



PRINCIPALS FEDERATION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Position Paper

“TURNING BACK THE CLOCK IS NOT THE ANSWER”

The “Facing the Facts” review into the Western Australian public-school system, commissioned by the SSTUWA, makes forty-six recommendations to the Government and Department of Education addressing the issues that the review panel has identified as major challenges confronting the public-school system in WA. The Review Panel chaired by Dr Carmen Lawrence is to be commended for its work, however, the challenges identified in the report have been well-known at Department and Government level for many years, and the recommendations seeking a return to a centralised model that is not fit for purpose in the modern world, do not align with the PFWA’s point of view.

As the report says WA public-schools continue to perform very well which is a credit to their staff and leadership. However, staffing shortages, problems with attraction and retention of teachers and school leaders, equity of resourcing, workload, frequent changes to policy and curriculum, availability of support, mental health and well-being, complex student needs and unrealistic expectations of schools and their staff are all factors which have been well-known for many years but have now compounded to the point where the health of what is recognised as an excellent public system of education, is under threat.

The PFWA is not at odds with what the report has identified but it does take issue with a number of its recommendations, particularly those that take aim at the Independent Public-School strategy (IPS) and school autonomy. This strategy, first implemented in 2008, introduced a number of mechanisms which changed the way in which public schools would operate – a one line budget, local selection of staff and a Board which is central to school governance. These initiatives have provided Principals and their school communities with greater autonomy, and by extension, greater flexibility. The capacity of a school to best address the needs of its students rests with its capacity to apply resources flexibly and equitably, and to employ staff with the skillset suited to the context. While the IPS strategy is not a perfect model, it is a better fit for purpose in modern schools and communities than its centralised predecessor. What is required is a greater commitment from Government to provide support for schools in those areas over which they have little or no control.

Unfortunately, by placing an emphasis on a return to a centralised approach the report deflects attention away from what Government can do to support the public system better. Linking the IPS strategy and current problems facing public education in WA is clouding what is at the heart of the crisis faced by the teaching profession. The staffing shortage is not a result of IPS, it is the result of a systemic failure to attract people to the profession and then retain them. It is not as simple as finding enough bodies to fill the available vacancies. It is about attraction of people into the profession and providing them with the opportunity to pursue a career that is fulfilling. This will involve a serious investigation of secondary pathways into teaching and a review of teacher training itself. The interface between the employer (Department of Education) and the universities needs to be examined with a view to improving the quality of the pre-service training model, with a greater emphasis placed on increased exposure of trainee teachers to classrooms and experienced practitioners. Schools will look after the rest given a reliable supply of well-trained teachers.

A centralised model will not fix the growing problem of attracting and retaining quality school leaders. School leadership is charged with the responsibility to set the conditions in schools in which staff, students and the broader community thrive. It is an increasingly complex role that requires a varied and complex skillset which is not understood by anyone who has never enjoyed the experience. The lack of emphasis in the report's recommendations on the importance of quality school leadership, and attracting skilled practitioners to the role, detracts from its effectiveness as a guide to Government and Department.

In delivering its forty-six recommendations the report also fails to acknowledge significant national documents such as the Productivity Commission Report which has informed the National Schools Reform Agenda. This Report highlights that, for schools to be responsive to the needs of their individual communities and their unique contexts, Principals need to provide innovative leadership which requires a degree of autonomy and flexibility. Returning to a one-size fits all centralised model, upon which a number of the Lawrence Report's recommendations focus, is effectively turning back the clock. That scenario is neither desirable for the system, school communities or school leaders.