Conference unleashes ECE creativity



It is such a privilege and an honour to hold senior officer responsibility for the early childhood education (ECE) portfolio – an honour that was underlined during the recent SSTUWA ECE conference.

The conference certainly gave us plenty of reasons for optimism. Over 40 schools were represented from across the state, from as far away as Christmas Island!

With teacher shortages gripping our schools, it was wonderful to see so many ECE teachers in attendance. Special thanks to school leaders who sent multiple staff from the same school, enabling opportunities for collaboration and networking, ensuring our youngest minds benefit from this wonderful professional learning experience.

Titled Unleash Creativity and Empower Learners in Your ECE Classroom, ECE educators were treated to a variety of keynote and workshop presentations.

The morning keynote, Dr Amie Fabry shared her insights into early childhood leadership, encouraging everyone to share their knowledge generously and to not sit back and wait but to “be the leader that you need”.

Small steps lead to big changes and it is important to “cultivate change, nurture professional growth, foster collaboration and empower others”.

Attendees selected one of three workshops: *Creativity through the lens of picture books and visual literacy* by education consultant Ron Gorman; *Strategies for creating neuro-affirming ECE classrooms* by Anabelle Tannenbaum from Thriving Minds Education; and *Don’t forget the drama! Dramatic and imaginative play ideas for K-2* by Alethea Dreyer from Into the Mask Theatre and Education.

A lively and energetic afternoon keynote was delivered by Hilary Price-Keegan, director of Musical Heartbeats.

Hilary had everyone on their feet, participating in music and movement activities that could be taken straight back to the classroom and used immediately. Hilary reinforced the importance of music and how it can be incorporated across learning areas. Have you ever tried singing *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* using only the numbers one to five? It is much harder than you think, give it a try.

Our afternoon keynote was delivered by SSTUWA President Matt Jarman. In his address, Matt reinforced that the state government has recognised the vital role of ECE by giving the sector a separate ministerial portfolio – a role taken up with great enthusiasm by former teacher Sabine Winton.

We need to maintain that momentum and as Matt said in his speech, ECE members can help us in a number of ways. For example:

- Promote research on ECE, and in particular, in relation to attendance and participation, as well as on a holistic high quality ECE framework.
- Continue to investigate the causes and consequences of privatisation of ECE, with a particular emphasis on technology platforms and tools.
- Individually advocate more to improve initial education, continuous professional development and decent working conditions for ECE teachers.
- Continue to unionise ECE teachers.
- Ensure full prioritisation and integration of ECE in system and school policies, programs and activities.
- Lobby, politely, your local MPs, especially when they come visiting for assemblies.

Having spent most of my career teaching in Years 1-3, I need no convincing of the fundamental importance and critical role that early childhood educators undertake.

My challenge to our ECE membership of the SSTUWA is to help develop and build our ECE policies.

Within *Facing the Facts* – the report delivered by Dr Carmen Lawrence and her team – we have already started to shape government education policy in a positive, solution-based way. *Facing the Facts* made several recommendations related to ECE. These in turn built upon SSTUWA campaigns such as Play is Learning.

Working collectively, we can continue to ensure decision-makers understand the importance of ECE and address what is sometimes a repetitive habit of ignoring play-based learning in long-term planning for schools.

We can also push back on the “schoolification” in pre-primary and kindergarten, ensuring that this increased pressure and the pushing down of the curriculum stops.

Now is the time to get involved in assisting and guiding the future development of ECE.

Special thanks to the ECE conference committee for organising such an outstanding event. I would also like to thank and acknowledge the dedication of our Education and Training Centre team, who ensured our members and presenters were looked after and supported across the day.



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