

School strike chaos



PERSONAL ATTENTION: North Adelaide Primary school teacher Sarah Slee and her mostly empty reception class yesterday.

Picture: DEAN MARTIN

LAUREN NOVAK EDUCATION REPORTER

CLASSROOMS were left empty across South Australia yesterday as confusion reigned over the cancelled teachers' strike.

The order by the Industrial Relations Commission to cancel the full-day strike came too late on Thursday night for many parents who had already made arrangements for their children.

As a result, schools reported student attendance rates as low as 10 per cent and some teachers were left with not a single child to supervise.

The teachers' union said most schools had reported attendance rates yesterday of between 20 and 40 per cent.

The commission's order also applies to half-day rolling stoppages teachers had planned from next week.

The Australian Education Union has lodged an appeal against the decision and asked that the order be postponed until the appeal is heard but the latter request was denied and schools will return to normal for now.

Yesterday's strike would have closed 350 schools and pre-schools and forced 135 others to run a modified program. More than 6837 teachers were expected to take part.

Canteen managers also were caught off guard as many had not ordered food for the day.

An AdelaideNow poll of almost 3000 readers showed most attributed blame for the debacle to the teachers' union (67 per cent), followed by the Government (23 per cent) and the commission (9 per cent).

Irate readers inundated the website with comments, describing the situation as a "circus" and calling for an end to the almost year-long dispute.

SA Association of State School Organisations director David Knuckey - whose organisation represents parents of 90 per cent of public school students - said it was the last straw for parents.

Today we had students without teachers, teachers without students and school canteens without food.



— DAVID PISONI

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POLL: Who do you blame for the teachers' strike confusion?

"Whether the union claims are fair or whether the Government claims are fair is now becoming secondary to this (feeling that) this has to be resolved," he said.

Teachers rallied at Parliament House yesterday afternoon and have promised to ramp up their industrial campaign, warning it will drag on next year.

Industrial Relations Minister Paul Caica said the union had been "hell-bent" on striking during intense discussions in the commission this week, despite assertions from the Government it would be pointless.

Commissioner Doyle, who oversaw the discussions, said the relationship between the parties was "underlined by mistrust and suspicion" and "short of a complete capitulation by one side... there is absolutely no prospect of this matter being resolved" by negotiation.

While it is becoming more certain a resolution to the ugly conflict will only be found through arbitration, Mr Caica would not rule out another Government offer. He said there was

"always the opportunity" to negotiate an outcome but the union's position would have to change first.

The teachers' union is seeking an 18 per cent wage increase over three years including an interim payment of 7 per cent, as members have not had a pay rise for more than a year.

Mr Caica said the Government had not made any offer of an interim rise this week.

Opposition Education spokesman David Pisoni criticised the Government for its "poor" handling of the dispute, which he said had "descended into a farce".

"Today, we had students without teachers, teachers without students and school canteens without food," he said.

Mr Pisoni questioned what led the commission to cancel the strike at such late notice.

The Education Department required all teachers to report for work yesterday and chief executive Chris Robinson said most had complied.

He estimated up to a third of students were absent, more so in secondary schools.

Teachers who did not work and had no acceptable explanation would lose pay, he said.

At North Adelaide Primary School about 20 per cent of the usual 280 students were in class.

Principal Peter Rawlins said all teachers had reported for work and they were doing their best to provide proper classes.

"If the children turn up they deserve an education," he said.

Just 25 students attended both Clovelly Park Primary School (which normally has 330 students) and Elizabeth Downs Primary School (220).

About 30 per cent of Klemzig Primary School's 240 students were there while Adelaide High School carried on with less than 10 per cent of its normal 1250 student population.

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