagues like myself with decades of service. Burn out has increased at an unprecedented level in an attempt at maintaining the system we once had."

While it has been particularly shocking this year, because of COVID-19, we've been seeing signs for years – in the number of people applying for principal positions – sometimes only three or four for a metro school; the numbers of teachers willing to go to the regions; the lack of department support structures we used to take for granted.

Teacher shortages are being experienced worldwide. In the UK, 10 years of increasingly difficult recruitment is now manifest in shortages in almost every subject area, meaning that more and more resources which should be going to student priorities are being diverted to advertising and recruitment costs.

In Australia increasing numbers of ITE students are being employed in classrooms – some in their first and second years of ITE. In Queensland, they have almost doubled the numbers of student teachers it employs; numbers have gone from 320 in 2021 to 600 in 2022; 782 "permission to teach" approvals have been granted in Victoria for final year ITE students.

It is not just the school sector which is experiencing these shortages – our TAFE colleges are even more vulnerable to the wider worker shortage; as qualified trades people return to their respective industries, TAFE colleges are becoming more and more desperate for lecturing staff. The result is pressure on course delivery – cutting content hours – which apart from being unethical, introduces risks in the licensed trades areas.

The minister says that recruitment strategies are in place – and they are. But the same strategies are in place in every state/territory in Australia; and in those countries we have traditionally relied upon – NZ, UK and to a lesser extent, Canada. We are all in the same boat.

In England, ITE enrolments are 36 per cent under target; teacher starting salaries are set to increase – to 30,000 pounds – next year, but these rises are not fully funded – they will need to come partially from school budgets.

This is exactly what is happening in NSW where the government is touting that 10 per cent of teachers will be eligible for an exemplary teacher package – which will be funded from existing school budgets. In Queensland, the very good public sector pay rise is also only partially funded – it is expected to ultimately be funded through redundancies.

What we do know is that politics will ensure that the minister will be able to truthfully say there is a teacher in front of every class in February next year - schools and colleges. We of course know that that will be achieved by some classes being cut; teachers teaching out of area; teachers losing internal relief; and a greater reliance on remote and online learning programs.

Which brings us to what we know COVID-19 has done – for better or for worse – fast forward the push towards remote and online learning. Expectations around remote and on-line learning have accelerated rapidly and we are already seeing references to online learning in the media as though it were almost the norm. Another one of those things that teachers "should" do.

However, emerging research is showing us that the shift to online and remote modes of teaching is causing significant stress for many teachers. Teachers across the Asia-Pacific region are reporting concerns as to:

- The number of hours they are spending with digital devices, in addition to their normal working day.
- The lack of professional development opportunities in the use of digital technologies – with teachers learning on their own, with a friend, or at their own cost, those three being the principal form of professional learning for most staff.
- Gaps in access to devices, including reliability of connections, with large numbers of teachers reporting themselves as beginners or novices in digital teaching skills.
- The impact on students of reduced face-to-face interaction both with their teachers and their fellow students.

Canadian research has also shown that the risk of burnout in teachers engaged in remote-work during the early days of the pandemic was higher in teachers than in other industry groups. Teachers involved in this study also reported a higher rate of sleep disturbance.

The combination of teacher shortages and digital teaching and learning expectations foreshadows a transformation in the way education is delivered and experienced. We are at a critical point – a quote from David Edwards, Education International general secretary, at the recent United Nations Summit on the Teaching Profession:

"Transforming education is important because the solutions to every crisis we are facing begin with education. Whether it's the climate crisis, the food security crisis, the democracy crisis or the conflict crisis,it all can be traced back to education. We need to be ambitious but it is critical that financing matches the ambitions we are now setting."

This is true for all levels of education – compulsory and post-compulsory – and there is no more important debate how we shape the digital forces around us for the benefit of public education and the public good.

