



# WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to  
advance public education

## WACSSO SUBMISSION

*Social Media and Australian  
Society*

June 2024

# Acknowledgments

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations pays respect to First Nations and Traditional Custodians throughout Australia, recognising their connection to land, waters and sky.

We acknowledge parents, families, Elders and communities as sharers of culture and knowledge; and recognise the value this learning holds for children and young people.

## The Voice of Parents

WACSSO acknowledges parents\* as the first educators in their child's life. We celebrate and honour the diversity of families and recognise the vital role they play in supporting children and young people throughout their learning journeys.

This submission is informed by the experiences and feedback we receive from Western Australian Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs) and the parents of children attending WA public schools.

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\* WACSSO recognises the term "parent" to also include a child's primary carer.

## Introduction

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school students in Western Australia. We provide services to, and State and National representation for, more than 650 Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs) across WA. Together with the P&C community and all our stakeholders, WACSSO works tirelessly to advance public education in WA so that every student has the best chance to realise their potential and live the life they deserve.

Our vision is for Western Australian schools to provide world-leading education to every student. For over a century, we have worked passionately with school organisations across this State to improve the public education system, all the while never losing sight of a simple principle: that we are stronger together. WACSSO's response to this paper is informed by WACSSO Policy and by interactions with our networks of parents located across WA.

WACSSO's Policy articulates our goals relating to seeking, supporting and representing the views of parents and carers. Furthermore, the WACSSO policy position emphasises the importance of parents as critical partners in children's education, and seeks to strengthen the partnership with schools, the Department of Education, government, and all other stakeholders who have a role to play in building children's access to and success in the public school system. This work is based on an understanding that we are all responsible for the education of our children – individually and collectively. Increasingly, the responsibility of raising and educating children includes monitoring and guiding their use of social media platforms. We understand from our own experience, and that shared with us by parents across WA, that the social media landscape facing parents and children is complex, with trends and developments in this space moving rapidly. We appreciate the opportunity to provide the parent voice to this Inquiry and look forward to hearing the results of these investigations.

## **The use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media**

It is well known by parents that the minimum age verification hurdle in place to access many social media accounts is very easy to overcome, with children much younger than the 'required' 13 years of age able to gain access. Education regarding the use and availability of social media has improved markedly in recent years, however the ease with which children can create accounts and the difficulties parents face monitoring use (because of the nature of certain platforms) means that children are at an increased risk of receiving and viewing inappropriate content. Additionally, data protection, security and privacy (where ID is required) are all concerns for parents, particularly in cases where users of social media are under 18 years old.

What is not understood by parents is the lack of oversight or accountability from the providers of social media platforms to better safeguard their own "security" or verifications methods to regulate unauthorised use.

## **The important role of Australian journalism, news and public interest media in countering mis and disinformation on digital platforms**

Publishers on all platforms, digital and traditional, should take responsibility for the material they make available to the public. WACSSO has stated publicly in the past that the sensationalising of particular topics related to education, such as violence in schools, is unhelpful and can be damaging to the families involved in often challenging and traumatic situations. Young people whose stories, circumstances and images are shared without consent on mainstream media seem to lose their humanness as they become fodder for public comment, media headlines, sales and clickbait. This loss of power over the narrative around their own experience can have significant mental health and wellbeing impact. Furthermore, once an image, point of view, or story makes its way to public media it can resurface when the young person is much older, which may have additional impacts years after the incident has been recorded. As such it is critical that media organisations prioritise ethics over sales.

The responsibility of well-researched articles that consider diverse viewpoints should also be included in the list of responsibilities assigned to the media. To achieve this, a review of the qualifications and credentials of journalists, and how these are published, is recommended. When young people are consuming media online, they are less likely to understand the credentials of the content suppliers. Better regulation of what children are exposed to as 'news', with regards both to quality and age-appropriateness, is important to parents.

## **The algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health**

According to reports from our parents, one of the most concerning features of the algorithms in place when it comes to social media is how addictive it is to young consumers. Without education that empowers parents to establish and monitor family phone restrictions and boundaries, there is a risk that children will spend hours scrolling various applications, which can be isolating and unhealthy.

Addiction is a serious condition, and it can be debilitating, leading to negative mental health impacts. There should be an expectation that social media, and gaming companies are leaders in the safe use of their products and support consumers, especially young users, with inbuilt alerts, rest periods, and incentives for responsible and safe use. There is a sense that social media has a free pass of their responsibility to provide consumer protection unlike other products and services that is consumed by the public.

## **Other issues in relation to harmful or illegal content disseminated over social media, including scams, age-restricted content, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material**

The criminal behaviour of sextortion and scamming of young people is predatory and dangerous. The consequences to victims of cybercrime, at the minimum, causes distress and feelings of shame, anxiety, and depression. Terribly, there have been cases of tragically catastrophic outcomes. This criminal behaviour targeting our children and young people is unacceptable. WACSSO calls on government to increase its campaigns of the Online Safety Act 2021, to raise awareness of online safety laws, and the role of the [eSafety Commissioner](#).

