

## Your Workplace Contacts

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The tumultuous years of Terry Metherell's control of the Education Ministry sowed the seeds of activism and fairness in a young Luke Di Salvia.

As the son of two teachers, "from a young age, my folks instilled in me a love of learning, a curiosity for science and an enduring sense of right and wrong, they also gave me my first real memory of unionism during the tumultuous Greiner/Metherell years of the late '80s," Mr Di Salvia said.

A Science/Physics teacher at Leeton High School for almost 20 years, he is the Federation Representative there and "it's fair to say the seeds of activism that were indirectly planted by my folks during the Metherell years" didn't take long to sprout and grow.



"As a 23 year old 'fresher', I understood fully the need for action and resistance and was even then piecing together the link between teacher conditions, morale, wellbeing, collective goodwill and the direct link to, and profound impact on, teaching and student learning," he said.

In late 2005, he relieved the then-Fed Rep while he was on leave and on his return was happy for Mr Di Salvia to continue in the role, and has been re-elected ever since.

"During my time as Fed Rep I have provided support and advice to a multitude of teachers at all career stages regarding such things as leave entitlements, staffing procedures, accreditation and legal issues," he said.

"I have represented the staff on merit selection panels and have worked closely with senior executive to ensure that new timetables, daily structures and initiatives, such as DEAR [Drop everything and read] and PBL [project-based learning], comply with industrial awards and provide equity and equality for all.

"I have acted as the voice for those staff in a position where they are reluctant to use theirs or have felt they are not being heard."

Like many other schools, one of the biggest issues that Leeton High struggles with is a shortage of day-to-day casual teachers to adequately cover staff absences.

"Over the years this shortage has affected teacher workload and professional learning opportunities and, as such, teaching and learning has suffered," Mr Di Salvia said.

"Prior to about 2009, it was custom and practice at Leeton High for the staff to vote in favour at the commencement of each year to a hybrid 'extras' agreement that centrally allocated up to six extras per term per staff member to cover absent colleagues irrespective of the reason for the absence and with little to no advance notice.

“How we agreed to and endured this agreement for many years I do not know. We were doing ourselves no favours by covering up our shortage of casual teachers and morale and goodwill was being adversely affected.

“A motion was passed at a Federation meeting on the first day of the school year to perform only three extras per term for excursions only with at least a day’s notice. However, now that we had ceased to ‘voluntarily’ cover all absences, the full extent of our casual shortage was highlighted.

“After battling through a tough year in 2015, the situation came to a head late in term 2, 2016, when the tally of uncovered classes had already exceeded 350 and it became the norm, rather than the exception, for classes of absent colleagues to be minimally supervised in the quadrangle by a casual teacher with up to three classes at any given time. It was clear action was needed.

“Federation membership endorsed a resolution calling upon the Department to appoint a temporary teacher external to our pool of casual teachers to help alleviate the disadvantage this was placing on the educational opportunities of our students and the increased and unnecessary pressure it was putting on teacher workload.

“After several meetings and negotiations between myself, the local Director and principal, this occurred and immediately helped to alleviate the problem.

“I implore any schools that have a similar problem to speak out and create the necessary waves. No favours are being done to students or staff by volunteering to do additional extras to cover the staffing shortfall and sweeping the problem under the proverbial carpet, it actually makes the problem far worse.”

A keen musician, Mr Di Salvia’s band recently marked their 20th anniversary with a local gig, but not being selected in Triple J’s Unearthed competition still pains.

“Music, and in my opinion punk rock, is a fantastic outlet and panacea to salvage goodness from an otherwise bad day,” he said. “My original band tHe pHIöggs consisted of three Leeton High School Science teachers and an IT dude united by a common love of the Ramones and beer.”

— Scott Coomber