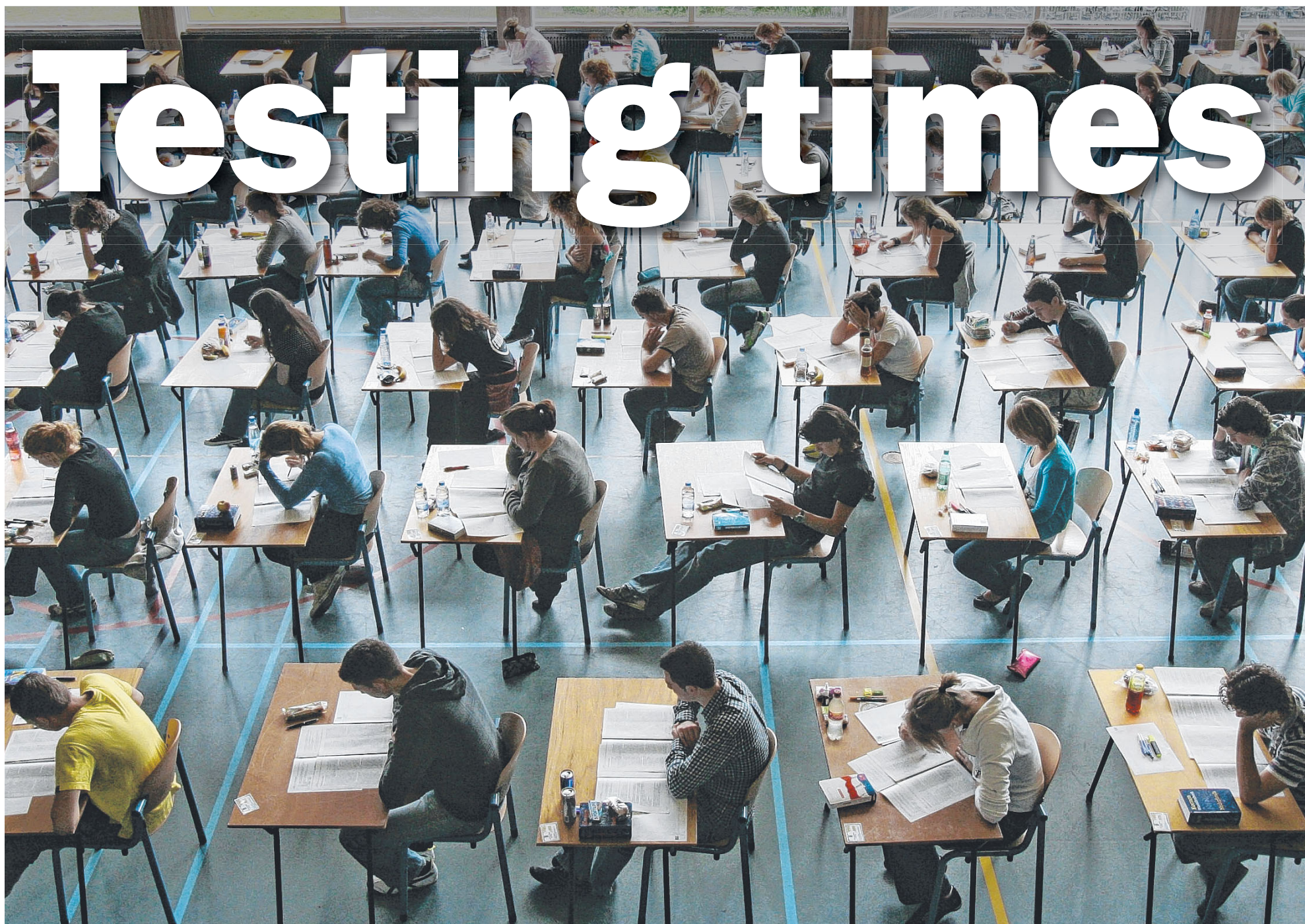


The education sector faces its greatest period of reform for years. This week the Education Department chief executive was sacked, heralding a new beginning. **CANDICE KELLER** reports.