Furthermore, we call on the companies who draw a profit from the gaming and online activities of children and young people, to safeguard their products from predators, and to work with organisations such as the eSafety Commissioner to flush out cybercriminals and protect vulnerable users. It is evident from our consultation with parents that there is a lack of transparency when it comes to gaming chat apps (such as discord) that allow access to other social media sites. Parents need to be empowered with knowledge in the many and varied contexts that exist when it comes to online platforms and behaviour. In the case of discord, for example, parents may think they are restricting access to social media when in fact it is being used a portal to access it.

Given the rapid rate with which online technology advances, especially with the evolution of AI, it is imperative that users are empowered to be aware of risks, protective of their privacy, and supported when issues arise. WACSSO commends the resources available via the eSafety Commissioner, and we encourage government to further promote this useful resource. We also commend the Federal Department of Education and the collaborative work they completed in late 2023, developing [The Australian Framework for Generative Artificial Intelligence \(AI\) in Schools](#). This framework puts Australian schools and Departments of Education on the front foot when it comes to planning and implementation of AI in classroom and school settings. Children and young people live in a world that will continue to expect people to have an online presence. As such it is imperative that public schools are resourced with the devices, infrastructure and expert skills to teach children to be competent future world citizens. Teaching children about online safety should be as second nature as teaching them about road safety – this topic should be a permanent and continually reviewed part of the Health curriculum, and not sidelined or quarantined to specialist classes and guest speakers only.

Families must also be supported to be better equipped to prepare their children to be safe and competent with technology and online platforms and environments. Navigating the plethora of internet safety providers on the market can also be confusing for parents, with many organisations seeing a business opportunity and establishing themselves in an already crowded market. Clarity around what to look for when installing security applications in the family home and on mobile devices would be advantageous.

Over the past few years, we've had experts in the area of cyber safety address our members at our annual conference. These presentations are always well attended and parents report feeling more aware of the dangers (and opportunities) of social media use and how best to monitor their child on various platforms. Staying up to date with advances in this area is a commonly repeated challenge that we hear from our affiliates.

## Any related matters

At its 2024 Conference, WACSSO will introduce to members a new Policy position relating to AI in education. The policy was developed in consultation with industry experts, incorporates feedback from parents on their needs, and references the policy position of the Western Australian Department of Education.

The proposed policy is as follows:

### **Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to address some of the challenges in education and innovate teaching and learning practices. To fully benefit from the potential of AI, schools must be resourced to appropriately manage a range of learning, security and ethical considerations. WACSSO supports the six underlying principles of the Australian Framework for Generative Artificial Intelligence in Schools:

- (a) Meaningful and purposeful human control is a necessity for the use of AI within schools.
- (b) Quality AI can assist with Education management and delivery, learning and assessment, empower teachers and enhance learning.
- (c) AI should be teacher-led in the classroom.
- (d) AI should be accessible to all schools and students.
- (e) Students will be exposed to and practice the responsible and ethical use of AI as part of their preparation for post-school success.
- (f) Students and others using generative AI tools must have their privacy and data protected  
WACSSO's position is that any inquiry into social media must consider the influence of AI in relation to the social media platforms.

Child users of any online social platform whether it is gaming, messaging apps, or the internet are more than likely to be exposed to AI. Being newer users presents challenges that children are ill-equipped to deal with. In consideration of the school environment members have reported situations where AI has been used to cyberbully, distorting students images, and other incidents where students are exposed to inappropriate AI-generated content. Such circumstances negatively impact students' mental health and their school experience.

WACSSO believes there are many opportunities where AI can be used to benefit education. To harness the opportunities that AI may present, schools must be well resourced with infrastructure, connectivity, and professional expertise to enable access to world class education. When such resources are in place, the use of AI can enhance the learning experience and equip students for future careers, and to be active contributors to society.

As the peak body representing parents of WA public school students, we ask the Committee to consider the influence of information that is being fed to our children non-stop via social media platforms. Parents know our children are being used as products by social media giants, specifically targeted as they interact on what they see as a social platform. Our children are being sold to, influenced, their data harvested and, in the most severe of cases, their sense of self groomed to become the perfect sales target.

The understanding that children and young people have of the world, and their place in it, can be radically altered if left under-supervised on these platforms. Parents want to better guide their children to properly navigate this online environment, and they want to equip with their children with the skills to be knowledgeable, safe independent online users. However, we cannot do it alone. Social media goliaths seem to escape the rigour that is applied to traditional news media, and as such have free reign on the content that they push to their consumers, including our children. WACSSO calls for stronger regulation and accountability for social media companies. State and Federal Government must be leaders in addressing the challenges that social media presents to Australian families.



