Working together to secure a better future



The following is a transcript of SSTUWA President Matt Jarman's opening speech to June State Council Conference on 9 June 2023.

The following text may differ slightly to what was delivered on the day.

Good morning and welcome to June State Council 2023.

I would like to acknowledge the Honourable Sabine Winton MLA, Minister for Early Childhood Education, Child Protection, Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence and Community Services who is representing the Premier of WA; Ms Meredith Hammat MLA, Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Premier, Treasurer, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Minister for Education, Aboriginal Affairs, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs (representing the Minister for Education); Ms Correna Haythorpe, federal president of the Australian Education Union – wonderful to see you back, Correna.

Welcome to Rachel Bos from the ACTU – who you will hear from later today to share more information on the Yes vote campaign for a voice to the Australian Parliament for the world's longest living culture – to our life members and former presidents.

I am deeply honoured to be here today, speaking to you in the SSTUWA's 125th anniversary year, as your union's 29th different president. I say different, because as we all know a couple of people have come back to do the job more than once. One of them may even be here today!

Such a milestone is definitely a time for reflection, and I am very much looking forward to chatting later today with some of our former presidents about their memories of the SSTUWA's work and achievements, how our public education system once operated over the past few decades and their views to how things could or should be.

Milestones also present an opportunity to look at where we are now and to consider what may lie ahead. We have heard much talk recently about what the role of the public education system should be.

I'd like to focus initially on what public education does now, because I think that is getting a little lost.

Public schools (as of the Semester 1 2023 census) are educating 66.5 per cent of high school students. Public primary schools taught 155,510 students in Years 1-6 – that's 72 per cent.

TAFE in 2021 educated 110,922 enrolled students.

Public education produces doctors, builders, scientists, bricklayers, lawyers, plumbers, musicians, geologists, auto electricians, artists, mineworkers, firefighters, truck drivers, police, accountants, mechanics, nurses, childcare workers and yes, even a few teachers and lecturers. Oh, and some politicians. Some really good ones. I'll come back to that.

Public education develops and nurtures far more of the important contributors to our well-being, our health system, our community services and our economy than any other system.

Of course it does, because it educates almost double the amount of students than all the various non-government schools combined.

Public education persists with the pupils other systems disdain. Teachers in public schools support pupils who struggle because of background and health issues. They offer them hope, they offer them a way forward, they offer a chance to belong instead of being discarded because they might make the stats look bad.

Public educators go out into the regions and live and teach in places where deep-seated community issues sometimes reach into schools, bringing disruption and distraction.

Public education offers alternatives to those who do not choose the ATAR path and yet offers a quality of education for ATAR students that is more than a match for schools charging thousands of dollars a term (schools who still reap government funding at a higher percentage of their schooling resource standard than the state school down the road).

Public education has a magnificent story to tell – and yet that story sometimes doesn't appear to be heard. As we approach another funding campaign and EBA I am concerned public education is sliding down the political agenda.

The former premier/treasurer gave his budget speech on 11 May. He mentioned teachers once. In general terms education was mentioned towards
the end and it did feel a little like a speechwriter's afterthought.

Now I don't think that was intentional. We have three new education ministers in 2023, each of whom I am pleased to say is taking a keen interest in the public system.

Education Minister Tony Buti has been accessible to the union and listens to what we have to say.

Early Childhood Education Minister Sabine Winton, who we will hear from later, is a former Primary Extension and Challenge (PEAC) instructor and Level 3 Classroom Teacher, someone many of us know and respect. Taking responsibility for training (and TAFE) is the Honourable Simone McGurk.

Of course, we also have a new premier. Roger Cook is a leader and a man strongly committed to equity, which education is utterly crucial in delivering.

We need those voices in the corridors of power and we are confident they will speak up loudly for public education.

However, we cannot rely on people outside the SSTUWA to tell the great story of public education; to remind our leaders of what a crucial role the sector plays in our community.

The SSTUWA needs to be the loudest voice of all for public education, not just for our members, but for all educators and above all, for the two-thirds of Western Australian students who are educated in the public system.

We also need the voices of respected people and organisations across the community to spark the broad debate we need to ensure the great contribution of public educators is recognised, properly supported and above all, respected.

That is why, in June last year, your union established a review panel, chaired by Dr Carmen Lawrence and comprising Mr Colin Pettit, Dr Scott Fitzgerald and Ms Robyn White, with Ms Pamela Pollard as the executive officer.

The initial aim was to prompt discussion about the issues facing public education and seek workable solutions to those issues.

I will be honest and say we were not certain how that review would be received; if there would be community interest; if our

members would buy into the process and see value in it.

So let's first talk about member reactions. Thank you to every single member who took the time to either attend a consultation session or make a written submission, or both.

