Dr Janet Woollard MLA
Chair
Education and Health Standing Committee
Parliament House
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Dear Dr Woollard

Thank you for your letter dated 30 March 2012 relating to the submission by the Community and Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association (CPSU/CSA) to the Education and Health Standing Committee inquiry.

The Department of Education is Western Australia's largest employer with a $5 billion annual budget and almost 37 000 staff in nearly 900 worksites across the state. These resources are directed at achieving excellence in the public school system, and to provide access for all Western Australian students to a quality education irrespective of their background or geographical location.

It is clear that into the future, technology will play an increasingly significant role in ensuring that schools are well equipped to meet the diverse needs of their communities. To meet these needs, the Department of Education has continued to invest substantially in the provision and support of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) services to all schools.

In a distributed, but connected agency such as Education, it is imperative that centrally developed strategies and initiatives, compliment and support those actions taken at a local level. I can assure you that as central ICT strategies are developed and planning is being undertaken, all initiatives and projects which relate to the deployment of technologies and online services for schools include a stringent review of the potential impact upon local technical support requirements.

To assist schools meet the demands associated with the increasing use of technology, a range of centrally funded ICT initiatives and services have been established. These include the provision of a permanent high speed connection to the Department's computer network, secure, filtered Internet access for use by all staff and students, the provision of centrally licensed Microsoft Office and McAfee antivirus software for use on all school workstations, access to an independent ICT advisory service provided by the ICT Customer Relationship Management team, and access to a centrally managed ICT technical support service which provides specialist break-fix services, and is available across extended hours on weekdays, weekends and on public holidays.

All Western Australian public schools also receive an annual per capita resourcing grant which includes an allocation to locally sustain the acquisition, operation and support of technology equipment and services. Decisions relating to how the school resourcing grant is used are made locally and often differ between schools. This facilitates a range of choices to further enable schools to address local technology related issues.

Where it is deemed that supplementary technical support skills are needed locally, principals can elect to use the school resourcing grant to directly employ staff into technical support roles or can put in place arrangements with commercial vendors to provide technical support services. The allocation of ICT related funding provided to schools as part of their resourcing grant is a further acknowledgement of the impact of technology in schools and of the need for local management and decision making.

In addition, in those schools where Independent Public School status has been achieved, principals also have the capacity to determine how their school staffing allocation is deployed in order to best meet local priorities. This enables schools to resource particular services in areas where demand is increasing, and which they determine, are vital for the achievement of local educational outcomes.

It is recognised that the Federal Government's National Secondary School Computer Fund (NSSCF) has substantially increased the number of student workstations in secondary schools, and that this has placed additional pressure on school services and support resources. To assist schools with this issue, supplementary funding provided through the NSSCF initiative has been directed to the development and deployment of a Standard Operating Environment (SOE) across all secondary schools. This SOE has been designed to reduce the need for complex technical infrastructure, to improve the reliability and resilience of school network services, and to greatly reduce the need for local technical support personnel. This strategy enables schools to focus their resources on the local priorities deemed necessary to deliver an effective learning environment and to achieve improved learning outcomes. As additional funding becomes available, it is our intention to ensure that the benefits of the Department's centrally managed SOE will be made available to all public schools.

To further assist school-based staff in network administration and technical support roles, the ICT division of the Department has undertaken a number of initiatives to facilitate local skills development and the sharing of experience. These include the development of consistent IT service management processes, the regular publication of targeted technology support documentation and the establishment of a training regime for those involved in delivering local support. Whilst the training regime has not yet been formally structured or assessed by a registered training organisation, we are now working towards having this managed and delivered by the Institute for Professional Learning. With assistance from the Institute, it is our intention to progress the development of a structured training program which will enable school-based technical support staff to develop a greater awareness of the support processes required to deliver quality ICT services whilst working towards formal accreditation.

All ICT initiatives and the associated technical support strategies employed by the Department of Education ensure that Western Australian public schools can be individual, distinctive and responsive to their local communities while still benefiting from being part of a system. As with any distributed organisation that values autonomous local decision making, it is necessary that core ICT systems are established and maintained to enable effective communication and sharing of data for planning and accountability. Local branches of the organisation, in this instance, schools can then build upon these core ICT systems to ensure that they are well equipped to meet the diverse needs of their communities.

In summary, the Department is addressing the specific recommendations made by the CSPU/CSA as follows:

1. With regard to the allocation of resources made available to schools through the staffing formula, as previously indicated principals already have the capacity to determine how their school staffing allocation is deployed in order to best meet local priorities. In addition, all Western Australian public schools receive an annual per capita resourcing grant which includes an allocation to locally sustain the acquisition, operation and support of technology equipment and services.

2. As central ICT strategies are developed and planning is being undertaken, all initiatives and projects which relate to the deployment of technologies and online services for schools already include a stringent review of the potential impact upon local technical support requirements.

3. The establishment of a structured training regime for those involved in delivering local support is now underway. Whilst this is not yet offered through a registered training organisation, we are working towards having this managed and delivered by the Institute for Professional Learning.

4. As previously indicated, the service improvement and cost management benefits being derived from the Department's centrally managed SOE will be extended to all public schools as soon as the required funding becomes available.

Thank you for raising your concerns.

Yours sincerely

SHARYN O'NEILL
DIRECTOR GENERAL

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