Time for wages growth and schools funding

By Pat Byrne
President

In many ways 2021 has continued the pattern of uncertainty, anxiety and loss that we saw in 2020.

In Term 1 we had two lockdowns, flooding in the Kimberley, fires in the Perth Hills and a cyclone in the Mid West. Added to this, flooding in Albany and Denmark to round off Term 2. Teachers in these areas have experienced loss and/or damage

to their homes, not to mention their classrooms, causing significant disruption to their teaching programs.

At the national level we're seeing the Morrison Government continuing to
push an agenda of educational change which is not supported by the profession; one which promotes assessment driven curriculum and a regime of accountability; while at the same time ensuring that public schools' resourcing is not required to meet the basic level of benchmark funding needed for every student to graduate from secondary school.

As if that wasn't enough, federal parliamentarians are now debating what is to be included in our national curriculum. One Nation is at the heart of two proposals – one to ban the inclusion of critical race theory in the Australian Curriculum and the other to allow any one parent to seek court injunctions if a school failed to teach children that the holocaust might not have happened, or that climate change science is all some giant conspiracy.

Once upon a time curriculum was written by teaching professionals through a process of consultation with the profession!

We have seen, and continue to see, the WA Labor government, happily ploughing along with an inequitable funding system which benefits private schools and underfunds public schools.

The state government is also persisting with, and extending, a system of public sector wage suppression which will see all teachers and lecturers fall further behind inflation in real terms.

There is no doubt we have had some successes working with this state

government, particularly with TAFE fees and the expansion of alternative learning settings. All of that is good and should be acknowledged.

However, we also have areas of major disagreement in terms of the wages policy and schools funding, and we plan to lobby for change.

This government's wages policy has been the most severe form of wage restriction that we have seen in WA for more than 40 years.

The first iteration of this policy was particularly severe – not only a $1,000 cap, but also a cost neutral requirement for any other changes in the General Agreement. The reason given for that was the state of the coffers left by the previous government.

The second iteration was an improvement, in that there was still a $1,000 wage
cap but there was 'flexibility' around the cost neutrality requirement – and we benefitted from that.

There wasn't supposed to be a third iteration but that's what we now have
– allegedly because of COVID-19 – but now with a commitment to a review after two years and maybe a consumer price index increase depending on the review's outcome.

The state government rationalises its position as being a consequence of COVID-19.

Well, no one actually believes that, and nor should they. WA's employment figures are the best in the nation and we're being told every day that business confidence is sky high.

We saw in the last boom what happened to many areas of the public service – people left and took jobs which paid more and were less stressful.

We are already seeing teacher shortages emerge. Principals are reporting problems with getting relief teachers across the board; secondary teacher supply is at high risk due to insufficient numbers of graduating students, with a 60 per cent drop in students completing a postgraduate

teaching qualification in 2020.

Public sector wages need to grow if we are to keep our teachers in the system, while the economy itself needs wages growth to expand.

Public sector unions have committed to work together to overturn wages policy. We need to change public conversations and build understanding of why wage growth is so critical. You can read more about that on page 10.

Let's now look at school funding.

We saw in the 2018 bi-lateral agreement, an increase of 6.5 per cent in funding
for private schools from the federal government to the state government and the state Labor government then reducing its contribution to public schools,

instead of using the additional funding to strengthen the public system.

This same agreement commits the state government to gradual funding cuts
over five years, taking us from what it was under Colin Barnett (even after the 2013-14 funding cuts) 105 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard to 95 per cent – while private schools get combined federal and state support of 104 per cent.

We need to continue to campaign vigorously for proper funding for education – for at least 100 per cent of the schooling resource standard for every school and every child.

We need to unite behind the national campaign for Every School Every Child. This means spreading campaign news and urging colleagues at every opportunity to embrace and support this vital fight, to talk to politicians whenever we can.

Education is absolutely the key to developing the workforce Western Australia needs; a workforce that be the foundation for a manufacturing and services industry that keeps the state strong between booms.

United we are letting government know that what it is doing is simply wrong and we're calling it out.

It's time.

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