

Hon Sue Ellery  
Minister for Education  
13<sup>th</sup> Floor, Dumas House  
2 Havelock St  
WEST PERTH WA 6005

Dear Minister

The Principals' Federation of Western Australia (PFWA) appreciates your initiative in bringing the subject of violence in schools to the attention of the general public through your media statement on the issue. You requested a response from the various stakeholders highlighting the positive measures that might be considered by Government and the various Departments charged with the responsibility of managing the health and behaviour of members of our broader community in relation to schools and the people who work in them. Following is the PFWA response.

First and foremost, the PFWA would like to emphasise that any long term, sustainable approach to managing the issue of violence in schools must look beyond students alone. Strategies must address the behaviour of parents and other interested parties, as well as threatening and abusive behaviour via social media. Secondly, there is a serious resource implication, one that requires the commitment and support of both sides of politics, so that when governments change, ideology and election cycles do not negatively influence long term planning and intervention.

While we acknowledge the investment of time and effort that has resulted in the KOWS strategy, to properly address the problem we need to go much further. KOWS talks about what school staff can do, but we know this is a problem that can't be fixed by schools alone. Violence, and how it manifests in schools, is a societal issue - with schools responding to this reality. As the Minister has said, the whole community has to be a part of the solution, led by strong leadership from government and Parliament.

The first steps toward the development and implementation of a strategy to address violence in schools is to, first identify, then bring together, the various agencies – government and non-government – with responsibility for the health and well-being of our communities. Ministers and CEOs must come to terms with the need to take a shared responsibility for developing the solution to the problems we face. The traditional silo mentality of departments and agencies, and their jealous guardianship of their own resources, will not contribute to a solution. Instead, it often results in duplication of services and exacerbates the mounting problem. All agencies must be prepared to pool adequate human and financial resources, and work in the spirit of true collaboration so that strategies are developed to, initially target education and prevention, followed by, where necessary, consequences and correction.

We could start by examining some past strategies with a view to identifying any positive contributions they made – eg, community policing where officers were placed in high schools but were available to liaise with the feeder primaries, working proactively with students on programs that built trust and empathy; education centres (SPER?) where students demonstrating severe behaviours that put them on a pathway of continual suspension and possible exclusion, entered into full time programs followed by outreach support once they

returned to mainstream schooling. These strategies have obvious cost implications, but if government is serious about supporting schools in a proactive way, then a means to develop and implement strategies like these, based on contemporary research that is not compromised by inadequate funding, has to be found. These strategies fell by the wayside, not because they were ineffective, but because the long-term commitment and planning wasn't there to ensure their sustainability

Current Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding developed between the Education Department and other departments and agencies do not provide the levels of support to schools and students that we believe the Department of Education intended. Principals need to be confident in their knowledge that an agreement with an agency or department will result in immediate support being delivered at the point of need. Of course, this needs to happen within departments as well. For instance, within the Education Department support from Statewide Services and Schools Resourcing should not be bound up in red tape and the requirement to provide endless details that soak up the valuable time of School Psychologists, Student Services personnel and Administrative staff. These processes need to be streamlined to enhance a school's capacity to deliver appropriate programs to students in need, along with access to SSEN D and SSEN B staff. Resourcing of schools needs to be flexible and directed to the student at the point of need. Restrictive staffing practices must be loosened up and the capacity to explore other avenues encouraged.

If, however, the educative and preventative measures, the proactive strategies, do not deliver the desired result, and the violent behaviour continues, then the government should be seen to deliver real and appropriate consequences. If a student is guilty of assaulting a staff member, and the behaviour is repeated, in spite of the school being able to demonstrate it has done everything within the resources available to it, then alternative programs and placements need to be made available that allow the student to receive the support and direction that is required. The current process of re-locating a student to another mainstream school simply shifts the problem.

In the case of adults whose behaviour is violent and abusive, then the full weight of the justice system should be directed at them. It is not good enough that we see examples of Principals and their staff suffering extreme violence, only to see the offender appear in court months, sometimes years later if at all, only to be dismissed with a fine. Police and the justice system cannot downplay violence against school staff. Our school staff require the same level of protection as other public officers – police, nurses and prison officers – and offences against them should be handled the same way. The message delivered to students and adults who behave in this manner needs to be much stronger than saying "it is unacceptable". The message must be that such behaviour will not be tolerated, and that appropriate consequences will be delivered.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, and we look forward to working with all stakeholders to achieve better outcomes for our school communities.

Yours sincerely



Bevan Ripp



President

ABN: 75 019 162 710