

President's Message – November 2017

Seventy years of testing times

I don't know what the last few weeks has been like for your family but for us it's been exam time. As a father I look on at the process and build up to those crucial few hours, and reflect on my own experience as a fresh-faced youngster facing the same end of year challenge – although too many years ago now to mention. What our experience has highlighted, in the modern day, is the true professionalism and genuine interest from our teachers and principals to give every student the confidence and sense of assured preparation to be the best they can. If we are looking at public education to be a reflection of the communities in which they are based then I think we're doing all right.

With this comes the willingness to work in partnership with parents and the wider school community to instil the sense of hope for the future and to reflect the place of community, and cultural expectations that frame so many of public education's strengths. It's this sense of inclusive openness and acceptance for all that is so important. Like all cultures that embrace public education it is deeply embedded and the result of a long continuum of passionate advocacy by those that have come before. In ACCSO's case it's 70 years of principled representation – a point that was emphasised by the Hon. Susan Ryan at the dinner held a couple of weeks ago to celebrate our 70th anniversary. The voice of parents in public education has never been stronger with Susan sharing the experiences of past champions that has put us all in the forefront of education; one that can never see parents relegated to bit parts in our children's future. What is even more gratifying is the recognition from all sides of politics and government of the need for open dialogue and policy input from parents into shaping the future of education.

The times are constantly a changing

There's an old adage that there's nothing as constant as change and in the feisty arena of education policy this could almost be said to be a defining tenet. With so many changes afoot, and with the goal of ensuring an open and informed dialogue from all sides, ACCSO recently held a Member's education policy Roundtable, over two days, to discuss and reflect on what has occurred over the last twelve months.

Another key factor in this is keeping an eye to the future with a series of state and territory elections either in progress, or in the offing – and the implications for a future federal poll. All state and territory peak parent bodies were invited to attend this bespoke gathering together with our Board, Member's representatives and their additional delegates. This was set in a format that allowed for free and frank conversations with a variety of key national education policy actors, shapers and stakeholders. The feedback so far suggest that all sides emerged with a deeper understanding of policy, its influencing factors and the parent perspective, and context. Please take the time to engage with your state or territory parent bodies representatives that attended the Roundtable and I'm sure they will be delighted to share their thoughts and reflection on the topics under discussion.

As advocates for public education we all have a responsibility, from our local school body to the highest office, to engage in informed debate, and to maintain an objective understanding of the policy issues that will impact on our children's learning and experience of education. The Roundtable's intent, in the face of many differing voices, was to bring calm rational objectivity to our mutual

understanding of critical issues – I know my ongoing reflection and feedback from the discussions will provide a valuable backdrop to my role.

Roles and responsibility

It's ACSSO's responsibility to advocate for open and equitable education opportunities for public education by engaging with all sides of politics without fear or favour. For parent champions of public education at all levels our legacy is in fair, simple and transparent education policy and the legislation that enacts it. Unlike most representative groups in education public education is represented largely by volunteers; their commitment cannot be questioned as they give their time and expertise freely to those that come to rely on this input in their professional responsibilities.

With the rapidly approaching Education Council meeting in Hobart we call on its members to reflect on the authenticity of the parent voice in public education and how it may be better supported. The provenance and value of public education advocacy has to be fully acknowledged in a world where its detractors have gained a twenty-year advantage, with their highly resourced representative bodies filled with well-paid professional lobbyists. Our children deserve a fair go wherever they live, whatever their circumstances and whatever their opportunities in life may be. Public education is the first voice for our nation, its families and the first choice for our children's future.

Phillip Spratt