We noted, in June, that the change of government gives us hope. While we are yet to see the pre-election rhetoric turned into action, especially around funding, there has been significant discussion at the national level. We'll hear some detail about that from Correna shortly.

For the first time in a decade, we have a federal minister who wants to use the bi-lateral agreements between states and territories and the federal government to solve workforce issues rather than devise more ways of making teachers more accountable.

Similarly in TAFE we see a move towards the re-introduction of national skills partnerships from a minister who genuinely understands the critical role that TAFE plays in building workplace skills across Australia.

Right now we have a fortuitous alignment of several initiatives for both schools and TAFE.

Obviously, the change of government is the first and most critical factor. That this occurred prior to new funding agreements being negotiated, through the National Schools Reform Agreements in schools and a new National Skills Reform Agreement in TAFE means that this union, through the AEU, is able to have a significant influence on what emerges.

We have opportunities here which must not be wasted. Too many times we have seen Labor governments come to power with pages of great commitments to public education only to see the pledges vanish in what is almost always a pointless exercise in pandering to powerful lobby groups. Gonski 1.0 was a classic example. What should have been a ground-breaking reform was nobbled by concessions to the private sector which rendered the proposed reform almost entirely ineffective. "No school will lose a dollar of funding" I think is what Prime Minister Gillard said at the time.

Sounds a bit like Scott Morrison saying that we support the advancement of women but not at the expense of others!

The alignment of state and federal ALP governments for three years at least is, theoretically, a good thing. However, as we know, that doesn't automatically mean good ideas or good decisions.

At this very moment we have a Western Australian Labor government with the largest majority in WA's history (and an LNP leader with a nine per cent approval rating) – coupled with its strongest ever economic balance sheet actually shrinking the percentage of funding public schools get and leaving them short of the minimum school resource standard.

It is doing this because it can. The law says it can – the Australian Education Act says it can. The ACT on the other hand, continues to fund its schools at 100 per cent – because it can.

That in many ways hurts more than the actions of people you know are ideologically opposed to equity and educational opportunities for all. These people say they are committed to public education; the ALP platform says so, yet no one bites the bullet on school funding.

The negotiations for a new NSRA will include arguments about the state/federal split of contributions to public schools – the 75 per cent, plus 20 per cent. It is the AEU position that the 20 per cent cap on the federal government portion of funding should be lifted. This was an arbitrary figure settled on by the previous government – it has no logical basis. This will be the critical debate between governments – whether the 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) will be reached by lifting the federal contribution, say to 25 per cent, or the state contribution or a combination of both.

Public sector pay has been another area of disappointment from this government.

Ignoring its own platform commitments to proper bargaining processes, in 2017 the Labor Party imposed a one size fits all pay model across the public service. This has led to a dragged-out process which could have so easily been avoided with better outcomes for all.

The government has been dragged, kicking and screaming, by the Public Sector Alliance (PSA) from its original intention to extend the $1,000 salary cap for a further two years, to three further changes of position, meaning that we have seen four different government wage positions over the bargaining period for our schools and TAFE agreements – unprecedented.

The SSTUWA achieved an outcome which has now flowed to the public sector generally.We secured an agreement around salaries that saw members get early relief from cost-of-living pressures with a guarantee members would also receive any

extra increases secured through PSA pressure.

What this has done is change the focus of bargaining for all of the Public Sector Alliance unions. They can now focus on securing improvements to conditions in the knowledge that any salary change will flow to them. As a result, PSA unions are now seeking the inclusion of “uplift” clauses in their agreements to guarantee flow ons when other public sector unions gain pay increases.

The ALP government’s persistent refusal to review the independent public school (IPS) model since its election is a significant outstanding matter for us. The Minister has been adamant from the beginning that she would not undo the IPS model because it is so popular with parents and this has continued through to the current round.