WHEN father-of-two Jay Weatherill was handed the education portfolio, many thought that would be a poisoned chalice. Now the cup runneth over with opportunity.

In just five months since the state election, Mr Weatherill has emerged as a self-styled white knight, attempting to mend bridges between schools and education officials.

This week, the minister sacked Education and Children's Services Department chief executive Chris Robinson in a sign of his intent to give the sector a fresh start.

Mr Weatherill said he was "committed to a new reform direction for the SA schools system" and believed a new department head was needed to support his direction.

The goal was welcomed by educators despite some concerns over changes yet to be introduced.

In announcing widespread reform for the education system, Mr Weatherill said building a new relationship with schools and preschools was key to the futures of staff, students and families.

He admitted public perception of the department was not positive.

In a policy circular to schools, Mr Weatherill said the most common belief was that the department was "cumbersome", slow to respond to schools' needs and unsupportive of frontline staff.

"This perception is not new.

Surveys over time confirm most parents are satisfied with their local school, but don't have a positive view of the 'system,' he said.

Case studies have cemented that image.

The Enterprise Bargaining dispute, which lasted nearly 2½ years, was considered by some an unfixable crack in education system foundations.

Teachers became disgruntled over delays in delivering a pay increase to make their salaries competitive with interstate counterparts.

Work conditions also were central to negotiations with overtime, class sizes and the school funding model up for discussion to improve the workload for teachers and principals. Mr Weatherill also has had to bear the brunt of dissatisfied school communities all over the state.

In Coober Pedy, staff, parents, students and school leaders were at loggerheads over former area school principal Sue Burtenshaw who was removed amid tension over her "tough" approach to discipline and school management.

Ms Burtenshaw has appealed the decision handed down by the Department after nine months of investigation.

Renmark High School was frowned upon by the minister for "terminating", via letter, the enrolments of a senior student who failed to meet performance and attendance benchmarks. Angry parents complained to authorities, however it was Mr

Weatherill who said this was not an "appropriate" way for schools to communicate with parents.

Rose Park Primary School parents have accused DECS of withholding a full-report on the site's controversial Family Unit, which has caused conflict among parents on classroom space per student.

Unions have claimed the cause of the disconnect is simple - a lack of department employees with experience or background in the education sector.

AUSTRALIAN Education Union SA branch president Correna Haythorpe said it was crucial for the public service staff working with schools to have an intrinsic understanding of how schools operate.

"Having people in the department who have educational experience and background know the implications of the decisions they're making," she said.

"Until you've worked in a school, you don't necessarily understand the intricacies of delivering a curriculum and managing student wellbeing."

Ms Haythorpe said teachers previously sought leadership opportunities in schools and then progressed to leadership within the department.

Attraction and retention to the administration side of education, however, had been overlooked for years.

"Those career pathways should be strengthened," Ms Haythorpe said.

"It's really connected with how the department and schools interact."

She said there now was an "air of change" surrounding educators.

Mr Weatherill is attempting to give the impression of leading from the top and ensuring the promises of reform are not just lip service.

He is visiting schools, meeting staff, leaders and families to understand first-hand the public education experience.

New policies show promise in streamlining administration processes for school principals and staff, allowing them to concentrate on fulfilling goals for students.

More freedom will be awarded to principals in staff recruitment.

Greater communication will be encouraged through a trial hotline for education leaders to provide direct feedback to the minister.

SA Association of State School Organisations, the state's peak parent body, said the volume of complaints from Governing Councils about dealing with DECS was increasing.

Director David Knuckey said that, in part, may be resolved by greater influence being given to Governing Councils who know intimately the needs of their local school communities.

"Rather than strive to build a better bureaucracy, the new chief executive must embrace that it is simply more efficient and effective to let schools govern themselves," he said.



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