President’s address to November State Council

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In this final edition of *Western Teacher* for the year, I want to thank all of our members for your support during a year of extremely hard work around general agreements. We have also seen the union campaigning strongly on funding and on class sizes. We are reminding all MPs of what their constituents would want most for Christmas – the gifts of full funding for public schools and the delivery of smaller class sizes.

Below you will find my full address to November State Council Conference, held on 15-16 November, looking back on a most significant year.

Delivered speech may slightly alter from this transcript.

Delegates, welcome to State Council. It has been quite a year!

If we look back 12 months we had just commenced negotiations with the school’s agreement whilst TAFE discussions had not begun. Since that time the SSTUWA has undertaken and completed two sets of negotiations for both General Agreements – one for schools and one for TAFE.

The SSTUWA has staged what the then head of UnionsWA described as the biggest union rally seen in Western Australia for more than a decade.

The SSTUWA has shared an independently commissioned report that has completely changed the conversation around public education in Western Australia.

The SSTUWA has played its role in a national campaign on schools funding that will shape the sector for maybe up to the next decade and continues to provide clear advice to government in support of the training sector.

The SSTUWA has begun a far-reaching community campaign around class sizes to address one of the most significant issues the sector faces.

The SSTUWA has delivered to all political parties two documents that offer a blueprint for schools and for TAFEs as we approach both state and federal elections.

The SSTUWA has seen its membership grow to record levels, both schools and TAFE.

I have repeatedly said SSTUWA because this organisation, our organisation, delivers because we work collectively and collaboratively.

This biannual event brings together the union's supreme decision-making body – and it is a key reason that for over 125 years the SSTUWA has been the crucial body for educators in Western Australia's public education system both in schools and in TAFE.

This is because State Council sits at the top of a democratic union that is directed by its members.

Yes, we have senior officers in day-to-day roles. Yes, we have an Executive team that meets regularly to direct the work of the union and to ensure the agreed strategies of the SSTUWA are being carried out diligently.

Far more importantly though we have a structure that gives our members a voice. This voice comes from union reps, deputy reps, women's contact officers and WHS reps. It comes through workplace branches; it comes through District Councils and above all, this State Council, which then directs your Executive and senior officers.

This is crucially important because your voice is crucially important. Members will not always agree with every collective decision or action, that is simply inevitable. But they know that those positions have been reached, not dictated from above but instead delivered by collaborative decision-making.

Such a process is absolutely fundamental for successful advocacy on behalf of members.

Collaborative action is also the absolute bedrock of fixing the issues that confront public education. This is the core, non-negotiable, belief of your union.

The only way to fix the broken parts of our system is working together – at every level, from the teacher walking, perhaps nervously, into a classroom for the first time to the school leader who has decades of experience in the role, to a lecturer delivering a new unit on a TAFE campus to those who service and support the hundreds of schools spread across this country's largest space. And of course, we need to be organised. We will make greater progress and sooner if we figure it out as one public education system.

I had reason recently to look back at the *TAFE Works* campaign of 2015. We should never forget, that while we still have many aspects to improve in TAFE workplaces, the crucial role that campaign played in saving our TAFE system from the almost irreversible damage done in other states.

We have, I believe, delivered another major success in the first year after *Facing the Facts* was delivered.

The *Facing the Facts* report identified a system imposed on public schools in 2010 as generating increased isolation of schools and said this system, along with other policy changes "has steadily increased both the intensity and complexity of workloads, lowered morale, increased burnout and created an environment in which teachers feel undervalued and disrespected."

In its inimitable style *Facing the Facts* did not stop at identifying the systemic problems; it suggested solutions. What was required, it said, was identifying the key structural changes needed to improve the functioning of the school system in WA to achieve:

- Improved educational outcomes.
- Greater educational quality.
- Equity and probity in teacher and school leader selection and promotion.
- Accountability, including the use of funds for designated purposes.
- Better access to support services and curriculum resources.