I'd like to share two posts that were made on social media by SSTUWA members about the process:

The first said: *"Thank you, independent reviewers. I got a great deal out of attending the one in Geraldton. Well attended: lots of open and honest discussion. Everyone was listened to attentively and respectfully. Some people in our profession are absolutely copping it. These individuals showed great courage when they spoke and great restraint when they were done."*

The second added: *"I recently attended the Busselton review, where I found it insightful to hear from courageous teachers in the South West region. It was evident that Dr Lawrence took the time to listen respectfully to the stories shared by attendees. However, I was saddened to see many educators feel jaded and burnt out.*

"The event reinforced the importance of creating safe spaces for open and honest dialogue, especially around difficult or sensitive topics. This approach is key in fostering constructive conversation and understanding. I hope it can have a positive impact."

So do we – especially the sentiment of fostering constructive conversation, transparency and understanding.

We can say that there was broad community interest. The review has received over 100 individual written submissions and perhaps most significantly of all, there have been additional submissions from over 25 stakeholder organisations.

You are going to hear an update from the review panel later today so I will not steal their thunder. I can say, without hesitation, that public education is valued. It is seen as a vital contributor to the Western Australian community and that people want it properly funded and they want educators respected and supported.

I am also absolutely confident that the state government knows of the reaction the review has generated and how that response is a signal that public education is seen to be an absolute priority by the WA community.

When I took on the role of senior vice president, what I noted over time was the extraordinary resilience of Pat Byrne and the rest of the team. It can sometimes seem an endless cycle of negotiation, combative discussion and hard work to take even the smallest steps forward.

This was especially true under nine years of a federal coalition government that did not just fail to disguise its loathing of public education but openly flaunted it. Never was that contempt more flagrantly displayed than in the appointment of the now-unemployed Alan Tudge and the simply awful Stuart Robert as education ministers.

From the Abbott Prime Ministership, through to Turnbull and onto Morrison, a system was put in place to deliberately sabotage the Gonski reforms and this included overfunding private schools, whilst leaving the public system floundering at well under 100 per cent of the minimum funding needed, known as the Schooling Resource Standard, or SRS.

Delegates, please keep in mind we are seeking to be funded at 100 per cent of the minimum SRS to operate our public schools in WA and that there are no private schools, as I stand here now, who are at less than 100 per cent funded of the SRS in WA. As the education economist Adam Rorris has stated simply: "the right money has gone to the wrong schools".

In terms of rhetoric, at least, the Labor federal minister for education, Jason Clare, has been a breath of fresh air.

He said a few weeks ago, and I quote: *"If you are from a poor family today, or the bush, or you're Indigenous, you are less likely to go to preschool, you are more likely to fall behind at primary school, you are less likely to finish high school and you are less likely to go to university.*

"This is our chance to do something about that. To build a better education system. And a fairer one.

"One that invests in all our children. One that gives everyone a fair go, no matter where you come from or the colour of your skin. One that doesn't hold anyone back and doesn't leave anyone behind."

We could not agree more, minister. We could not agree more.

We are grateful for Minister Clare's declaration that "we have committed to work with states and territories to get every school to 100 per cent of its fair funding levels".

What we all know as educators is that 100 per cent of the SRS would be a game changer for schools.

Such funds – around $1,800 per pupil, per school – could deliver extraordinary improvements: smaller class sizes, better

support for students facing challenges, initiatives to address the chronic teacher and school leader shortages and a series of initiatives to make teaching in the regions an attractive proposal once again.

By and large we understand the careful process being followed at federal level with expert panels and working groups, even if further delays chafe and irritate.

The next National School Reform Agreement will be absolutely crucial to the future of public education. Please minister, deliver on those pledges and get the agreement right. Two-thirds of WA students are depending on you. We are depending on you.

At state level we will not jump the gun. We want the public education review to be delivered properly and independently. We want the state government to work in full and proper consultation with educators to address the issues it raises and to make our system better and make it as strongly supported, fully funded and properly respected as the WA community desires.

One area where we do not want to see any extra funding wasted is in diverting resources out of the public system to private providers driven by profit. I've come to learn this is more of a WA phenomenon after speaking to interstate comrades. They are growing in number, they deliver programs for far-from altruistic motives and they are being supported to operate beyond the scope of the general agreement and the award. Sadly, many of these profit-driven operators tie teachers to barely understood contracts that demand more and more administration and data collection and leave teachers tethered to programs they often did not want to undertake.

At national level it appears politicians have realised that undermining the public sector and replacing it with private operators has been a huge mistake across a range of areas. Our local education leaders need to consider that and learn not to allow financially-driven providers to put profit before teachers.

There is a massive army of people who can offer advice on programs and professional development – they are called qualified teachers and they are the actual experts for the WA classroom.

Weaving in with the review and the national reform agreement processes are other core issues this year for the SSTUWA.

