

TEACHERS, PAY AND CONDITIONS

Grievance

MR BAKER (Joondalup) [9.21 am]: My grievance is directed to the Minister for Education. Several weeks ago, approximately 20 primary and secondary school teachers hailing from the 10 government schools in my electorate visited my electorate office to discuss with me on a face-to-face basis the nature and extent of the teachers' log of claims with the Education Department. Initially I was told to expect that my office would be picketed by these local teachers, but as it transpired I simply invited them into my office to speak with me, and they were happy to do so. As the minister is well aware, the teachers' collective log of claims has been the subject of protracted negotiations for several months, and I am very concerned that this dispute be settled as soon as possible.

At the outset, I emphasise that I did not find this group of local teachers disruptive or unruly in any way. They were very polite, and their view of the issues in this dispute was clearly representative of the majority view of teachers in public schools in my electorate. I knew many of the teachers who attended my office on that day by virtue of my involvement with the various schools in my electorate and also my involvement with many community and sporting groups in the Joondalup region. I raise these factors to indicate to the minister that these teachers cannot be described as radical or as the type of people who are prone to get actively involved in industrial disputes, but are professional, highly experienced and concerned teachers who wanted to raise several issues of concern with their local member of State Parliament. Most of the teachers who presented in my office were middle-aged; and, as I discovered, they had commenced their teacher training at or about the same time as I had entered university in 1977.

During my discussions with those teachers, I found them to be sincere and genuinely concerned not simply about their salaries and conditions of employment but also about what the future holds for the public education system in our State. In my view, teaching was their true vocation in life. They regarded teaching as a calling and not simply a way of putting food on the table and repaying a home loan. They certainly did not regard teaching as a mere job.

I do not propose to recite the teachers' claims, because the minister is well aware of them, and I understand that discussions with the relevant teachers' representative bodies have been ongoing for some weeks. However, I will make some general observations about the teachers' log of claims and what appears to me to be at the very heart of this dispute. First, over the past 25 years, our so-called modern or enlightened society has downgraded the status of teaching as a career option. The reasons for this range from the effective lowering of tertiary entrance scores for teaching courses to the media portraying teaching as a less than sexy career option for young school graduates. It is clear to me that one major reason for this downgrading is the apparent decline in the salaries paid to teachers relative to those paid to people employed in other vocational or professional fields. As one local teacher candidly put it to me, having a vocation or calling to teach is great, but the salary paid to teachers is a reflection of the extent to which a society values its teachers and their role in socialising our community's children. I also accept that when year 12 graduates decide to embark upon a teaching career, they usually do so in the full knowledge of the future career paths that are available to them and at least have an insight into the various salary levels that they can expect to attain as they travel down the career path or climb the ladder, as the case may be.

However, since the year 12 graduates of the 1970s decided to pursue teaching as a career, much has changed in our schools and our society, and much has changed in the composition of our society's families and in parental attitudes and skills. In my view, many of these changes have placed unreasonable, unforeseeable and additional heavy burdens, pressures and duties upon our modern-day senior teachers. Our society's teachers are expected to be IT-literate in most respects, assume greater responsibilities in the form of extra-curricular activities, do more work at home after hours, and in some cases act as de facto parents, counsellors and child psychologists for the children whom they teach, while at the same time fulfilling their core duty of imparting knowledge to children within a formalised educational framework.

In the real world, teachers are the interface between the State, or the Government, and parents; and many teachers are the innocent victims of a society in which some irresponsible parents attempt to load them up time and again with more and more responsibilities which should fundamentally be the core responsibilities of parents, not teachers, and are certainly not the core responsibilities of the entity known as the State.

The central issues in this dispute are varied. The first issue is adequate funding for government schools. This is always an issue, and it is an issue in every State and Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia and, no doubt, every country in the world. The second issue is the need to raise the status of the teaching profession and encourage bright year 12 students to pursue teaching as a career. The third issue is the need to provide secure employment for teachers and administrators and also to provide additional resources to enable classroom

teachers to carry out their work as effectively as possible. The fourth issue is the need to provide a meaningful career path for teachers and administrators. Many centuries ago, a famous philosopher said that one of the greatest gifts a father can give to his children is to love and respect their mother. With this in mind, it is equally true that one of the greatest gifts that the entity known as the State can give to our children is to respect and appropriately reward their teachers.

I conclude by asking the minister a couple of questions. The obvious one is: When will this dispute be resolved? The related question is: Can the minister assure me that any offer of settlement from his department to the teachers involved in this dispute will be framed in the best interests of our State's children, with a view to settling this dispute once and for all?

