



WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to
advance public education

WACSSO SUBMISSION

National Teacher Shortage

December 2022

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.

Acknowledging 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.

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

Who is WACSSO

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school students in Western Australia. For over 100 years, WACSSO has provided services and representation at State and National levels to more than 660 Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs). WACSSO is primarily a volunteer organisation made up of a President and State Councillors (representatives) from geographically based electorates. As such, the Organisation has a wide representative reach across the state. WACSSO uses our strong networks with parents, carers and stakeholders in public education to inform our advocacy efforts.

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Introduction

WACSSO commends Federal Education Minister Jason Clare on the development of the draft National Teacher Workforce Action Plan aimed at addressing workforce shortages in education. The following submission responds, as requested by the submission process, to the key priority areas identified in the draft plan.

WACSSO acknowledges that the staffing shortages in schools are the result of complex, long-standing issues. These priority areas address some of the issues, but there is significant work to be done to overcome existing shortages and safeguard against future staffing gaps.

This submission is bound by the criteria of short responses to each of the 6 pre-determined priority areas. WACSSO welcomed this opportunity to advocate for parents and is open to commenting in more detail on the below feedback as required.

Priority Area 1: Elevating the Profession

WACSSO supports elevating the status and value of the teaching profession, however, this will take more than a media campaign. The constant public laments in the media about the quality of teachers, public schools, and students must cease. This negative narrative creates a sense of crisis in Australian education due to inadequate teaching/teachers and substandard public schools. Beyond a recruitment campaign, elevating all areas across education will elevate the status of professionals in this sector.

A national campaign to raise the status and value of teachers is a positive move and will improve public awareness of the complexity of teaching and the high level of skill across multiple intelligences that teachers require. WACSSO urges that this approach should be bolstered by an educational campaign targeted at politicians and the media (journalism students, journalists and editors) with the aim of raising awareness and holding accountable public discourse on teachers and public education.

WACSSO calls out inflammatory headlines and clickbait statements that cause division and controversy. WACSSO has always advocated for measured and informed approaches with the views of teachers, principals, parents and students in policymaking and media coverage.

Government must consider that when teachers are reported to be overworked, under-resourced, housed in less-than-ideal conditions (feedback from WACSSO's regional affiliates), and subject to workplace violence, these factors create negative public perceptions detracting from the attraction of the teaching profession and education. Rather than rhetoric, action is needed in these areas.

Parents and school communities love to celebrate success and excellence. However, careful consideration is required when attributing recognition to one teacher. Awards must be outcomes-based and equitable. What is the purpose, the measures, and is the process inclusive? The application process for awards, including the Order of Australia, can be onerous, meaning schools, P&Cs or individual teachers avoid participating.

Priority Area 2: Improving Teacher Supply

Australia's government education systems should be world-leading. Excellent public schools provide both excellent workplace environments and learning environments. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that Western Australian parents supported their schools, particularly their teachers. WACSSO regularly hears from affiliates their concerns about the conditions, workload and wellbeing of their teachers. As a first point, the priority should be retaining current teachers. Competitive teachers' salaries, reducing workload stress by hiring administrative and specialised support staff (the latter to support complex students' needs) and providing teachers with appropriate duties other than teaching (DOTT) time allocation, is an investment in improving teachers' working conditions.

Retaining teachers is challenging in regional and rural contexts where turnover rates are unpredictable. Teachers working in remote schools suffer various, interrelated wellbeing issues related to isolation, students' physical and mental health, and curriculum. Comprehensive measures including reliable access to medical professionals, professional development on trauma-informed practices, and a focus shift to curriculum development and students' needs rather than performative agendas is required.

WACSSO's regional affiliates continue to raise concerns regarding high turnover of teachers and principals. WACSSO has long recommended that the suitability, quantity, and state of teacher housing in regional areas is a concern. When teachers have family with them and can experience the community as a parent and an employee, this positively impacts retention and the wellbeing of the teacher. Additionally, research shows that effective incentives include suitable housing and rental subsidies, extended incentives to teachers' partners and families and medical travel and accommodation expenses for all. Packages should be bundled and flexible to meet individuals' career and personal needs. Research demonstrates that connecting teachers to the local community is also essential to improve wellbeing, efficacy, and parent engagement.

Priority Area Three: Strengthening Initial Teacher Education

WACSSO has long encouraged ITE to have a stronger component regarding engaging with parents. We believe that parent engagement currently lacks identified standards, consistency and resourcing. WACSSO has observed, through anecdotal reports, that teachers who engage well with parents have an easier start to their teaching careers, are more productive, and are more likely to feel job satisfaction, valued and connected. Additionally, they are more likely to stay in a community, and to be supported by that community. Research around best practice in parent engagement and co-design (universities and parent representative bodies) of revised ITE education on this matter has been something WACSSO has advocated for and resources to support this would be welcomed.

