June State Council

By Minh Lam

Protecting public education and the rights and conditions of those who work in the field were among the key messages delivered at June State Council Conference earlier this month.

The June conference made a return after COVID-19 forced its cancellation last year, and close to 70 State Council Conference delegates attended the event at the SSTUWA's headquarters.

State Council Conference is the union's highest decision-making body. Over two days delegates participated in professional learning and discussed and determined the union's future activities.

They also heard from speakers such as SSTUWA President Pat Byrne and AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe.

Ms Byrne said the SSTUWA had achieved some wins for public education in WA in the areas of TAFE fees being frozen or reduced, expansion of Alternative Learning Settings and increased spending for capital works for education facilities.

The focus for the union currently was the campaign to remove the state government's cap on wage rises, schools funding and the start of new general agreement negotiations.

The SSTUWA has banded with some of WA's biggest unions to form the Public Sector Alliance (see story on page 10) to campaign for the end of the public sector wage cap and more support for public services.

"We need public sector wages to grow if we are to keep our teachers in the system," Ms Byrne said.

"The economy needs wages to grow if it is to grow. The current wage stagnation is actually acting as a brake on economic growth as people don't have money to spend – economists across the country are telling us that.

"With no functioning opposition, it has never been more important for public sector unions to continue to speak up loudly and remind any state government, whatever party it may be, of its core responsibilities."

One of these core responsibilities, Ms Byrne said, was to fund public education

"To build an education system that will take all of its students along, lifting results across the board without leaving people behind, we need better-paid teachers and lecturers, we need proper recurrent funding in real terms, and we need an investment philosophy that places the value of people ahead of the value of infrastructure.

"I'm here, asking you as union leaders in your workplaces, to join me to stand up and continue to fight for public education, for a fairer society."

Ms Byrne told State Council Conference that another round of General Agreement negotiations for both TAFE and schools were due to start in September this year.

"We will be using that to continue to address workload issues, safety, IT needs and class sizes as absolute priorities," she said. Ms Haythorpe told State Council Conference delegates that this year's federal budget made scant provision for schools or TAFE funding, while private schools were continuing to spend recurrent funding on capital works.

"And yet it is public schools that have got the booming student enrolment growth, public schools that have a huge backlog of infrastructure needs," she said.

"That inequity gap is equivalent to $8,000 per public school student per year since 2013.

"What the government is saying to you (is) deliver better outcomes, better student results and work harder (but) we are only going to give you 95 per cent of the funding you actually need.

"Our objectives are really clear, and that is to achieve a minimum of 100 per cent of that benchmark across public schools for Australia; to have a capital funding investment program established and to smash the 20 per cent cap on Commonwealth

funding.”

Ms Haythorpe said the Every School Every Child campaign, as well as the Rebuild with TAFE campaign, would work towards addressing funding shortfalls in public education.

“Have courage and stay the course, because this is so important for our students and it is so important for our members and for our communities,” she said.

Ms Haythorpe said other upcoming issues for public educators to deal with included NAPLAN testing and a new form of online formative assessment, known as Spindle.

“This is meant to be a tool for teachers but ... this is all about connecting system data,” she said.

Ms Haythorpe said there was a strong possibility that the contract to build and support Spindle would go to a private corporation, thus involving edu-businesses directly in curriculum production and in the collection and storage of student data. This raises questions about the ownership and security of such data.

“This is really dangerous...It is not a tool that is useful for teachers,” she said. Ms Haythorpe said one spot of good news for public education was the recent announcement of ongoing funding for universal pre-school access for children.

The government will fund pre-school access for four-year-olds for the next four years at a cost of $1.6 billion, with ongoing funding set to continue past 2025.

“This is a direct result of campaigning and pressure felt by the Morrison Government to settle this matter,” Ms Haythorpe said.

However, the conditions attached to such funding were vague and needed to be clarified urgently. She said the AEU stood ready to go into election campaigning mode as soon as the date of the next federal election was confirmed.

Ms Haythorpe thanked educators for their tireless work since the COVID-19 pandemic began. “It’s our members who have been on the frontlines, time and time and again,” she said.

“Lockdowns have not meant that all schools are closed, because it is teachers and education support staff that kept schools open for the children of essential workers even though being denied that status themselves.

“It’s our members who saw their workload escalate. Last year when we did our state of our schools survey, members told us they were working around 12 hours over and above their huge working hours, during the week trying to manage the multiple layers of remote learning.

“I want to thank you for your commitment to public education, for your commitment to your students and I want to acknowledge that this has been just an extraordinary time.”

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