

# Blame game gets poor marks

■ **Bethany Hiatt**  
Education Editor



The prospect of getting pictures of dozens of excited, shiny-faced students in their new, slightly-too-big school uniforms, means that media conferences on the first day of the school year are usually well attended.

But some of the footage captured at the first day of school media event last week at Highgate Primary School made for excruciating viewing.

Instead of focusing on the success of the annual Herculean effort to staff every school with a full complement of teachers, or the fact that 11 new schools were opening on time, Education Minister Sue Ellery was forced to talk about the possibility of lead contamination in school drinking water.

She revealed that bottled water would be handed out to students at five schools for drinking and hand washing because lead testing requested four months ago had not been finished in time for the start of the school year.

And the minister did not pull any punches when asked who was to blame for the fiasco. She blasted the Education Department and the Finance Department's Building Management and Works division for failing to come up with a test regime to clear all new schools in time for the start of school, or to advise her of a possible delay in results.

Standing in the background, nodding and smiling through gritted teeth, was Education Department director-general Sharyn O'Neill. The tension between the minister and her department chief was palpable, even on vision filmed on a reporter's iPhone.

Apart from the five schools which had their first day back



Illustration: Don Lindsay

disrupted by the water scare, another five schools were found to have "inconsistent results", returning some elevated lead levels in gardener's or work sink taps which were kept off-limits until retested. One other school was given the all-clear.

Ellery ordered the lead testing in new schools and flushing in 809 established schools late last year after concerns were raised about lead in stagnant water and leaching from construction materials at Perth Children's Hospital.

All but one of the 10 schools under a cloud have now been cleared. Aveyley Secondary College, initially one of the five schools issued with bottled water because results were not back in time, has returned inconsistent levels in some taps.

While Ellery has been criticised for the decision to provide bottled water because

of the risk it could undermine the public's faith in drinking water at all schools, she really had no choice once the situation got to that stage.

She had pledged to test school taps and release the results, so she would have been roundly condemned for doing nothing if subsequent tests had discovered lead levels even slightly above normal.

But it never should have got to that stage.

The tests should have been done and the results known well before the end of last month.

When the results still had not been returned in the last week before school started, the minister should have had someone from her office demanding to know when they would be on her desk.

A day after the botched media event, the minister was still fuming as she stood next to O'Neill after officially opening the new Fremantle College.

Asked if she could have pushed harder to make sure the deadline would be met, she says she checked with the department the previous week and was told the water testing process was on track.

"I don't know if I was lied to or not," she said. "I didn't get the information."

O'Neill was also quick to point the finger of blame elsewhere, saying she told her staff to do "anything and everything" to get the results before the start of school.

"I asked my staff to escalate the results so we could have them on time," she said. "It was clear the minister's expectation of the Department of Education and Building Management and Works was that this testing process would be completed by the start of school."

"That was also my expectation, and the direction given to my department, in partnership with Building

Management and Works. The minister is right to be disappointed and frustrated and, equally, I'm disappointed and frustrated in my department and its partnership with Building Management and Works."

The issue followed hard on the heels of Ellery's reversal of her decision just before Christmas to close Schools of the Air and six months after she was forced to dump an election pledge to strip Perth Modern School of its historic status as an academically selective school.

Forced — once again — to defend his Education Minister, Premier Mark McGowan blamed unnamed public servants for the failure, saying someone in the bureaucracy "needed a good kick up the pants".

"It's not the minister's fault, it's not the Government's fault," he said. "There is a failure in carrying out the very clear instructions, the very clear request that was put to the relevant departments by the minister."

The problem for Ellery is that apportioning blame to others, no matter how well deserved, is not a good look for a minister.

Leaving aside the question of whose responsibility it was to make sure the lead testing was completed on time, the way the issue was handled and communicated was down to her.

And the way it was managed rang unnecessary alarm bells, wasting an opportunity to get on the front foot by providing a calm voice of reassurance.

After experiencing strife mostly of her own making during the summer break, the minister could have really done with a smooth start to the school year.

Instead, a handful of tardy test results has led to another black mark against the education portfolio.

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## Libs' bad behaviour not acceptable in modern workplace

■ **Gary Martin**

Backstabbing, nasty personal attacks and horrific insults. In recent times, the Australian public has become accustomed to this type of behaviour by some of our politicians.

Who could forget, for example, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's outburst last year when he labelled Opposition Leader Bill Shorten a "social-climbing sycophant" and a "parasite". This after endless goading from the Opposition about the Prime Minister being "Mr Harbourside Mansion".

What the public is less familiar with is physically brawling politicians.

This is the type of behaviour that seems to happen in countries such as Taiwan, Ukraine, Turkey and South Korea — but rarely Australia,

and never in WA. Don't get me wrong, there surely have been physical altercations between WA's politicians in the past but rarely have they crept into public view.

That changed last Thursday. Just as the 2017 leavers season receded into the background on Rottnest Island, a new wave of schoolyard antics was about to hit its shores.

Two senior MPs had a physical altercation at what has been described as a Liberal Party "love-in" on the island, or to be more precise, a work-based retreat.

To be fair, it was not really an altercation of the scale witnessed in the international arena — nowhere near it in fact — but it did leave one of them, Peter Collier, on the ground after he was pushed by John McGrath, following a heated exchange of words.

While the idea of two MPs resorting to a physical clash

because of a difference of opinion is incongruous with the WA community's expectations, like in any other workplace those working in the political arena are prone to stress and anger — especially given the divisive nature of politics.

But there does appear to be some fundamental differences in the way that the modern WA workplace and a political organisation respond to the same behaviour.

Most modern workplaces would not tolerate the behaviour that occurred between the two politicians.

Serious verbal abuse between co-workers would be viewed as misconduct and, at the very least, result in a stern warning.

Any physical altercation would, more often than not, represent serious misconduct and potentially solid grounds for termination of employment.

Not so in political entities, it would seem.

And in the modern workplace, a decision around termination would hinge on a number of factors including the extent to which an aggressor demonstrated remorse.

But not so in the political world, it seems.

In the political arena, the two men played down the event as being a storm in a teacup. And to add salt to the wound, one of them reportedly said he "should have behaved a bit better".

A "bit" better? That's hardly remorseful. Didn't he mean "a whole lot better"?

And more than likely, in the modern workplace, if the offending parties were actually able to salvage their jobs, management would send them off for a hefty dose of anger management training as a condition of ongoing employment.

I wonder if Liberal leader Mike Nahan has this in mind?

This should be a wake-up call to all politicians and political parties that verbal and physical abuse cannot be tolerated.

Both sides of politics, not to mention the minor parties, have many skeletons in their closets.

There is no doubt that politics is a tough business.

But the same politicians who are often called on to make decisions which relate to the health and safety of their constituents cannot carry out their responsibilities with any credibility when they resort to the behaviour that has become public over the past week.

And by the way, had the same type of incident occurred between two 18-year-olds at the Rottnest pub during leavers, the two offenders may well have been sent home.

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