According to the Australian Teacher Workforce Data, since 2005, there has been a slight increase in students enrolled in initial teacher education courses, with 28,694 students enrolled in 2019, which would account for the country's demand. However, we lose a significant number of aspiring teachers halfway through their studies, before completing their courses. The most likely causes, alongside the decreasing status of the profession, are increasing costs of getting qualified, the teaching practicum requirement and the lack of guarantee of a permanent job.

The emphasis on attracting and retaining First Nations peoples in the profession is highly relevant, but it requires earlier initiatives in the previous educational levels. Today, only 63% of Aboriginal youth aged 20-24 have finished Year 12; specific strategies are needed to ensure Aboriginal students are successful. For students to succeed in primary and secondary schools, they must be appropriately supported in a responsive system that embraces their cultural identity and needs. First Nations communities must be part of the school's daily life to support the students and the transference of the First Nations people's cultural knowledge and assets to the classroom and school community.

Priority Area Four: Maximising Time to Teach

WACSSO supports this initiative however time allocation for family engagement must be an objective of this measure. Parent communication and engagement must not be outsourced. WACSSO acknowledges that some tasks could go to support staff. ITE students are in schools for professional learning; only tasks that enhance their development should be reassigned to them.

Parent engagement must be individualised and resourced to be of the highest possible benefit. It is essential that teachers and school administrators recognise and negate barriers to parent engagement. WACSSO understands the benefits of new technology to share learning experiences and information in real-time. However genuine parent engagement requires a combination of approaches and resourcing to create real connection.

There is no quick fix to the problem of time scarcity for teachers. Even when supported with the best resources, teachers require adequate DOTT. Teachers' workload needs to allow for more preparation time ensuring teachers can combine their expertise and knowledge about students with teaching materials and methodologies that are best suited to the needs of that class.

The foremost strategy to alleviate teachers' workload is reducing educators' non-teaching work with other staff, including administrative and specialised teams. State and Territory governments must invest in these non-teaching roles. WACSSO policy requires the government to fund public education to the level that ensures high-quality education for all students. Although there are areas for volunteers to perform school-based education support activities after taking appropriate certification (Certificates in School-Based Education Support) or program-specific training, relying on a volunteer workforce to address shortfalls in schools is unacceptable. If increasing the number of parent volunteers is explored, State and Territory peak parent bodies such as WACSSO must be engaged to make recommendations about the role of volunteers.

Priority Area Five: Better Understanding of Future Teacher Workforce Needs

WACSSO acknowledges that understanding current and future demand for teachers is critical, as is understanding the attrition data and the root causes of teachers leaving the workforce. We have a long-standing position about the need for better data on current and future demands within the education sector. In particular, we have called for this in the area of school planning and development. Poor planning, not just in staffing, puts the system under strain and makes it difficult for teachers and families. This is particularly felt when school sites are overcrowded and/or under-maintained. In responding to this priority area, it is critical that published data is of high quality and peer-reviewed. In line with the suggested initiative for an educational campaign directed at politicians and the media to raise awareness about the impact of their discourses on teachers, it is also necessary to promote awareness of the required precautions regarding the presentation of data. Creating a blame culture is detrimental to learning environments and educational outcomes. Anecdotal or sensationalist commentary that seeks to blame certain stakeholders for attrition issues related to teaching is unhelpful, harmful and must be avoided.

The establishment of a National Quality Framework to guide regulation requires cautious consideration. WACSSO recognises the potential benefits of the proposed NQF enabling improved workforce movement and standards across Australia. However, it is critical to guard against negative impacts on ITE and to ensure ITE candidates complete their qualifications providing a continuation of teachers locally.

Priority Area Six: Better Career Pathways to Support and Retain Teachers in the Profession

School communities welcome graduate teachers, however they recognise that in order for them to succeed they must be supported. The number of early career teachers who leave the profession suggests that improving induction strategies such as mentoring is critical. Furthermore, graduate teachers who take positions in regional rural and remote locations require additional support to help them adjust to community contexts and moving away from their home base.

The WACSSO position on cultural competency is that it's critical this is ongoing learning, that the content is specific to the local context and that it is informed and led by Aboriginal educators.

Micro-credentials are potentially helpful, but only if the credentials are quality learning opportunities. This idea will not assist if staff struggle to be released from classroom teaching to do their further training. The ability to attend professional development workshops or complete micro-credentials is a particular issue in regional areas where travel requirements and the absence of relief teachers makes it especially problematic. Financial and time costs need to be considered carefully and support for teachers must be made available. If teachers need to fund their own professional development, this becomes a barrier to teachers upskilling or moving within the system.

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