Our climate emergency is an education emergency

By Geoff Holt
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Last year saw a succession of headline- grabbing climate disasters, from unprecedented heatwaves drying Europe's rivers to catastrophic floods

in Pakistan and Australia and the most powerful storms to hit Cuba and the USA.

Declarations from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are unequivocal; we must put an immediate halt to further coal and gas and rapidly transition to renewables.

We must also ensure eco-justice for the victims of climate change who are invariably among the world's lowest greenhouse gas emitters.

In July 2022, Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek released the State of the Environment report (2021) which had been shelved by the Morrison Government in advance of the federal election.

The last election became known as "The Climate Election" delivering a clear message to politicians that Australians want decisive action on the climate after decades of obfuscation and interference by fossil fuel lobbyists and failure by government.

The State of the Environment report makes for distressing reading, with many of our treasured natural wonders on the brink of collapse, including the Great Barrier Reef, Ningaloo Reef and the seagrass meadows of Shark Bay to name but a few.

Land clearing, over-development, the overuse of chemicals in agriculture, deforestation and climate change have driven Australia's environment and precious ecosystems to the brink.

In 2015, Australia was among 193 UN member states committing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

This commitment involved a clear undertaking to "enhance climate change education" and to be accountable for implementing:

(i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development including mainstreamed climate change education in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education and (d) student assessment.[1]

Those of us working in Western Australian public schools could be forgiven for being unaware of these undertakings and find ourselves asking why we have seen little, if any, evidence of progress in their implementation.

In June 2022 the Education and Health Standing Committee of the WA Parliament published a report following an inquiry into Western Australian schools' response to climate change which acknowledged our international obligations to provide comprehensive climate change education. It also stated that:

The Department of Education should be widely promoting and funding climate action in schools because of the many and varied co-benefits for students, staff and the community. The strong links between Aboriginal cultures, science and sustainability offer a holistic and relevant framework for student learning. Climate education also easily lends itself to practical, project-based learning and problem solving. These approaches are not only the future of education, but they engage students through their authenticity and relevance.[2]

In the context of the growing climate crisis, our clear obligations and the findings of our own parliament, it is hard to understand the "business as usual" mindset that exists in education.

One major reason for our lack of progress in implementing climate education and action at a system and school level resides in the direction that education has been headed under the influence of the private sector.

The idea of schools as businesses or corporate entities, rather than indispensable public institutions has become integral to

their governance, values, programs, curriculum and even the pedagogies which pervade our schools.

In recent years there has been an increase in some school business plans being written under the mentorship of leaders from the private sector.

They adopt work streams and business metrics for measuring performance as well as nomenclature and corporate job titles.

Power is exercised by setting the agenda for schools and even at general staff meetings. How is it that our public education system with its inclusive, egalitarian philosophical basis has come to be pervaded by neo-liberal market- based ideologies and values?

Why the bar-coding of our students as if they were commodities? Why the emphasis on teaching to the test, the endless gathering and analysis of data and the promotion and policing of teaching orthodoxy?

Teachers in some schools report being expected to teach in the exact same way using formulaic pedagogical approaches which fail to treat our students as unique individuals with diverse needs.

This leaves little room for teacher autonomy to address complex issues such as citizenship, climate change, inequality and human rights. It fails to develop problem solving and project focused approaches.

In short, it denies our students the opportunity to develop the global and sustainable competencies they so badly need for the challenges that lie ahead.

“Mentors” from fossil fuel industries deliver programs to thousands of students in WA promoting the interests and perspectives of the industry. They provide resources and programs in STEM, science and other areas.

The extent to which schools have embraced these and other private sector/philanthropic organisations is troubling from an ethical and moral perspective.

Some schools have spent almost their entire professional development budget year on year sending their teachers off to private training providers to develop so called “high impact instruction” and “teaching mastery” based around repetitious and formulaic methods with massive workload implications.

Members also report being observed and performance managed on their fidelity to such methods.

Research from Canada, another heavily resource-based economy, has analysed the influence of the fossil fuel industry in politics and wider society including their reach into schools.

This research helps explain a lack of action towards a just energy transition and coined the phrase “petro-pedagogy” which illuminates:

How teaching practices and resources work to centre, legitimise and entrench a set of beliefs relating to climate change, energy and environmentalism that align with the interests of fossil fuel industry actors.[3]

The parallels between Canada and WA are apparent in terms of alignment of the form and content of education with the interests of the fossil fuel industry.

Our current focus on public schools as independent entities gearing up to meet the needs of industry help to explain a lack of action on climate and the UN SDGs more generally.

It is to be hoped that the Making Hope Practical report, currently with the Minister for Education awaiting action, will lead to far reaching reforms in line with our Paris obligations.

The SSTUWA made detailed written and in-person representations to the WA parliament’s inquiry into school responses to climate change.

We stand ready to work with the Department of Education to ensure that our thousands of members across the state can implement Education
for Sustainable Development and Climate Change Education as per our undertakings.

This must involve significant support for teacher professional development, curriculum and assessment development

and provision for our young people to engage in climate and environmental action at school level.

They need and deserve agency to deal with the climate emergency; they must fully understand its systemic causes, its disproportionate impacts and the urgent measures necessary for its mitigation.

This is the core business of education and must come from teachers, not the fossil fuel industry or the private sector and the petro-pedagogy they promote.

Geoff Holt is a WA public school teacher and SSTUWA Executive Committee member. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the SSTUWA or AEU.

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