

Your say: You are the union

August 22, 2018

In our centenary year, I feel I must speak out about the NSW Teachers Federation. I joined in 1979 as a trainee teacher and came into it with 10 years of nursing under my belt. I had been in charge of a 54-bed surgical ward at Prince Henry Hospital in Sydney. Once I joined the union, I found myself belonging to a group of likeminded people who, like nurses, were prepared to stand together to maintain and improve our conditions. This makes our union strong.

I remember attending Annual Conference and being amazed at the passion of debate from the floor. It was here in the 1980s where the motion to ban testing was lost. If there had been enough likeminded teachers in that room, we may have a very different testing agenda. It wasn't the senior officers who made that decision, it was us, the membership. So now today with the NAPLAN online debacle, it's our chance to reclaim the agenda. Get engaged!

If it wasn't for Federation, our work would be even more difficult than what we face today. We need to honour the work of the dedicated unionists who've gone before us. Equal pay for female teachers came from the women activists of the day and for that I say thank you.



Federation has been around for 100 years and from the concerted efforts of teachers over this time, we have improved our working conditions. But we need to stand firm on them to ensure they are not lost. What is the union doing, you ask? Well, I ask, what are you doing?

Politicians learnt many years ago how steadfast we are as a union. When we have an issue in our workplace, we organise together and stand together. We attend school branch meetings, we attend our local association meetings, we elect delegates to Council and Annual Conference and members determine the policies and campaigns of the union. Not the senior officers in Mary Street.

For an issue to be taken up as a campaign, it has to come from members. Do you speak up? Do you support your Fed Rep, Women's Contact or Workplace Committee in their endeavours to ensure a safe and harmonious workplace? Do you attend Association Meetings?

If every teacher attended just one meeting each year, our message would be so much more effective.

There are many ways you can make a difference. At school level, develop a roster so a different staff member attends each Association meeting with the Fed Rep or Woman's Contact throughout the year. Think how much more informed your workplace will be.

If there are issues at the school level, stand together. Hold a branch meeting and carry a resolution about what you want, and then take that to an Association meeting, where an action motion can be sent to

Executive and Council or Annual Conference. These motions are debated on the floor and, if carried, become policy. That's when the Officers come in – it's their job to implement the decisions of the membership.

I'm very concerned because in today's teaching world there is a culture of fear rearing its ugly head. Teachers say they can't speak up because they won't get a spot next year or they won't get a promotion because their boss won't support them. Some people even say, "I pay all these union fees, but what does it get me?"

Well, besides belonging to the strongest union in Australia – in my opinion – the benefits are enormous if you are prepared to do something. The union is you.

We are in the profession of teaching and learning. When unrealistic expectations are placed on us that are not related to the job, we have to take a stand. If we are told we need to do something not related to teaching and learning, stand up. Ask for the Department of Education policy and request your supervisor to show you where that thing you must do is in writing.

Speak to your Fed Rep. If you don't feel comfortable doing so, perhaps entertain the thought of putting up your hand for the job.

Teachers united together are a force when we act together. You hold a Federation meeting at school, you move a motion about the issue and you have the matter settled at school level. You then report your action at the Association meeting and may discover your colleagues are having similar experiences in their schools. So you move a motion at Association to go to Executive or Council. Your motion goes on the business papers and council delegates vote on the motions from associations to determine debating order. When your issue is one that is experienced by others, you may find the issue raised by you at the school level becomes union policy.

Here are some things Federation has gained:

- Leave: Long service leave; maternity/adoption leave; parental leave; leave without pay; trade union training leave; sick and FACS leave; part-time leave
- Salaries: permanent part-time; temporary classification; conditional casual approval; head teacher and assistant principal salary equivalence; improved allowances; improved incremental salary scale; access to top pay scale for 3YT teachers
- Conditions: Maintenance of the statewide staffing system; reduced class sizes; executive release time; relief from face-to-face; casual relief to cover teachers; work health and safety enforcement; increased funding in public schools
- Incentives: Statewide transfer points system; incentive transfers; teacher housing program; priority employment program for casual/temporary teachers in isolated schools; rental subsidies' isolation allowances; relocation subsidies; teacher employment priority scheme
- Training and professional development: Internship Program; Professional Development Funding; School Development Days; Trade Union Training; Centre for Professional Learning; Journal of Professional Learning
- The professional and industrial strength we gain when we join the union strengthens our capacity to advocate the concerns and aspirations of public school teachers.
- Federation provides information and advice to its financial members on teachers' working conditions and entitlements. This includes assistance and advice to protect employment rights of members in legal matters.
- Your elected Fed Rep and Women's Contact can provide advice and assistance. You can also contact a Federation organiser for individual assistance.
- Inform them of the Future Teacher Scholarships; Teachers Health Centres; Teachers Mutual Bank; Teachers Federation Health; and Federation Library.

What do you say to someone in your staff room who isn't a member?

Let's take our frustrations relating to our work and participate in the decision making structures of the union. When we do this, we will continue to strengthen Federation as we head towards the next 100 years of teacher unity.

Maureen Davis-Catterall is a Life Member