Regional plan needs real consultation



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The State School Teachers' Union of WA (SSTUWA) welcomes full and proper consultation on any new regional education strategy – and the key words here are full and proper.

There is a form of consultation that experts call DAD. That acronym means decide and defend. What it really means is consultation that isn't in any sense consultative – a body puts out a plan then holds sessions with no intention of changing that plan, no matter what the feedback.

The issues around regional and rural education in Western Australia are serious and demand much more than that.

As SSTUWA President Matt Jarman said when the state government announced it would begin consultation on a new framework for the delivery of education in regional and remote areas, the union looked forward to having the chance to contribute to the consultation process.

Let me share the statement we supplied to the media: "We are keen to talk about all the relevant issues, including attraction and retention of teachers in remote and rural areas and the need to supply modern, secure and reasonably priced Government Regional Officer Housing," he (Matt Jarman) said.

"The *Facing the Facts* report commissioned by the SSTUWA and headed by Dr Carmen Lawrence found that the centralisation of services has not met the needs of schools for administration and educational support.

"It also found that teachers and school leaders prefer well-resourced local services over centralised services to support schools as they are seen as more responsive and useful."

The simple fact is that regional and rural educators were among those most affected by the massive education cuts foisted upon the system by the Barnett Government and sadly reinforced during Labor's first term.

The previous system was not perfect, systems rarely are, but the forced centralisation of services, which was exacerbated even further in 2016, has made things far, far worse.

Now apparently this needs to be reviewed. We agree.

Community research commissioned by the SSTUWA found that 47 per cent of regional respondents thought education quality had become worse over the past five years; 59 per cent said there was not enough funding and 78 per cent want class sizes reduced.

The public knows these issues exist because they see their effects every day.

We need a return to locally provided support services. We need working conditions that encourage people to regional and rural areas, to stay long-term if they wish and to be able to teach elsewhere with fair and competitive selection processes if they want to move on.

We need secure, modern, affordable local housing options. We need targeted funding for the areas that need it most.

We need to be creative and look at schools as hubs that serve as the base for a wide range of services to support educators, students and communities.

We need a proper, well thought out plan. As *Facing the Facts* said: "The WA Department of Education should redesign support services to ensure they are more accessible, more responsive to local needs and better resourced to support schools' administrative and education needs."

It's that simple. Educators and communities are best placed to advise what works and what doesn't. The SSTUWA and its members stand ready to help but it needs to be a genuine consultation process.

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