The obvious one is the negotiation of new general agreements for both schools and TAFE. Such was the drawn-out nature of the public sector wages campaign that the delivery of the 2021 agreements was finalised just a few months before the current process began.

However, one of the delays was for all of our members to have the agreed salary component increased each time a public sector union agreement came up for renewal. Across government and the public sector union movement we now call it "up-lift".

This ground-breaking level-up agreement was absolutely crucial in securing, not only SSTUWA members but other public sector unions, matching increases even if their agreement had been signed off.

The SSTUWA will again make a submission to the promised public sector wages policy review later this year. We will again work with our Public Sector Alliance comrades to secure the best possible outcomes for our members. It is perhaps timely to remember that until the alliance began its work, with full commitment from the SSTUWA, public sector workers faced the prospect of two more years of salary increases capped at $1,000.

Of course, salaries are just one aspect of any general agreement.

Of crucial importance to our members is the ability to do the job properly. To spend time actually teaching and lecturing, rather than being diverted onto often box-ticking administrative tasks.

There are encouraging signs that the federal government is listening to teachers' concerns.

At the same time, the state education department has formed a new group looking at ways to reduce teacher workload, with educators asked to be part of the consultation process.

We at the SSTUWA are optimistic, not the slightest bit sceptical, that this might be a sign of significant consultation around key issues.

The teacher shortage on a national scale is such that if the WA government does not match actions in other states, it could face an even greater loss of teachers here to interstate positions.

In New South Wales, the new Labor state government has promised teachers a reduction of five hours per week in administrative and compliance work, the conversion of 10,000 temporary teaching positions to permanency, a thorough, consultation-based review of student behaviour policy and a new agreement with the Commonwealth to deliver 100 per cent

of the SRS.

The WA state government will hopefully move pro-actively to offer similar support for educators, being aware the community-supported review and developments elsewhere in Australia will require similar actions here.

General Agreement negotiations will give us early indications if this message has been heard by the respective departments.

In addition to what is perhaps more obviously core SSTUWA business, this union is absolutely committed to supporting the Yes vote in the Voice to Parliament referendum.
Maybe to some it might not seem as glaringly important to the public education sector, but it absolutely is.

My words would not be adequate to convey how important the Voice is, so I refer you instead to these sentiments, penned by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee, which appeared in the April Western Teacher:

We have always known the power of building positive working relationships with Aboriginal people in our schools.

Ensuring that an Aboriginal family's aspirations are reflected in school directions and students' achievement have yielded the strongest outcomes. But governments change, and so does the political will.

This is too important to keep changing. As surmised by Thomas Mayo from that referendum working group: "we want this to be above politics, we are tired of having our lives used as a political football."

Past practices such as ASSPA Committees, School Community Partnership Agreements and Aboriginal Advisory Councils all reflect the journey we have been on in ensuring the voice of our parents is reflected in the priorities and actions of schools and systems, but all have faded away with changes of government.

Enshrining our voice in the constitution is the only way to stop this and ensure we have a voice in our affairs and move forward a reconciled nation.

We ask our members within the SSTUWA to walk with us and as educators, we are informed and accept the invitation that is at the heart of the Uluru Statement that specifically calls for a voice enshrined in the Australian Constitution.

This request has come after decades of activism by our people who have fought for a fair go and say in our own communities and in our own affairs.

We urge you to vote Yes.

I strongly urge you to read the full article, which is available in the copy of Western Teacher on your tables, is included in the agenda document and also via the State Council hub on the SSTUWA website. The impact of a yes and a no vote is in the curriculum; as educators we are critical players. I urge you to lead the discussions through the prism of the curriculum, it is your license. Every vote you influence can make a huge difference in a referendum such as this.

If the timetable looks full for the SSTUWA, I can assure you this is only a glimpse. As an organisation we are absolutely committed to delivering the best possible service to members in WA, as well as fulfilling our obligations of the national stage, where AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe, Federal Secretary Kevin Bates and the rest of team are doing such a great job with a very consultative federal Labor government.

There is so much work to be done and this is such a crucial time for public education. The right decisions at state and federal level could be transformative.

I was at Kelmscott SHS in the 1980s and a movie during that time was released, called Clockwise. Some of you may recall it. It starred John Cleese, who played, appropriately, a principal.

In it he declared "It's not the despair, I can take the despair, it's the hope I can't stand".

Well in our 125th year I think hope is an admirable sentiment. If hope is too strong then let's call it tempered optimism that, working together, we can receive the strong support, full funding and proper respect that public education and educators absolutely deserve.

The SSTUWA has a proud heritage across these 125 years; one we seek to maintain and honour with your support. This is the largest attendance at a State Council in at least a decade. I thank you for your attendance and contribution to the union and the public education sector.



By Matt Jarman

President

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