



Speech 17 June 2016

## WA Primary Principals' Association Mindful Leadership conference

Good morning.

- I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today.
- My thanks to Western Australian Primary Principals' Association for inviting me to speak to you.
- It's great to be back among so many familiar faces.
- Leading Minds: Hearing the voices of children and young people.
- Former US president Harry S Truman once stated:

*I have found the best way to give advice to your children is to find out what they want and then advise them to do it.*

- This is not a new concept and any opinions whether from adults or children must be balanced against a range of issues and needs.
- It's a role I am honoured to take on and I have a clear direction for the coming five years on how we can improve the wellbeing of our State's youngest citizens.

- Rather than start out by talking about my role, I would like to set the scene by discussing the very important people I'm here to advocate for:
  - There are now more than 586,000 children and young people under the age of 18 in our State – many of them are currently in your schools
  - In the last decade we had increasing numbers of babies being born each year, although last year was the first year where no increase in the number of births was recorded in WA
  - Just over one quarter of our children and young people live outside of the metropolitan area.
- I am independent and report directly to the Western Australian Parliament, working across government and with community sector partners.
- My overarching responsibility is that I give paramount consideration in all of my work for the best interests of children and young people in WA
- My role is to listen to our children and young people and advocate for, promote and monitor their wellbeing.
- Under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*, I am also required to give priority to, and have a special regard for, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.
- The Act also describes 15 specific functions, and while I won't go through all 15 with you this morning, I would like to highlight that

one of the key functions is, focusing on listening to children in matters that affect them.

- Underpinning my work, and that of Children's Commissioners and Guardians around the country, is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child.
- This Convention is based on the premise that children and young people have the right to be heard.
- Articles 28 and 29 of this Convention specifically relate to education and that at all times, we are to act in the best interests of the child.
- Both my Act and the UN Convention connect to the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians and therefore your work in particular engaging young Australians as described.
- While you have all spent the last two days hearing from a range of speaker on the topic of mindful leadership it is important not to lose sight of the minds you lead.
- We know mindful leaders in an education:
  - Understand the context of their community and focus first and foremost on every child as an individual
  - They are committed to make a difference by:
    - Nurturing positive relationships
    - Leading, guiding and supporting their staff
    - Connecting children to relevant and meaningful curriculum

- And focus on outcomes for all.
  
- The office has in previous years consulted children and young people on issues such as mental health, wellbeing, living in regional and remote WA and living with disability.
  
- In a recent consultation with in excess of 1200 Aboriginal children and young people across the state they expressed a clear understanding of the connection between a good education and a good quality of life.
  
- Five clear themes emerged from these children when they were asked about what was important to them and what their hopes were for the future.
  
- Education is a constant theme.
  
- Many told us that they enjoyed school and viewed their school as one of the positive aspects to their community.
  
- However the children themselves identified that family support, financial resources, regular attendance and integration of culture into the curriculum and a school that heard their voices were all factors that can impact on their education.
  
- The report “Listen to Us” was tabled in State Parliament and has been positively received by Aboriginal leaders and the general community.
  
- The challenge is to establish processes and protocols that allow your school community to hear the voices of these children to overcome the education barriers that they themselves identify stop them from achieving their best?

Last month I launched a suite of resources and a schedule of workshops as part of my Child Safe Organisations WA initiative.

- This is a range of resources to assist WA organisations to identify and manage risks that affect the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.
- These resources were born out of the St Andrew's Hostel Inquiry, the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and other inquiries both here and overseas.
- These inquiries continue to highlight that children and young people are vulnerable to abuse where:
  - organisations neglect their responsibilities,
  - fail to listen to children and young people,
  - and prioritise the reputation of the organisation over the protection of children and young people.
- This is one area where *mindful leadership* and continuous improvement is vital.
- The office also consulted with 365 WA children and young people on what they thought made an organisation child safe to inform the development of these resources – and there are learnings from this consultation that have relevance to everyone working in education.
- Children told us the key things that made an organisation child safe were:
  - Having friendly and engaged staff who like children

- being proactively asked their views
  - having their views taken seriously
  - being given choice and having flexibility around participating
  - having information about expectations and clear rules of behaviour
  - seeing action taken to stop problems from continuing, and
  - adults doing what they say they will do.
- The new Child Safe Organisations WA resources are based on nine key domains for organisations to consider and enact to strengthen and create a culture of safety for children.
  - While I won't go through all of them I would like to point out that it was no accident that leadership at all levels was the first domain to be highlighted. Mindful leadership in this area is an absolute necessity
  - A project I would like to announce today is involving a major consultation with children and young people enrolled in government, Catholic and independent schools throughout the state about how they perceive their education.
  - The consultation is currently planned for Term 3 of this year.
  - In previous consultations undertaken by my office, WA children and young people have said that a good education is vital to their

wellbeing and achievement of their goals.

- The aim of this consultation is to find out from students what they feel are the key factors that influence their engagement or disengagement from education.
- We are particularly looking at relationships and what is important to building relationships at school.
- While schools do a great job of supporting the wide range of learning and developmental needs of their students and developing relationships with them, there is a lack of information and understanding about what the students' perspective is on this.
- A major component of my School and Learning Consultation will be a survey of around 2,000 Year 3 to Year 12 students in schools randomly selected to be representative of sector, of location (metropolitan/non-metropolitan) and of school size.
- The survey questions aim to find out both what helps and prevents students enjoy their learning and stay in school.
- The consultation will also include workshops with children and young people, including those who are vulnerable to disengaging from school and education, as well as a parent survey.
- This important work is being conducted with the support and input of representatives from all education sectors, including the Department of Education which has representatives on my reference group for this project. We are waiting for final ethics sign off from the D o E and then we will commence contacting schools that have been selected.
- This consultation should also give all of you important data that will help you to be mindful leaders in your schools.

- There have been very few consultations with children in the past that have looked at engagement and disengagement, and those that have been done have had small sample sizes.
- In concluding I would like to use this drawing by a young girl to demonstrate why Mindful Leaders must hear the voices of children.
- Improving how we deliver services by asking them what they think, and being responsive to what they tell us, is essential to achieving better outcomes for our children and young people.
- We cannot be mindful leaders in achieving improved education and wellbeing outcomes without understanding what motivates our students.
- As indicated within the Melbourne Declaration, we cannot be **mindful leaders** in our schools and in our community without hearing the voices of our children and young people.
- I wish you well in what is one of the most important vocations within our society to lead minds within your school.
- Thank you.