MR BARNETT (Cottesloe - Minister for Education) [9.28 am]: I thank the member for Joondalup for his comments. The member, like all members of this Parliament, supports education. Much of education receives bipartisan support, which is important. We all recognise the critical role that teachers play within our schools and broader society. There is no doubt that relative to other occupations and professions, teaching has experienced a loss of status. That is not because there has been a diminution in the status of teaching as such but is simply because a wider range of career options is available to young people these days; therefore, teaching does not have the same status or ranking that it once had for new school leavers who go into university education.

It is of concern that generally the entrance levels of undergraduate teacher trainees has fallen relative to other career options. Salary is one important component of how the profession is perceived, but many other factors must also be taken into account. Nevertheless, teachers have been negotiating with the Government about a new enterprise bargaining agreement that would see, among other things, a significant increase in the salaries of teachers. Teachers have received a 21 per cent pay increase since 1996. My approach since I have been minister is to continue to achieve real increases in teachers' salaries, and the Government hopes to maintain that. The broader community is perhaps slightly confused about teachers' salaries. Although everyone is of the view that teachers' salaries must increase, people are often surprised when they find out what are the teachers' salaries.

The current enterprise bargaining agreement expired in May this year. It is a matter of public record that I offered teachers a 3 per cent plus 3 per cent pay increase in February. I then formalised that proposal and offered other benefits. At around June, I offered an expanded offer of 10 per cent over three years; that is, 3 per cent plus 3 per cent plus 4 per cent. That offer was accepted by the administrators - the principals and deputies. So far, around 1 000 administrators have signed workplace agreements and have received a pay increase from August this year. If that 10 per cent increase is applied over three years, it takes the salary of a senior principal from \$79 340 to \$88 326; a top-level teacher from \$48 264 to \$53 965; and the starting salary of a graduate teacher from \$32 925 to \$36 814. Compared to most graduate areas, a starting salary of \$37 000 is attractive. The problem that arises is that teachers who stay in the classroom effectively have a cap on their income. Experienced teachers in their 40s and 50s find the top level of \$48 000 rising to \$53 000 to be a constraint, and I recognise that.

Issues have arisen concerning teaching appointments in country areas. As a result, the Government and the Education Department have introduced both the remote teaching service, which provides expanded benefits, and also a country incentive package, which provides additional salary components. Most importantly, however, the country incentive package provides guaranteed paths to permanency for teachers in exchange for accepting three-year contracts. It is interesting that the country incentive package, which has provided improved conditions, applies to some 1 800 teachers. The Government is also building around 340 new houses and dwelling units in country areas around Western Australia. When I first became the Minister for Education, the most common complaint was the state of teacher housing, and that is being addressed.

I recognise that teachers' salaries are important. Negotiations have been continuing, and I am optimistic that in the next week, perhaps even this week, a conclusion might be reached. The only outstanding matter is the amount of the increase. The teachers' union has been claiming a 15 per cent increase over two years, but that is not realistic. The Government has offered 10 per cent over three years, but the union says that that is not enough. In New South Wales, by comparison, there has been a 16 per cent increase over four years - that is, a 4 per cent increase annually over four years - and Victorian teachers have recently accepted a 3 per cent increase. An increase in the range of 3 or 4 per cent would seem to be reasonable. Perhaps the executive of the teachers' union recognises that that is not a bad outcome, and the Government will continue the process of gradually increasing teachers' salaries above the underlying rate of inflation.

Other issues have been raised by teachers, which I support. One of the problems has been that of disruptive adolescent students in years 8 and 9. A component of the package includes a commitment to spend another \$3.5m annually to provide a range of measures to deal with those groups. Those measures include a reduction in class sizes in some schools, extra support in others, out-of-school programs, and a host of other measures.

Another issue I have been keen to progress is that of paid maternity leave for teachers, bearing in mind that 70 per cent of the work force is female. The Government intends to introduce paid maternity leave as part of the agreement. A valid point the member for Joondalup raised is that teachers feel the stress of an increased workload. As the member stated, increasingly over the years, more and more responsibilities have been placed on schools and teachers. Teachers no longer seem to have only the primary role of the education of children and young adults. Increasingly they are charged with their personal, social and moral development. A greater level of responsibility is demanding.

Many teachers and unions have indicated that the introduction of new curriculum and outcome statements, and some of the changes that have been put in place within the school system, are causing a heavier workload and putting more stress on teachers. As part of this agreement, the Government will ease some of the workload. When the new curriculum was introduced, it was intended to be phased in over five years. To the credit of teachers, they have introduced the curriculum far more quickly than they were asked to, and that has put pressure on the system. I thank the member for Joondalup and other members who have met with teachers. They have visited my electorate office on occasions and I have also had discussions with them. I hope that the issues can be resolved quickly. In conclusion, this is not about an increase or no increase - the Government has had a 10 per cent offer on the table for some time; the issue is over what is the final quantum.