Our member-driven schools log of claims, already developed when *Facing the Facts* became public, had identified many similar issues. What the work of Dr Carmen Lawrence and her *Facing the Facts* team did was to provide deeply researched,

factual evidence that supported many of those claims. I have absolutely no doubt this was one of two crucial elements that led to so many positive gains in our new schools agreement.

One of the most moving moments of my presidency of the SSTUWA came at last November's State Council. A member, moved to tears, spoke of how *Facing the Facts* made them feel heard for the first time in many years.

That summed up for me the impact of *Facing the Facts* – a review that was a long time in the planning, in the execution and in the follow up.

Everyone involved in that process, from the voices who supported its development, to those who made submissions, those who served on and supported the panel and those who continue to drive the process forward should be absolutely proud of their work.

I can also state this report has struck a chord in the academic world which may lead the SSTUWA to new partnerships focused upon the economic impacts of poorly funded public schools and overworked teachers. Watch this space.

Our members were also heard loud and clear on 23 April. There is absolutely no doubt that the huge turnout across Western Australia, including of course the march across the Matagarup Bridge and rally at Gloucester Park was the second crucial element in shifting the government's stance on key areas of the Schools General Agreement.

The new Agreement delivered salary increases of 12 per cent over three years. Each year delivers increases above the predicted rate of inflation. For WA this is currently 2.8 per cent. While we would all have loved to fully address the way public service salaries fell behind inflation, this is a significant first step.

Members will be around $10,000 to $20,000 better off by the end of the agreement in salary terms. For many this increase will be improved by a switch to new allowances which in some locations offer a further $6,000 per annum.

Graduate teachers will be some of the best paid in Australia. Senior teachers will also see salary and workload improvements, whilst other newly introduced salary increments will apply to some school leaders.

Significant system reforms offer teachers the chance to experience new opportunities with a guaranteed right of return to their substantive positions.

Perhaps most significantly of all, there are workload reduction measures and we have successfully drawn attention to the matter of workload for the next three years.

Key areas of improvement will address professional learning, documented plans, compliance expectations, complex behaviour and classroom support.

There are positive first steps to manage class size issues including:

- Improved classroom support and small group tuition to 13,000 students in 350 schools.
- Clear instructions to school leaders that they will provide additional support to teachers asked to manage oversize classes and that they must take into account the number and proportion of students on individual plans when providing that support.
- An additional 64 FTEs to be engaged as complex behaviour support coordinators across 192 schools.
- A direction to apply student documented plans only in specific circumstances.
- Professional learning will include employee choice, as well as required online professional learning to be completed for the purposes of legislative and system requirements only.
- A new Workload Ministerial Taskforce, which will include the SSTUWA and which will report directly to the Minister for Education.
- Long service leave: Access to pro rata long service leave during the first accrual period after completion of seven years continuous service.

No agreement solves all issues. We know that there are some members disappointed in specific outcomes. Those issues are not forgotten.

However, given the improvements secured in managing workload, the ability of staff to take up opportunities in other areas of the state and changes to address recruitment of staff, I feel this agreement may well be seen as the time when we began the dismantling of a system imposed in 2010 that did untold damage to public education in Western Australia.

So we might need to prepare for a long goodbye, but it will be farewell to IPS.

The Schools GA is not the only success for the SSTUWA. The activism of the TAFE Committee and TAFE members uniting behind various actions also secured an agreement that will serve members well, with key wins including:

- Wage increases of five per cent (from 15 December 2023), four per cent (from 15 December 2024) and three per cent (from 15 December 2025).
- New Grade 9.
- Fifty more Advanced Industry Lecturers.
- A pool of $500,000 per annum to support lecturers earning teaching qualifications.
- A $200 subsidy for industry tickets, certificates and licences.
- Additional travel concessions for lecturers in the Pilbara, Kimberley, Goldfields, Carnarvon and Exmouth.
- Increased country incentive allowances.

