

## Winning ideas for grassroots campaigns

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When teachers at Girraween Public School began campaigning for better school infrastructure last year, there was no magic formula or “go-to” tactic that would guarantee success.

As Federation members, they simply committed to the first step in a long process of learning through collective action. This approach involved cultivating greater solidarity among teachers and forming an alliance with parents based on shared values and their aspirations for the children of Girraween Public School.

Federation Representative Tavisha Hewa-Gamage said working together as a whole school community was critical.

“We built up a strong connection between the teachers and the parents because, at the end of the day, we had the same goal: to secure the school buildings that our children deserve.”

The campaign relied on three integrated strategies:

- the support and development of local leadership
- identifying and working towards campaign peaks
- the continual expansion of the “active supporter” base.

These strategies reflect the approach of American civil rights activist and union organiser Marshall Ganz and were adapted to meet the needs of Federation members at Girraween Public School.

### Supporting local leadership

Effective local leadership is

essential to any campaign's chances of success. It requires teachers, principals and parents to bring their respective strengths and capabilities to the table.

For legitimate reasons, Girraween Public School had four different Federation Representatives in just 12 months, but each stepped up to the challenge of collaborating with colleagues and parents to lead the campaign.

“It's really made me see the value of teamwork and delegating different roles to work with people's strengths,” Ms Hewa-Gamage said. “And it's been great working with a team who have the same passion and vision.”

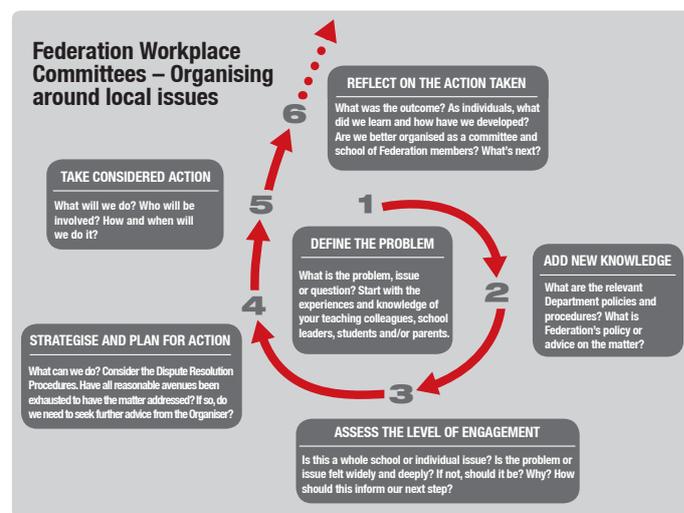
Acting Fed Rep Matthew Nash added: “The main thing this campaign has taught me is the importance of working with the people around you. This campaign has only been successful due to the combined efforts of multiple people. To build something like this you absolutely need to foster that school community support.”

### Campaign peaks

Exhausting all reasonable avenues to have the infrastructure problem resolved and gradually escalating the agreed actions required Federation members to identify, commit to and work towards specific peaks in the campaign.

Early peaks involved resolutions that called on the Education Minister to intervene and resolve the school's infrastructure problem.

On two occasions their



correspondence was referred to the Department and the school received disheartening bureaucratic responses. “I think the most challenging part was ensuring we stayed motivated and focused on our goal when we kept getting knocked back,” Ms Hewa-Gamage said.

Establishing and focusing on peaks was fundamental to staying on task. Critical campaign peaks included:

- **A school community forum:** Federation members and the P&C co-hosted a forum, “The school buildings our kids deserve”. More than 80 people attended, including shadow education minister Jihad Dib. Parents and teachers began the forum with a short activity where they identified what they loved about, and wanted for, Girraween Public School. Education Minister Rob Stokes agreed to meet with the secretary of the P&C on the same day.
- **A joint meeting of P&C and**

**teachers:** Having received nothing in writing after the positive meeting between the Minister and P&C secretary, the P&C president and Fed Rep emailed the Minister and requested a written response to their reasonable concerns. A deadline was set just prior to a joint meeting of parents and teachers. The failure of the Minister's office to respond by the set date ultimately triggered the meeting in which members committed to stopwork action.

### Expand the supporter base

In between peaks, Federation members committed to building their base of active supporters.

A P&C petition on *change.org* secured more than 400 signatures, but the campaign needed a database of school community members who would be prepared to take more direct action. In the lead-up to the school community forum, teachers handed out leaflets at the school gate to promote

the event. One-on-one conversations with teachers and parents secured more than 100 active supporters, who provided their email and mobile phone numbers.

Prior to the Week 9 deadline provided to the Minister, the list grew to 200 active supporters, who were urged to email and call the Minister's office. Anecdotal evidence suggests a significant number of those supporters did so.

"We had a constant conversation going between the staff and

the parents which I think ensured that the issue was still relevant and required action," Ms Hewa-Gamage said.

Mr Nash added: "We tried to keep everyone up to date and on the same page. This meant that we were able to have a united front. Everyone knew what stage we were at and what had to be done next." The Workplace Committee also recruited six potential members to the union during the school term.

### Reflections on the campaign

At the end of each peak in a local campaign, there are three questions that a Federation Workplace Committee should consider:

- What was the outcome?
- As individuals, what did we learn and how have we developed?
- Are we better organised as a committee and school?

Teachers and parents were clearly pleased with the

outcome and the growth of the Fed Reps as leaders is evident in their reflections.

But what of the final question?

"It's helped our members understand the importance of working as a team," Ms Hewa-Gamage said.

"We also have more confidence in Federation because we can see how our membership ensures our voices are heard."

## GROUND GAINED ON SHRINKING SPACE CONCERNS AS SCHOOL'S ENROLMENTS DOUBLE

The last days of a hectic school term are usually welcomed with some sense of relief by teachers, but that relief is rarely delivered in the form of a letter signed by the Minister for Education.

In the letter, addressed to acting Federation Representative at Girraween Public School Matthew Nash, Minister Rob Stokes announced that "an innovative approach to the delivery of demountable classrooms" would be piloted at Girraween in 2018.

Mr Stokes assured the Federation Representative that "no further demountables will be provided that will reduce the available playground space for students at the school".

"I look forward to continuing to work with you to develop a longer term solution for permanent classrooms at Girraween Public School," the Minister said in his letter.

A similar letter was sent to the school's Parents & Citizens Association (P&C). "The reaction from all of the teachers was very positive," Mr Nash said. "There definitely was a great vibe of celebration and victory."

It was a victory for the school community, and for common sense. In the past decade, the school's enrolments have grown from 514 to 1150 students. The principal introduced a strict policy on out-of-area enrolments when he arrived at Girraween and next year the school will have a reduced catchment area.

Nevertheless, the school's student population has continued to grow. As a result, Girraween Public School now has more than 30 demountables — two for every permanent building on site. "We are all feeling the effects of the overcrowding," Mr Nash said. "It's not just an issue for one or two teachers."

In the last week of Term 3, Federation members met and committed to future stopwork industrial action (in a resolution subsequently withdrawn). That decision represented just one of several critical and challenging moments for members in a long and strategic campaign to secure improved infrastructure for their school community.

The current substantive Federation Representative, Tavisha Hewa-Gamage, wrote to the Minister after a Federation meeting was held at the beginning of this term.

"Your commitment to start delivering new and improved demountables to Girraween Public School in 2018 is an important step in reducing the footprint of our existing demountables and reclaiming space for our students," her letter said.

"We also welcome your commitment to the longer term conversation about new, permanent classrooms for Girraween Public School.

"It gives our school community confidence that you and the Department of Education share our commitment to delivering the high-quality school buildings that all students deserve."