

## Focus on members' needs

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### Commitments, a listening ear and a shoulder to lean on provides support to members to rebuild after crisis

Significant commitments have been secured from the Department for teachers and school communities dealing with the aftermath of the summer bushfires and floods.

On 23 January, Education Minister Sarah Mitchell said the Government would work directly with principals and their school communities to ensure tailored short and long-term support was available — 113 schools were identified for increased counselling services.

In consultation with Federation, the Department also announced it would be maintaining 2019 staffing levels in bushfire-affected schools, recognising that enrolments may have fallen as towns are rebuilt and families have acquired accommodation outside their area.



Federation hit the ground running on day one of the school year, visiting teachers and principals in some of the 173 bushfire-affected towns to ensure the needs of school communities ravaged by summer's crisis are being met.

The bushfires were just as quickly replaced by drenching rain that, while putting out the fires, filling dams and bringing some relief from the drought, brought dangerous flash flooding that closed dozens of schools in early February.

On 28 February, President Angelo Gavrielatos travelled to Mogo PS, Moruya HS, Batemans Bay PS and Moruya TAFE on the South Coast, while Deputy President Henry Rajendra and Senior Vice President Amber Flohm met members at Kangaroo Valley, Bundanoon and Hill Top public schools.

Mr Gavrielatos said the situation in the communities he visited was “dire”, especially as “the devastation could have, in part, been alleviated”.

“The TV images can never do justice to the devastation and trauma these people have faced,” he said. “As the winds changed and the evacuation alerts changed with them, some residents were evacuated from their homes three and four times.

“You can imagine the trauma, the stress, the blur these people repeatedly lived through deciding whether to stay and fight for their homes or leave them to fate.

“So officers travelled to bushfire-affected schools to listen and learn because we want to make sure

everything possible is being done to deal with the emotional, psychological, physical and financial distress caused by this devastation.”

The Southern Highlands centre of Bundanoon holds a special place in Federation’s culture and values as one of the regional hosts of the union’s annual Beginning Teacher Conferences.

Bundanoon Public School’s Federation Representative Kerri Vega Carrera briefed Mr Rajendra and Ms Flohm on the situation in the school and community, and described the visit as “heartfelt” by school staff.

“It was wonderful to see Federation there to support teachers who have been deeply affected by these horrific fires,” Ms Vega Carrera said.

“While the school was not directly affected by fires, it has been a hub for our little town and the villages surrounding our community. The staff and school community at Bundanoon have worked tirelessly to ensure the children have a safe and happy place to come to despite the devastation they may have experienced through the holidays.

“The ongoing support from our school counsellor each day has been instrumental in working with the welfare wellbeing of our students.”

Mr Gavrielatos said Federation would continue to work with the Minister and Department to ensure affected schools have the necessary resources, including school counsellors and other specialist support in the medium and long term noting that recovery takes time.

He said Federation would also focus on the needs of members, especially any emotional and mental health issues brought about by the trauma they and their students have suffered across the state.

“The best analogy I can use is that it’s like the instructions airlines provide to passengers in the event of an emergency. Adults are told to fit their mask before assisting children,” he said.

“In other words, it’s important to ensure the adult, in this case the teacher, is able to function properly so that students can be properly looked after.

“It is in tough times like this that Australians stand together and Federation stands with members, who are united in upholding the values of public education and the welfare of school communities.”

Scott Coomber is a staff writer