Our road to achieving our goals is one in which collaboration across all levels is key.

We need to ignore those who would divide the teaching profession into managers and workers. We are all educators, first and foremost. For example, administration is a vital role, but administrator is not a job title for professional educators. We all believe in the power of public education. That is our greatest strength and some might argue, our superpower.

We need to note how some who claim to have the public school system's interests at heart instead resort to obfuscation and sometimes abuse. Happy to grab credit for the work of others, desperate to divide. What we don't need to do is let them distract us from our path and our purpose.

Every member is important to us, from those joining us while studying, right through to those who stay in touch through the Retired Teachers' Association. All are valued by the SSTUWA.

That is why the SSTUWA is offering targeted professional development opportunities to every member.

From new educators to the most experienced principals, through HoDs, HOLAs and school leaders, the SSTUWA knows that an approach which encourages respect for colleagues and empathy with the challenges faced by different levels is the way forward to a better system in public education.

It is why we unreservedly support avenues for people to experience new challenges, whilst having the safety net of a return to their substantive position.

It is why we absolutely endorse fair and competitive recruitment policies that do not play favourites or limit candidates because of where they work or which systems they have been using.

It is why we support equity and fairness whatever your gender preference, your sexual identity or race.

It is why this union engages in social justice campaigns outside of the education sector. Because that's what unions do – they fight for fairness. Once you favour one group of educators above another or allow one section of society to be left behind you lose that core value.

That is why the SSTUWA has bodies that represent disparate groups. I thank everyone who serves on our committees to ensure specific voices are heard and not silenced.

I think it is important that we recognise the national and international context within which the SSTUWA operates.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) has undertaken extraordinary work over the past couple of years.

There is a truism in education that the most disappointing governments are the ones you expect most from. Contrary to what some grifters will tell you, none of your union dues go to specific political parties. We are a non-affiliated union. However, it would be condescending to pretend that education unions do not expect more support for public education from Labor governments.

Far too often the supportive words in platforms and manifestos are not matched with actions.

This has sadly, been the case once again with the Albanese government when it comes to schools funding.

Encouraging belief from the Labor federal government in the importance of TAFE's contribution to the public good has, disappointingly, not been reflected in the approach to schools funding.

We have seen a series of watered-down pledges and an approach that sought to isolate state governments one by one with funding agreements that take far too long and fall far too short.

Meredith Peace from the Vic Branch of the AEU will share more of what this looks like from an eastern states, Victorian perspective later in your agenda.

The simple fact is that pre-Gonski WA was getting 100 per cent funding for public schools, plus another four per cent in additional funding for things like depreciation and SCSA.

The watered down Gonski saw a built-in drop of five per cent in the combined state plus federal contributions – so that saw 100 per cent become 95 per cent.

Then the state government was given the chance to count what used to be the extra four per cent within their 75 per cent, so the actual total fell from 95 per cent to 91 per cent.

Now we see both state and federal government trumpeting a return to full funding – 100 per cent they claim; divided into 77.5 per cent from the state and 22.5 per cent from the Commonwealth.

What they do not say is that the four per cent is still allowed to be counted towards the state government's contribution, so in reality that sum becomes 96 per cent, not the 100 per cent that is claimed. What they also fail to mention is that the four per cent fiddle only applies to public schools, not the private schools.

The end result is that public schools in WA are still hundreds of millions of dollars short of full funding, while private schools get more than they need. That this is seen as a sensible political strategy by governments when public schools educate around two thirds of all students (higher in primary years) seems extraordinary to me.

Adding to the deception is the timing of the funding – stretching out over another generation of public school students. There is a suggestion that legislation will mention only a floor of 20 per cent federal funding, not even protecting the measly extra 2.5 per cent being offered now*. *(*Legislation passed on 26 November.)*

Meanwhile we all watch on agog as we wave goodbye to $368 billion to pay for three nuclear submarines and a further $9 billion to pay for a few one-time use only missiles, which is enough by itself to fix the public school funding gap.

