Learning safety in schools a priority for all

When Minister for Education Sue Ellery launched a violence in schools policy position in 2018 there could no longer be any doubt safety in the classroom was not only a priority and shared responsibility but, perhaps more worryingly, had become such a cause for concern that ministerial intervention was now needed.

Safety in our schools and classrooms is critical to not only keep students, staff and visitors physically safe but also to help create suitable learning environments for learning to succeed.

Securing this safety also falls into line with one of the SSTUWA's strategic goals: Keep schools safe sanctuaries of learning.

So what is required at the classroom, school, network and system level to create safe learning environments?

Firstly, safety in the classroom is not a new thing but it does have dual meanings. For instance, there is the safety of students feeling comfortable in the classroom which encourages their learning, such as answering questions well, thanks to feeling safe which was actually noted by educational researchers as far back as 1897.

Then there is the need for education systems and schools to take steps to assure physical safety in the classroom, something much more modern day and the justification for the Minister's 2018 policy.

Casualised workforces, helicopter parenting, social media and other negative influences now bear down on student mental health, making the role of the teacher and that of the school challenging and complex in ways never before seen.

Creating safe learning environments through our pedagogy will lead to less disruption and at the other end of that scale, impact physical insecurity within the school grounds.

Learning and physical safety in the classroom has never been more at risk or more important than now.

If we only implement a responsive approach, we will be ignoring what we know - which could easily lead to increasing complaints and dissatisfaction and also invite criticism from neoliberal education reformers who like nothing more than the opportunity to argue for public education to become a cheaper and residualised platform.

A learning safe environment is easy to identify, there's lots going on! Students are asking questions, there is focused work underway, the teacher is not stopping or pausing lessons to manage disruptive contributions, completed work is successful and regular, a good energy is always present, staff are calm and take little leave, smiles are common, parent support is often higher in these classrooms, attendance is high and much more.

But these successful spaces are not only a consequence of students coming from "good homes" or academically select compositions or even postcodes, these are the consequence of deliberate and skilful choices by teachers that are often borne from the school's strategic agreements and a targeted professional learning regime that has clear purpose and resourcing.

Teachers have a much greater likelihood of creating and sustaining safe learning environments where their approaches are supported by school-wide policy, backed by appropriate school leadership support. They have the opportunity to self-reflect with their peers on what works, what they are doing and planning together for the next steps.

John Hattie's research supports this very point stating that teachers working together to evaluate their impact can have an effect size of 0.93. (Effect size is a measure of positive effect on student outcomes, with anything greater than 0.4 considered worthwhile doing.)

Creating positive learning frameworks is the jurisdiction of the school leadership team but is even more powerful when the classroom, student and parent voice is present.

Everyone on board, everyone in agreement and everyone clear; that is the school leadership's responsibility and challenge.

Policy and procedure must be clear – from the classroom door to the Director General's office – as to what happens to students who are physically disruptive or violent, or require support to succeed in a mainstream setting.

Some students at their current point in life cannot succeed in a classroom and systemic intervention must be immediate to minimise the interruption to the regular classroom.

Whilst positive steps have occurred since Minister Ellery's 2018 policy announcement, our system is well short of delivering a rapid response and most certainly is not delivering a system-wide approach to help classroom staff create safe learning environments.

Too often we continue to see cases drag on whilst the correct audit is completed, the part time staffer is unavailable to meet, the interagency personnel are on leave

or the system personnel are simply so overworked they can't meet for a few more weeks. All the while the disruption and risk to learning and physical safety continues.

Parent communication charters are of value to help everyone understand their rights and responsibilities, and they become critical when complex cases emerge. (The DoE is working collaboratively with the SSTUWA, redesigning a systemic approach to complaints management.)

System complaint resolution is far from consistent and this needs immediate attention if for no other reason than to provide the greatest opportunity for those at the coalface to not be distracted from attending to the needs of all the other learners who want to learn.

Prevention is better than response. It's the cost-effective approach. A coordinated, system-led approach to managing mental

health in schools through a boosted school psychology workforce is the other much needed injection to help the Minister's policy have greater likelihood of success.

The 2021 election commitment of 100 FTE of school psychologists, with 40 FTE in 2022, is most welcome.

Recognising and implementing a mental health framework for schools could enable the teacher to focus on the business of the classroom and ensure students who need specialised and expert support receive it.

By addressing mental health we minimise classroom distractions, students feel safer in the classroom and are more likely to be engaged and maximise their attention during learning.

There are currently no system approaches for students aged up to 12 years in WA, it is up to individual schools and parents to act.

The smaller the school, the less they can act. The bigger the school the more choice they have as to what they will prioritise their funds towards.

If only we were achieving the Schooling Resource Standard in WA! A system-led response to mental health should be separated from the one-line budget, with incentive available to local schools who build or enhance a shared network model.

It's arguable the primary responsibility of a principal is to identify the context of their school and deliver conditions to help learning succeed.

If they correctly assess the context, implement the right programs, resource it well and make the right appointments learning success is much more likely and a safer school will follow.

Key criteria for a safe learning environment:

- Teachers trained and skilled at creating safety in lessons.
- Inclusion and belonging strategically invoked by the teacher and across the school as part of a shared approach.
- Individual accountability for oneself and for the success of other learners being evident.

- Active participation of the highest number of learners in the classroom as a classroom goal.
- Continuously building respect for one another in the classroom as a teacher- student and student-student goal.
- Wherever possible learning being meaningful and interesting.
- Novelty and variety of instructional methods being evident.

(Source: Barrie Bennett)

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