Facing the Facts about public school principalship



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In case you missed it, the executive summary of the Department of Education Agency Capability Review was released late last year.

It is now available on the Public Sector Commission website. It offers some serious criticism and calls on the department to act in three key areas:

- Exercise its system leadership role to make explicit expectations on key policy and strategy matters.

- Respond to escalating complex student needs at a system and cross government level.
- Develop a deliberate, future focused workforce strategy to address significant attraction and retention issues.

When invited to do so the SSTUWA told the reviewers:

- Priorities for the whole department need to be reduced, focused and communicated.
- The role of the teacher and the school leader needs to be reviewed and reduced to core purpose as much as possible.
- Effort and expenditure need to be coherent and strategically aligned at all levels.
- What the increased workload is needs to be identified and where it is coming from.
- A concerted effort is required to address the teacher shortage and focus on the core business of public education.
- Progress needs to be monitored, major reforms such as IPS need to be evaluated for proper diligence alone and strategic decisions need to be evidence based.
- Department support services need to be more local, accessible and responsive to need and proactively aligned to change management.
- Quality assured and evidence-based teaching resources and professional learning need to be developed and provided by the department itself at no cost to schools with greater scrutiny applied to external, profit-driven providers.

The reviewers clearly heard us – and took *Facing the Facts* on board!

Teaching and school leadership has always been hard and demanding work, but the profession is now at breaking point.

It is not just about the sheer hours of work people undertake with diligence and dedication, but the growing complexity of the workload, the way the world has changed and the way kids and families have changed.

Everyone in schools is feeling it. For principals there is a unique burden – based on the combination of professional responsibility, ethical leadership and legislation – that commits them to simultaneously lead for their students, their staff, their school community and their boss and the system.

The massive turnover in the principalship over recent years tells the story.

In *Facing the Facts*, Dr Carmen Lawrence told us that teachers and school leaders feel undervalued, disrespected and insecure; the sheer volume of work is exacerbated by growing complexity. Burnout must be addressed, and system support is needed:

“The cumulative impact of frequent policy changes, including the increased isolation of schools generated by the IPS initiative, has steadily increased both the intensity and complexity of workloads, lowered morale, increased burnout and created an environment where teachers feel undervalued and disrespected. Many teachers, particularly in disadvantaged schools, are paying a high personal price for staying in the profession.”

In U*nderstanding and Reducing the Workload of Teachers and Leaders*, Robinson and Hamilton told us that the core work of teachers and school leaders has expanded, that expectations are out of hand.

Misunderstanding, fear and over-conscientious compliance must be addressed and more system support is needed: “It is the cumulative impact and relentless nature of all the tasks and requirements that drives the problem of workload intensification.”

Over more than a decade, and under successive governments, principals have battled to lead their schools as the funding of public education has reduced and the fabric of many schools continues to unravel.

Policy change has been unrelenting and poorly supported. A culture of command and control has taken hold in the system.

Commercialisation has grown as schools desperately seek out resources and services, including professional learning, to meet the demands of the curriculum and student wellbeing.

Quality is variable, costs are prohibitive and teacher professionalism is reduced.

There is tension between those who seek to split the role of principal from all others who work in a public school and those of us who see school leadership and teaching as roles in one and the same profession.

“The profession is at breaking point and requires immediate steps to improve education delivery and morale”.

Facing the Facts: A Review of Public Education in Western Australia, p107.

Opening such a gate elsewhere around the world has led to non-qualified educators running schools or networks of schools, managerial types who relish the big title and soak themselves in self-importance but don’t understand the needs of a classroom or have the skills to deliver an educational program.

At the same time, society has been changing; parenting is changing.

Mental health issues are growing, behaviours are becoming more aggressive and violent.

Harms driven by social media are growing, and cultures of both entitlement and complaint are rife in the community.

Many principals now feel more likely to be told what to do, less likely to be properly resourced and supported to do it and more likely to cop the blame (and the shame) when there is an issue.

So much for autonomy or independence!

Reform should lift a significant burden from principals and all the staff members they lead and care about.

The one strategic direction that is consistent for all schools everywhere is the curriculum itself, this is where collective efforts should be focused. Our focus must be on looking after the people who run and deliver in our schools.

The risks to students, teachers and principals and the profession itself are too great a risk to take, we simply must take big steps to look after our people.

Thankfully, the SSTUWA is here for all its members, including principals. Principals are part of the teaching profession.

There is no reason, as some may want to claim, that the interests of teachers, principals, and indeed other school leaders, should be in conflict or even competition.

It’s time to face the fact that we are one profession and only one union represents all of us and the needs of public education in WA.

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