The AEU has been strong and forthright in demanding genuine full funding over a proper period of time. Our own members in WA have stepped up at every stage of the national campaign and we will continue to do so.

That we have to fight this battle against a government that should have a commitment to public education running through its very veins just makes it all the more disappointing.

It is, however, a fight we cannot and will not shirk.

On the international stage I was honoured to attend the Education International (EI) conference in Buenos Aries earlier this year. I am delighted that we have former president of EI, Susan Hopgood, here with us as our keynote speaker.

We have many issues to overcome in Australia and these are reflected on the global scale in areas such as the teacher shortage, funding, the rise of tech in our schools and so on.

But child labour and its brutal trade, refugees, getting children into schools, keeping teachers or union officials safe and much more have been set as an active agenda for coordinated international action.

Then we all face the sobering reality of the impact of war in areas such as Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan along with the oppression of union leaders and educators in other countries. And who knows what will become of public education in America or how Trumpism will impact our own country, especially as we run to a federal election. I know Susan will tell you more about the vital work on the global scale of EI and how the AEU and its confederate branches are fundamental to that work.

If it seems that sometimes we are always fighting, well that is probably because
we are!

We have state and federal elections looming next year, possibly very close to each other and we want education front and centre. Cost of living and housing affordability will be key issues and WA will again have a strong influence on the federal result, so we have a part to play. We have a chance and a responsibility to make sure the current government knows what we want.

Significantly, the *Target 27* campaign you have all supported so well is having an impact. Just this week, responding to a question at a Leadership Matters conference, the Premier publicly said the campaign “intuitively” made sense and when pressed if he would rule out supporting class sizes of 27, he refused to do so. Delegates, this issue is well and truly on the table. Your school-based advocacy leading up to the state election will be critical.

The Premier also said that this union, thanks to your hard work, was a good, professional union, one that he respected.

In addition to our *Target 27* campaign on class sizes, the SSTUWA has put together detailed policy documents for both schools and TAFE.

The TAFE document targets areas including:

- Expenditure and infrastructure.
- Staff attraction and retention.
- Government housing in the regions.
- Support services for students.

Based on the findings of *Facing the Facts* the schools document targets the following areas:

- Funding.
- Class sizes.
- School infrastructure.
- Staffing schools.
- Government housing.
- Support and services for students, teachers and schools.
- Aboriginal education.
- Safety in schools.
- The early years.

The SSTUWA is undertaking rigorous lobbying campaigns to ensure that not only do politicians know what the problems are that face public education but realise what the solutions are and how vital it is to make sure those fixes are applied.

Facing the Facts has gained such immense momentum as the core publication on public education that even the department’s own recent message from the new Director General (DG) listing the department’s priorities could have been lifted from the report compiled by Dr Lawrence and her team.

Indeed, I take the opportunity to welcome Jay Peckitt to the role of Director General. I look forward to working with him on the SSTUWA’s behalf as we seek to deliver the public education system WA deserves and needs. I also acknowledge the work of the outgoing DG.

Another departure I should acknowledge is that of Owen Whittle from his role as secretary of UnionsWA. The SSTUWA worked closely with Owen as he led the Public Sector Alliance campaign against public sector wage caps. Owen was also a fine and successful campaigner for workplace health and safety reforms in WA, alongside our own Joy Barrett. We wish Owen well and welcome his successor, Rikki Hendon, another proud unionist with whom we have had excellent working relations with over
the years.

As I said at the outset, 2024 has been an extraordinary year for public education in Western Australia.

2025 will be an even more significant year for public education because we are simply not yet where we want to be. We have achieved a lot through two EBAs, now we must land those measures and together we must keep public education at the forefront of public debate as we go to both state and federal elections.

I can’t get there alone, nor just with senior officers and the Executive of the SSTUWA.

We get there together.

Thank you.



By Matt Jarman
President

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