



Election setback strengthens resolve to keep fighting

June 14, 2019

Visitors to the Federation building in Mary Street, Surry Hills, will see black and white historical photographs scrolling on a screen in the front foyer. One of the images, from 1962, is of a small group of young NSW Teachers Federation members marching from Spencer Street Station in Melbourne to a national protest meeting calling on federal funds for public schools. They had travelled overnight by train from Sydney and were joining delegates from across Australia in the Royal Exhibition Building. In the centre of the picture is a 32-year-old teacher wearing a suit and tie holding a banner saying, "We're here for federal funds!"

Now a resident on the NSW south coast, that young teacher, Dave, will turn 89 this year. He and his partner, also a retired teacher, have a Fair Funding Now! corflute on their front fence near where I live.

As I went to vote in the federal election on May 18, I caught up with Dave, who was handing out information at a local booth in support of fair funding and rebuilding TAFE. It's a poignant reminder of how long public school teachers have been campaigning for essential resources for teachers to enable them to do the job society expects of them. It is also evidence that we play the long game.

The profound disappointment felt at the return of the Liberal/National Coalition Government on May 18 will not diminish Federation's resolve to continue to fight for a well-resourced public education system.

There is no choice.

Last month's federal election result means that, for the next three years, public schools will not be funded to the minimum Schooling Resource Standard. The privatisation of vocational education and training will continue. Also, the opportunity for guaranteed pre-school funding for three-years-olds and four-year-olds is lost – for now.

Federation Council recently placed on record its heartfelt thanks to the thousands of members, officers, staff, parents, community activists and allied organisations for their commitment and work over a long period to sustain the schools and TAFE funding campaigns.

In our campaigns for fair funding for public schools and to save TAFE as a proud public institution, we have taken on Australia's most powerful and connected elites. That is why it has been so difficult and such a long haul. But in doing so, we have changed the discourse on public education, which in itself is a tremendous achievement.

Our primary task has always been to ensure our policy positions on school funding and TAFE are elevated to the national agenda. There is no doubt this has been achieved, which means we have a solid foundation for the next phases of the campaign as we regroup and continue building community support.

While public schools in NSW are nowhere near the minimum Schooling Resource Standard, since about 2010 the various phases of funding campaigns For Our Future, I Give a Gonski and Fair Funding Now! have resulted in billions in additional recurrent funding for our schools. However, the funding gap is still significant and funding inequalities between public and private schools unacceptable.

Our immediate focus will be to ensure additional recurrent funding is used in an effective way to create more permanent teaching positions, increase release time, lower class sizes and to strengthen systemic support for teaching and learning – to name just a few priorities.

We must maintain our principles and traditions, which is why in the coming weeks and months we will evaluate and refocus. But we won't retreat.

We were passed a baton by previous generations of activists and we can be proud we have run our hardest with what they gave us.

But the race is far from over. Too much is at stake to slow down now.