Regional/remote schools worst affected by teacher shortage

By Matt Jarman,
SSTUWA President

With Western Australia's public education system currently facing a teacher shortage, among other issues, the unfortunate reality is that schools in regional and remote areas are the worst affected.

While it is tough to find experienced, fully qualified teachers to teach specialist subjects in metropolitan schools, it's far more difficult to attract those people to country schools.

As a result of the shortage, the SSTUWA is aware regional schools are having to amalgamate classes so that several year groups are in one class; a challenge for an experienced teacher, let alone a graduate or new teacher who's unlikely to have access to enough support.

Many regional students are having to turn to the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) to do particular subjects which aren't available at their local school primarily due to the teacher shortage, or the school cannot fund a particular course.

And while the challenge of attracting experienced teachers to the regions is nothing new, a series of policy decisions and other factors have made it even harder for regional schools in recent times.

The introduction of the Independent Public School (IPS) model by the Barnett government was designed to give schools more independence in how they managed their budgets and staffing.

Unfortunately, one of the predictable consequences was the removal of incentives for teachers to go the regions. For example, working in a regional school for a length of time previously made teachers eligible to choose their preferences if they decided to return to the metro area. That incentive was removed as part of the IPS system.

The availability and standard of Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH) has also had a huge impact on the attraction and retention of staff in regional areas, with teachers unable to find anywhere suitable to rent. We are yet again seeing reports of property prices and rents soaring across regional WA, making the market almost inaccessible for teachers, particularly in mining towns.

This shows exactly why GROH should have been properly funded, rather than abandoned to the market. Again, a previous government started this process, but the current one has not adequately addressed the issue.

Our members also tell us their workloads are at unsustainable levels, with teachers in the regions more likely to have to take on extra administration duties due to a lack of staff in their school. Combined with the constant erosion of regional support networks, this leaves school leaders and teachers feeling isolated in more than the geographical sense.

When the base model for funding public education was developed – a system called the School Resourcing Standard – the extra needs of vast states like WA were recognised by a recommendation that the state get a minimum of 105 per cent of its SRS figure. Nowadays WA public schools get 91 per cent.

Full SRS minimum funding would equate to around $1,800 for every state school student. The impact on education would be enormous and could be targeted according to a particular school's needs – more specialist subjects (including ATAR courses) with suitably qualified teachers, smaller class sizes, better IT, more support for students with particular needs.

The challenges being faced by regional and remote schools is one of the reasons the State School Teachers' Union of WA commissioned an independent review of the public education system. The expert panel has been travelling around the state to hear directly from people in the regions about the problems they're facing in schools.

The review panel will report back to the union later this year, and we expect it will provide some recommendations on how to attract more teachers to regional schools and improve education for our regional kids.

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