

A year to reflect upon



Angelo Gavrielatos
President

December 01, 2020

It has been a year like no other. At about this time 12 months ago, years of drought and environmental mismanagement were culminating in a perfect storm that would bring loss, damage, fear and pain as large swathes of NSW terrifyingly burned out of control.

Many of our school communities were ravaged in the Black Summer fires, others in the floods that followed. Our members were quick to lend a helping hand, with schools acting as a source of stability and refuge in the chaotic aftermath and subsequent reconstruction.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck. There was little respite for teachers and principals as this public health crisis unfolded and school education was forced to swing into remote learning mode, and variations thereof.

It has become something of a cliché but there is no other way to describe the efforts of our teachers and principals other than superhuman. You have gone over and above the call of duty, doing the very best within the constraints of the resources available, to support your students and communities.

The year has been marred by periods of intense anxiety and stress, not helped by conflicting, contradictory and, at times, hypocritical advice by state and federal politicians. Nonetheless, you have risen to the challenge and provided continuity and stability under the most trying of circumstances.

Behind the scenes, Federation prioritised the health and wellbeing of the teaching service and, by extension, our students and communities. Daily, indeed sometimes three and four times a day, our officers were keeping in touch with departmental officials and other agencies doing our best to look after you, so you could look after your families and your students.

It has been disappointing that policy makers too frequently treated teachers as an afterthought in the handling of the pandemic. Fortunately, it is in contrast to the high regard parents and the community have shown teachers and principals for their amazing efforts during the crisis.

Research at the height of the pandemic has shown that more than 95 per cent of respondents across various lines of questioning were most satisfied with the work and role of their children's teachers and schools, while 91 per cent stated they had gained more respect for the profession.

Such appreciation goes to the very core of the Gallop inquiry, "Valuing the Teaching Profession — an



independent inquiry”, which has heard evidence from research experts, academics, teachers, executive staff, careers advisors, teacher-librarians, school counsellors, principals, non-school based officers, indeed all classifications representing the widest variety of school settings and contexts. They’ve talked about the changing nature and value of your work over the past 17 years.

Regressive industrial laws implemented by this NSW Government have denied Federation the opportunity that was previously afforded unions to appear before the state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to argue a work-value case through a thorough examination of changes to skills, complexities and responsibilities to determine salaries.

In short, the evidence before the Gallop inquiry ranges from the burgeoning daily administration work now required of the job, to the lack of resources and support available to teachers and principals exacerbated by the withdrawal of departmental support under policies such as Local Schools, Local Decisions. All this amid a rapidly rising tide of mental health and disability issues in schools.

The inquiry is also taking place against the backdrop of continued attacks on the public sector by NSW Government. While you were turning yourselves inside out delivering teaching and learning in the context of a pandemic — meeting challenge after challenge — the State Government was plotting a wage cut.

Not content with the 2.5 per cent salary cap it imposed with the removal of work-value cases in the IRC, the Berejiklian Government sought to freeze public sector wages and not pass on the annual 2.5 per cent ration as a post-pandemic austerity measure.

It lost the first round in Parliament and sent its argument to the IRC where, what could only be described as a studied insult, a 0.3 per cent increase was passed on to public sector workers, tantamount to a handful of silver coins.

It didn’t stop there. In the recent State Budget the Government announced a new state wage policy that now places teachers’ worth at between zero and 1.5 per cent.

Not content with a wage freeze, the Government thought it would be a good idea to explore the option of some more precarious employment in our system by floating the discredited notion of putting principals on individual contracts. We fought back with an army of retired principal members.

Further, at the height of the pandemic, our TAFE teachers who have not had a pay increase since November 2018 had their 2.5 per cent annual entitlement quashed despite having negotiated a new four-year enterprise agreement before COVID-19. We are continuing our efforts to secure salary justice for our TAFE teachers.

In August, Federation uncovered and exposed the deceit of this Government and the Department with their deliberate misrepresentation of the number of students with disabilities in our schools.

According to confidential Government documents Federation obtained under freedom of information, official figures were more than 20,000 short of the actual number of students with disabilities in our schools.

Faced with its own report’s dire predictions that the exponential growth of students with disabilities would require thousands of extra teachers, the Government proposed a solution that would shift kids out of the SSPs into units, then from units into the mainstream classes.

The pandemic also further exposed the sad reality of the inequity between private and public education funding.

School funding remains an issue of national shame. With no path available, our public schools remain stuck at 90 per cent of the minimum government funding required to provide students with the education they deserve. This is while state and federal governments continue to deliberately overfund private schools.

The confluence of drought, catastrophic fires, floods and pandemic has taken its toll on our students; many have not returned to their school, teachers have recorded a rise in mental health issues culminating at its most desperate in suicide clusters.

The inequity is magnified in regional and remote settings, where the infrastructure that most urban communities take for granted has yet to find its way, where broadband internet is fantasy land and mental

health services are as rare as winter rain.

As the school year comes to an end, let us pause on the plight of Aboriginal education. We have work to do, and it is a cause for shame.

Federation will continue its proud tradition to support the struggles of our Indigenous brothers and sisters and walk together with them in acknowledging the significance and importance of the Uluru Statement from the Heart for structural change and reform.

We will not fully mature as a nation until we reconcile our past and stop the denigration and deeply insidious racism that has, and continues to, trample the rights and aspirations of our First Peoples.