So it is not surprising that every step which has been taken since 2017 to strengthen system approaches has been resisted; the measures which were most stubbornly opposed in the last round of bargaining were the no-cost items that reduced principal autonomy – the half school development day at teachers’ discretion; the one day of curriculum support; the PM template; the statement re: the use of the curriculum support documents – these things were the most contested items because they would cut across principal autonomy.

There was no consideration of the consequences of IPS and the one-line budget on system equity; over the last decade, equity gaps have widened. Some schools are well off; others not. At this time, schools have almost half a billion dollars in school bank accounts. This is not money which is evenly distributed across schools, some of which have in excess of a million dollars in their accounts, others with nothing.

Several independent inquiries have shown IPS to have no effect on student learning; that the assumed link between school autonomy and improved student outcomes is in fact a dangerous myth – something which we knew long before its implementation in WA. We’ve now had almost 10 years for principals and teachers to have formed views based on their own experiences. Ten years to observe the consequences for both students and for staff – and in neither area have the promises which were touted at the time been delivered.

This is one of the reasons we need a broad public debate around the importance of public education to the community; about what is required to address the crisis besetting the sector in terms of workload, well-being and morale.

Enough of politicians and conservative think tanks!

We need to listen to what our teachers and leaders are saying; we need to examine the evidence as to what is happening in our schools: what is the state of public education in WA currently? And what effect is this having on our teachers and leaders?

Most critically, how do we best support teachers and leaders at an individual level but also with an eye to the long-term health of the profession?

As you know, to address these questions, the SSTUWA has commissioned an independent review of public education in WA.

The review is chaired by Dr Carmen Lawrence and will take evidence from both national and international experts, as well as canvassing views from relevant stakeholder groups, including parent bodies.

Once the panel has established a process and timeline for its work, schools will be informed and staff invited to make submissions. This will involve a combination of written submissions and face-to-face meetings.

The SSTUWA obviously has strong opinions on the causes of public education’s current fragile state and will of course be making a submission to the panel.

We have arranged for the panel to be present today and you will be meeting them this afternoon. State Council delegates will be among the first members to provide commentary to the panel. You have been given a little stimulus with a list of relevant policies, programs and directives which have been required to be implemented over the last 14-15 years.

I’m sure this will have reminded you of what has changed and what has been the impact of that for your work and for students’ learning.

I am confident the review panel, under the leadership of Dr Lawrence, will bring to bear the highest levels of expertise and scrutiny.

Most critically, this will be a review tasked with delivering workable solutions. The public system educates two-thirds of children across Australia and those children deserve the very best from our elected leaders – a strong, viable and quality system.

There is a sense of that mission having faltered in recent years, that the voice of teachers and principals has been lost with the imposition of business and market models of education. It's really important that union members have a strong say in this

We have a rare alignment of forces in front of us – in both the schools and TAFE sectors over the next 18 months.

TAFE has just concluded its GA negotiations, having made some significant and long sought after gains and with some clear and positive indicators of how to proceed into the nextround of bargaining; we have the AEU Rebuild with TAFE campaign which is aimed at influencing the national debate about the necessity of TAFE being the major vehicle for post-COVID skills development; and there is a new National Skills Agreement to be negotiated – with unions at the table and able to engage in setting the national agenda, something which has not happened for a decade.

In schools the position is similar – we have the review into public education in WA; we have the negotiations for a new bi-lateral agreement and we have another General Agreement to be done.

Most critically, what we have in both TAFE and schools at the national level is a willingness to use these platforms to resolve the problems facing public education. That in itself is incredibly rare!

I can't ever remember that happening – in fact LNP governments have been in power federally for 18 of the last 24 years and it is not a party which supports public education. It's as simple as that.

We have a huge opportunity right now and one we have to seize. As Gabby Stroud says – no-one is coming to save us – we have to do that ourselves.

And there's a lot to do: As David Edwards' comment indicates, we picked a job that's not just any job – it's one which is critical to climate science, food security, resolving conflict, democracy, the whole functioning of our society and that means we have no choice – we're here for the long haul.

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