President's address: November State Council Conference

The following is the full version of SSTUWA President Matt Jarman's address to November State Council Conference, held on 10-11 November.

Good morning delegates.

I look forward to today when we will hear from the Education Minister Tony Buti and Minister for Training and Workforce Development Simone McGurk, who will be speaking to us later.

Forgive me if I especially look ahead to a little ceremony we hope to have later today honouring Pat Byrne.

Thank you for your efforts in getting here early and then heading off to the Public Sector Alliance meeting – I hope you will agree with me that it was worth the effort.

I'd especially like to thank Reece Young, who spoke on our behalf with such strength and clarity. Thank you Reece.

In 2021 the SSTUWA helped form and joined an alliance of public sector unions to campaign against the state government's punitive $1,000 salary cap.

Our message was clear – we wanted to give the cap the boot and return to collective bargaining.

Today the Premier was very complimentary about the public sector. The Premier said he wants to reset the relationship. We welcome a reset. But it must be accompanied by an immediate reset of salaries and working conditions.

We need the government to tell departments to stop dragging their feet over bargaining.

We need the state government to match rhetoric with words – we need to see the state government properly show its respect to public educators as individuals and to public education as a whole.

In our written submission to the state government's public sector wages policy review we pointed to the words of New South Wales Education Minister Prue Carr, who said of her government's significant pay offer to teachers: "negotiating an outcome that demonstrates respect to teachers has always been my highest priority".

That is the message we want to hear from the Minister for Education in WA. We want that message echoed by the Minister for Training and Workforce Development. We want not just words that speak of respect but actions that actually demonstrate it.

I'd like to thank all of our members across schools and TAFEs who contributed their experiences towards the wages policy review, telling their personal stories of the impact the cost of living increases has had on their lives after the public sector was singled out to fund budget repair.

I especially thank those who attended consultation sessions in person. I am absolutely convinced that their words have been heard. We wait to see if they have been listened to.

They were troubling tales of people falling behind on rent and mortgage payments, of children missing out on their favourite activities, of people having to move back home, of having to change jobs to reduce their commute and petrol use, of not being able to fix broken hot water systems, under-insuring their belongings and having to miss out on even the fundamentals like fresh fruit and vegetables.

What an utterly unacceptable situation for the very people whose dedication is to giving others a better chance in life through education at schools and TAFEs.

Salaries are of course but one aspect of the changes and improvements we need in the schools and TAFE General Agreement negotiations.

With respect to schools we were all too aware from our own research, member feedback and from the studies carried out by others that education was at a crossroads.

What we needed was a process by which the public could be made more aware of the challenges schools, school leaders, teachers and other staff were facing.

That is why we commissioned a wide-ranging review. It is why we appointed the highly-respected Dr Carmen Lawrence as chair of a panel of equally respected people with a broad range of public sector, research, and especially, teaching experience.

It is why that panel travelled the length and breadth of WA to hear from members, peer groups and the community at large.

We wanted to start a conversation that would reach from the grassroots of the community to the higher echelons of government.

On Monday we launched the report that the review generated – *Facing the Facts – A Review of Public Education in Western Australia*. I'd like to thank members who came to the Convention Centre or joined the livestream.

You will hear from Dr Lawrence after lunch so I will not speak for too long on the review here.

However, it was of great significance that the Minister for Education Tony Buti not only attended the event but actually accepted the handover of the report personally.

The launch was attended by the current minister and the shadow minister for education, as well as a number of other senior government and opposition decision makers.

Education is well and truly on the table for community debate. It has generated over 200 mentions in the media across TV, radio, in print and online.

I can absolutely assure you that the education department is all too aware. In the wake of the public and political awareness the review process generated the department suddenly commissioned a review into red tape, and there was a new Aboriginal consultative group announced.

Now the red tape review has mysteriously vanished, despite the delivery date having passed.

I was glad to hear the minister reference that red tape report in Parliament this week. I would now urge him to release it immediately so we can compare the findings to those of Facing the Facts.

I suspect the reality is that the thoroughness of the review process and the positive, solution-oriented Facing the Facts report has left very little room for it to be dismissed or swept from sight.

Indeed, the SSTUWA will not let that happen and we have appointed Lindsay Hale, a highly-respected former teacher, principal and senior public servant to ensure that decision makers don't only read Facing the Facts, but actually face the facts and act to fix education.

We will work to make sure the reviews recommendations are acted on. We will seek to ensure that we return democracy into how the public education system works as a connected system.

We will work to stop the privatisation by stealth of the public education system. We will work to end the situations where a teacher cannot get a role because they didn't use a particular private provider's product.

We will work to return to a fair and transparent recruitment system, where quality of teaching matters, not who you know.

