Review into public education finds teaching profession at breaking point



A review into public education in WA headed by Dr Carmen Lawrence has found the teaching profession is at breaking point, with many teachers planning to leave the sector.

However, the report also found that action on reducing workloads and class sizes, reforming the recruitment process and more support for both students and teachers would help stem the flow.

Commissioned by the State School Teachers' Union of WA, the review took more than 12 months, received over 100 submissions from both individuals and peak bodies, held community forums in 11 regional towns and 17 metro locations and conducted two statewide online sessions.

The review made 46 recommendations, including that a joint steering committee should be immediately established to oversee the implementation of the recommendations, with a focus on the most urgent changes.

The report found that teachers were navigating increasingly complex classroom environments, trying to cater for an increasing number of children with special needs and behavioural problems, which left less time for the core job of teaching.

The review recommended both class sizes and administrative tasks be reduced in order to enable teachers to manage the needs of their students and give individual attention to every student in the class.

The report also pointed out public schools had been starved of funds, with funding declining in real terms and not keeping up with the recommended minimum federal standards or the increasing demands of the school environment.

The review also found that teacher and principal workloads were at unsustainable levels, with not enough support available to help them navigate competing priorities.

Dr Lawrence said while the review panel was interested in receiving a wide range of views, it especially valued the perspectives of those at the coalface – teachers and school leaders.

“We were very concerned to hear that many teachers, particularly in disadvantaged schools, are paying a high personal price for staying in the profession,” she said.

“However, we were impressed by the dedication teachers and school leaders showed toward their students and their deep concern about the detrimental effects of some recent education policies.

“Those we spoke to had given careful thought to how schooling could be improved for both them and their students.

“Many pointed to the need for a significant increase in public school funding, together with a better distribution of those funds to help teachers narrow the achievement gaps created by socio-economic disadvantage and disability.”

Chaired by Dr Lawrence, the review panel included Dr Scott Fitzgerald, Colin Pettit, Pam Pollard and Dr Robyn White.

The report found there were many challenges with the current Independent Schools model, ranging from inequities in schools’ access to experienced staff, particularly in disadvantaged schools, the provision of system support and excessive red tape, often imposed with little or no consultation with teachers.

SSTUWA president Matt Jarman thanked the panel for the report and called for immediate action to start implementing some of the recommendations.

“The report has highlighted what our members have been telling us - teachers are facing increased workloads and stress due to the demands of managing student behaviour, higher class sizes and the increased use of Individual Learning Plans for children with ASD, ADHD, dyslexia and other neurodivergence,” he said.

“To ensure that all children can get the individual attention they need to thrive, we need a carefully considered and fully funded plan to tackle the significant issues in WA schools, that ensures we have both the teachers and the classrooms we need to make positive changes.

“With many families working longer hours to make ends meet due to the cost-of-living crisis, it has never been more important for them to be able to rely on their kids getting a quality education through the public system.

“Our union is committed to working with the government and the Department of Education to fix the public education system in this state.”

The report is being officially handed over to Education Minister Tony Buti at an event at the Perth Convention Centre on 6 November 2023.

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