Fighting for public education and democracy



November State Council: SSTUWA life membership conferral, Graeme Repper

Public schools funding, the state of education in WA, nationally and globally and the honouring of two SSTUWA stalwarts headlined November State Council Conference for this year.

The two-day conference was held at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre last month, with more than 130 delegates meeting to review union activities and vote on our future direction.

State Council is the highest decision-making body for the SSTUWA and meets in June and November every year.

Delegates also heard from keynotes speakers Susan Hopgood, former president of Education International, AEU Victoria Branch President Meredith Peace, Early Childhood Education Minister Sabine Winton and Professor Andrew Whitehouse, who is leading autism research at UWA and the Telethon Kids Institute, on the first day.

SSTUWA President Matt Jarman, in his opening address to State Council Conference, said that it had been an extraordinary year for public education in Western Australia.

There was the 23 April Rally, the signing of the Schools and TAFE General Agreements, the *Target 27* campaign to bring maximum class sizes in WA down from 32 to 27 students, as well as the ongoing public discourse generated by the independently commissioned *Facing the Facts* report.

Membership had grown to record levels, Mr Jarman said.

“Twenty twenty-five will be an even more significant year for public education because, we are simply not yet where we want to be,” he said.

“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.”

Mr Jarman said the SSTUWA had delivered to all political parties two documents that offered a blueprint for schools and for TAFEs ahead of the dual 2025 elections.

“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,” he said.

“*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.”

For Mr Jarman’s full speech, turn to page four of this issue of Western Teacher.

Ms Hopgood (pictured below, left) said globally, the problems facing education included teacher shortages, funding, education technology (including artificial intelligence) and the refugee and child labour crisis.

This was across the backdrop of a post-pandemic world dealing with war, climate change, economic downturn and attacks of democracy.

“Progress must be fought for in the most challenging period of our lifetimes,”
she said.

“As individuals, we are often underpaid and overworked. And yes, often overwhelmed. But through our union and our allies we are never outnumbered.

“Through our union we define the notion of quality public education and the essential conditions for society to make available to every student … through our union we are elevating our profession, into the ranks of leadership into critical fights ahead of it.

“This is a fight we are having, and we know it is a fight we can win.”

Ms Peace (pictured below) shared with delegates the history of public school funding since the Gonksi review was handed down in 2011.

She said Victoria, which has so far refused to sign a funding agreement with the federal government, is currently sitting at a Student Resource Standard (SRS) of 90.43 per cent, meaning one in 10 students in the state were not being funded at the level required.

Ms Peace said even states (including WA) that had signed a funding agreement with the Commonwealth were still falling short of the 100 per cent SRS funding needed and recommended by the Gonski report.

“You can’t deliver high-quality education if you don’t actually support your staff and ensure you have qualified teachers in your schools who are provided resources they need to meet the needs of their kids,” she said.

“Every child in this country is entitled to a high-quality education. Governments should be ashamed that they are standing by and not funding our schools properly in that kind of context.”

Delegates participated in strategic planning for the SSTUWA, before hearing from Minister Winton (pictured above, right) and Dr Whitehouse, who is currently chairing a review on the School Education Act 1999 that will examine how students with disability are catered for in the school system.

Minister Winton acknowledged the work of the SSTUWA and role that it played in advancing public education in the state and advocating for its members.

She said early childhood education (ECE) played a foundational role in the schooling of students and the Cook Government

was committed to prioritising ECE by addressing the problems of teacher shortages, infrastructure upgrades, recruiting and retaining educators in the regions.

There was also an emphasis on expanding ECE services through child-parent centres, community kindy and childcare programs operating on school sites – as well as an acknowledgement of how play fits into ECE.

“There is a place for both play and a more formal approach to learning,” Minster Winton said.

“The benefits of learning through play are enhanced when … thoughtful planning sits behind a play activity.

“The benefits of a balance of play and intentional teaching are promoted in those key national documents – documents such as the Early Years Learning Framework … [and] the National Quality Standard.

“The Western Australian kindergarten curriculum guidelines have a clear focus on play experiences, along with stronger connections to the framework, to support a holistic development of kindy children and their transition into full time schooling.”

At November State Council, two long-serving union stalwarts were recognised.

The late Joy Barrett, who was the SSTUWA’s work health and safety (WHS) organiser for more than three decades, was honoured through the establishment of an annual scholarship.

The Joy Barrett Work Health and Safety Scholarship will acknowledge the exceptional work carried out by a WHS/health and safety representative on matters regarding health and safety at their workplace.

Former SSTUWA President Pat Byrne spoke in favour of the scholarship stating: “We are all safer in our workplaces today because of Joy.” Her work included the establishment of an asbestos roof replacement program for WA schools and programs that dealt with workplace violence and bullying.

“Joy was very proud of her policy work and quite rightly. She wasn’t an educator; she wasn’t a teacher by profession, but she was definitely one in practice,” Pat said.

“She had an amazing effect on teachers’ working lives in this state. We hope to continue Joy’s passion for change through the provision of this scholarship, which we hope will ensure that we continue to have advocates for [WHS] in our schools well into the future.”

Graeme Repper, who has served the SSTUWA in capacities such as Executive Committee member, union rep and State Council delegate, was bestowed with life membership of the union at November State Council Conference.

“I am obviously greatly honoured, incredibly happy and frankly embarrassed at receiving this wonderful life membership,” he said.

Always a fierce advocate for public education, environmental and social justice, Graeme paid tribute to colleagues and fellow union members who supported him and worked through differences respectfully.

“Their energy, their commitment and their enthusiasm gave me my energy, commitment and enthusiasm,” Graeme said.

“You delegates here are brilliant in dealing with difficult, different educational and industrial issues but remember do not be afraid to tackle environmental and social issues at your workforce.

“Thank you from the bottom of my heart for awarding me life membership, the pinnacle of my educational and union career.”

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