We will work to return to a system that provides full and proper respect, support and statewide services to school leaders, teachers and yes, students where and when it is needed.

What the review also does is focus on our goals through the Log of Claims, not just for schools, but for TAFEs as well.

It equips us with hard evidence to back our claims around a wide range of issues including the need for smaller class sizes, for a reduction in nonsense busy work that distracts from teaching and lecturing and, of course full funding.

There have been encouraging signs at federal level with regard to TAFE. The new national skills agreement has been welcomed by the AEU nationally, delivering as it does an additional $3.7 billion in Commonwealth investment along with:

- Baseline funding agreements for TAFE.

- $100 million to support and grow the TAFE teaching workforce.
- $142 million for foundational skills education and $250 million to improve course completions.
- $325 million for TAFE Centres of Excellence.
- $214 million for Closing the Gap initiatives.

Although, much of this lacks detail at this point in time.

In school terms the National School Reform Agreement review panel has concluded its deliberations.

Hopefully that is the end of the obfuscation and delays. Our message to Minister Jason Clare has been clear – only full funding of the public education sector will deliver For Every Child.

There is no room for backsliding. If the Albanese Government fails to deliver full funding of the Schooling Resource Standard then it will fail every family that has a child in public education.

It will fail every parent, every relative, of the 72 per cent of primary students and 66 per cent of secondary pupils educated in the public system.

It will fail many of its own MPs who have been supportive to the For Every Child campaign, especially here in WA, where we met with those key MPs – the very ones who delivered victory on the national stage with their wins here in WA.

Nor can the state government evade its own responsibilities. It needs to go further than sitting back if the federal government delivers 25 per cent of public education funding.

We will call upon the Cook Government to unilaterally reinstate the four per cent of public education funding that was once delivered over and above the 75 per cent state commitment but which after the last national agreement was folded into the larger amount, effectively depriving WA public schools of the extra four per cent.

The gap of four per cent has been valued in recent weeks by education economist Adam Rorris as $223 million in 2023. That is $223 million in 2023 that has not been delivered to WA public school students, staff and parents.

In total, WA public schools currently receive 91 per cent of the minimum schooling resource standard rather than the 100-107 per cent that private schools in WA are currently receiving.

That decision has seen WA public schools (but not private schools) miss out on massive amounts in funding each year since 2018, starting with a shortfall of $183,157,476 in 2018 and rising to $223,489,939 in 2023.

That’s where your funding comes from for additional support for students with additional needs, that’s where your funding comes from for smaller class sizes, that’s where your funding comes from to address inequity throughout the system.

I can assure delegates and members that politicians who do not back full funding and support public education are badly misreading the room.

In both qualitative and quantitative research undertaken in the WA community on the SSTUWA’s behalf there is clear support for fully funding public education, for reducing red tape and freeing teachers and lecturers back into classrooms and for making our schools safer workplaces.

These issues are now potentially vote changing issues.

Within Facing the Facts there is a dedicated section on Aboriginal education.

In a year when, sadly, Australian voters delivered a rebuff to the offer of reconciliation contained within the recognition of Aboriginal people in the Australian constitution there could be no better time to hear the voice of Aboriginal educators in WA and deliver the solutions they suggested to our review panel.

I am unreservedly proud of the SSTUWA’s campaign for the yes vote in the referendum. I thank and acknowledge the work of the SSTUWA’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee, and I thank SSTUWA vice president Sharmila Nagar and her team for the work they did on the Yes campaign.

I especially salute her patience with the handful of members who felt it was not the union’s place to engage in the debate. It absolutely was our place to do so and we would absolutely do so again.

It is my great honour to commit to our Aboriginal members and committee that at the SSTUWA will absolutely listen to their voices on these issues.

We have called on our members for their backing and contribution on many issues in this our 125th year.

We asked for their input on surveys on the state of schools and TAFEs on both the national and state levels.

We sought support for the referendum campaign. We have asked members to sign postcards and petitions for full funding. We've diverted them from their breaks or lunch to show their support for campaigns; we've asked for their personal stories on the cost of living, on violence in schools and to take part in the now vanished departmental consultations on red tape.

We've asked every member to contribute to the Log of Claims discussions and we've seen the TAFE Committee work exhaustively across the state on their General Agreement negotiations.

We achieve nothing without our members. Our reps. Our delegates. Our Executive. Our hard-working staff.

So I find it absolutely fitting that throughout the 125th year of the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia it has been hectic and challenging.

I'd like to repeat what I said on Monday to a room full of politicians at the Facing the Facts launch:

Education shapes individuals.

Education shapes communities.

Education shapes Western Australia.

Education shapes our nation.

Education is the key to equity.

Thank you delegates.

The above may differ slightly to delivery on the day.

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By Matt Jarman
President

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