

President's Report

SAASSO State Council

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Recently, members of SAASSO's board were invited to meet with the Hon Robert Brokenshire MLC, to discuss his proposal to establish an Education Ombudsman.

In general terms, an Ombudsman is an independent official who scrutinizes the activity of a government agency or department, in the interest of the public and is empowered to investigate complaints regarding improper behaviour by such a department. Being completely external to the department and government, an ombudsman avoids the conflicts of interest that are sadly inherent in self-policing.

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We have a number of distinct ombudsmen – federal and state - specifically appointed to protect the public interest, including:

- The State Ombudsman
- Energy Ombudsman
- WorkCover Ombudsman
- Employee Ombudsman
- Workplace Ombudsman
- Telecommunications Ombudsman
- Financial Services Ombudsman

In fact, we have an Ombudsman for almost every area of life ... except education. Despite being both a government and private service, which every single Australian will use for more than a decade and despite being the

second largest government employer, there is no independent person or body to go to if you or your child are being treated unfairly.

Mr. Brokenshire is introducing an Amendment Bill which will make the existence of an Education Ombudsman part of the Education Act. This person would have the powers of a Royal Commission and be appointed by the Governor of South Australia.

Why do we need an independent authority in education? As Mr. Brokenshire recently said in State Parliament, 'This bill is intended to deal with the public outcry over Education Department inaction or bureaucratic

bungling of complaints by students, parents and teachers alike'.

At present, if I, as a parent, am unhappy with the conduct of the education department, my option is to complain to ... the education department. An Education Ombudsman would be an avenue for all South Australian's to ensure they and their children are treated fairly.

In his speech to parliament, Mr. Brokenshire referenced 'appaling' tales from the education system; including neglect of children, disregard for parents' concerns and inappropriate treatment of teachers.



It seems all too frequent we hear of another problem in our education system. We hear complaints from the teacher's union about the stress placed on staff who are under-resourced. We have a Teachers Registration Board under Parliamentary Inquiry. We have disturbing rumblings – particularly from regional centres – of pressure being applied in relation to Super Schools. We have an epidemic of bullying and parents reporting nothing being done. And then we have our own work at SAASSO; trying to help parents with experiences ranging from frustrating to disturbing.

We are all free to complain, but the Government is also free to ignore us. SAASSO made a submission to the Education Minister in December 2008, regarding issues with the Education Act review. That was 173 days ago ... and we've heard nothing since.

SAASSO supports the call for an Education Ombudsman; we need an independent watchdog for education; a watchdog with teeth to force the Government into accountability and action. ■