



# WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to  
advance public education

## **WACSSO SUBMISSION**

# ***Pathways to Post-School Success: Response to Discussion Paper***

December 2023

# 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.

## Contact

Pania Turner  
WACSSO President  
0477 644 000 | [president@wacssso.wa.edu.au](mailto:president@wacssso.wa.edu.au) | 151 Royal Street East Perth, WA 6004

---

\* 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 and representation at the State and National level to 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.

## **What is the purpose of senior secondary schooling? What does it look like when senior secondary schooling succeeds?**

WACSSO believes that the purpose of senior secondary school is to equip young people with the skills, knowledge and ability to engage in future learning opportunities and/or meet the demands of the workforce. Parents expect that as their children graduate from senior secondary schooling, they will have the necessary skills to respond to rapidly changing personal and professional environments. It should be a goal of senior secondary schooling that students, now young adults, feel they have found their pathway, and they are confident about their post-school destination. WACSSO believes success can be identified by seeing happy, productive and engaged citizens and a diverse workforce with people of various backgrounds represented at all levels.

## **Are there other important objectives that have not been identified? If so, what?**

Other objectives the panel may wish to consider include the identification of skills young people need to respond to the (unknown) demands of the future workforce, building these into the curriculum, and providing and promoting opportunities for civic responsibility. WACSSO also encourages the panel to ensure work is done to improve the transparency of pathway choices and enhance the support given to students and families as they navigate the options, with schools working in partnership with their community to achieve positive outcomes. Suggestions on how to achieve this are provided in other responses to this paper below.

## **How should the Expert Panel weigh these objectives? Which are the most important?**

WACSSO's experience is that parents view all these objectives as equally important, and the panel should take a collaborative approach. Actions in one area will impact outcomes in other areas.

## **What is the role of wellbeing in senior secondary education? Should the Expert Panel treat it as a separate objective or a pre-condition to 'optimising student engagement'?**

WACSSO continually hears from our members and from parents that wellbeing is a prerequisite for student engagement and a matter of both high priority and high concern for parents. We believe that a part of the educational experience on offer at schools should be the development of resilience capability, which can support enduring positive wellbeing. WACSSO also believes that achieving wellbeing in young people is a collaborative effort that requires schools to work in partnership with families. For the purposes of this plan, wellbeing should not be considered as a stand-alone or separate item; it is something that should be considered alongside all aspects of the educational experience for young people.

WACSSO also asserts that when considering student success, the discussions and deliberations on wellbeing should look at both the staff and students in a school. Parents acknowledge the impact of excellent, happy teachers in engaging students and helping them navigate the choices available. We also believe that improvements to individual wellbeing are not solely the responsibility of the education sector, and there is a range of government services available to improve student mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, we understand the critical role of happy, and safe home and family environments for children and young people to thrive.

In our discussions with parents, we have found that while academic achievement is a priority for some families, ALL families want their children to be happy, secure and to have good, healthy friendships. Wellbeing is the priority for parents, and in the current context of raising children, it is a topic that comes up time and again, with various environmental concerns, such as increased pressure, social media, screen time and bullying raised by parents as detrimental.

## **Are there reforms that have taken place in other jurisdictions that this review should consider in a WA context?**

Numerous parents have raised with WACSSO their concerns regarding the use of NAPLAN and/or OLNA in WA as prerequisites for graduation. There have also been a number of concerns raised regarding the lack of clarity around the recent changes to NAPLAN, particularly for those parents of Year 9 students.

WACSSO is aware of units of study offered in Years 9 and 10 in NSW and SA that are dedicated to career advice and pathways training. It would be worthwhile investigating these options to determine if they would be applicable and/or beneficial in the WA context.

## Why do schools make the decisions they do on what course, program and pathway options they offer?

WACSSO is aware of limitations in place for regional and remote schools, and the impact these restrictions have on the post-secondary pathway options for students. We encourage the panel to consider how to make partnerships between schools with limited resources easier to establish so that collectively groups of schools can run programs that aren't available at individual schools due either to a lack of resources or insufficient student enrolments. WACSSO has also received feedback from parents that SIDE courses can cause timetabling issues for students and the lack of teacher support for these students can be detrimental to student performance. Parents have also expressed concern over the lack of VET/general courses in some schools and the limited options regarding work placements and work experience. Enhancing these options for students, again potentially through schools partnering together, would improve student outcomes.

Ultimately, the feedback we receive from parents is that options related to Year 11 and 12 subjects, and consequently post-school pathway options, become more and more limited when the school is in a more rural location. Where school partnerships are not possible, meaningful, supported online learning options would benefit students and families. Parents express concern that students become disengaged in learning due to the limited options in their area, and this needs to be addressed with online or school partnership models of delivery. The School of Isolated and Distance Education should be consulted on this topic.

WACSSO has also heard from parents of students with disabilities, and, again, the options provided are limited in many cases. Additionally, for these families, support disappears once the child finishes secondary school, and some parents find it difficult to find further meaningful learning or work options for their child/children.

The announcement in November regarding students who complete Year 6 in a standalone Primary school being able to access transport assistance to attend their local district high school in selected areas was welcomed by many families. This will assist in opening up learning opportunities and, therefore likely have a positive impact on post-secondary school pathways. We note, however, that the assistance must be monitored and limited to eligible high school students only. Permitting primary school students to make use of this allowance to attend larger primary schools outside of their local community will have an adverse effect on the local community schools.

## Which students are served well by the decisions that schools make? Which students are not served well?

WACSSO understands that there is still a stigma in the school context of choosing ATAR versus non-ATAR pathways. This stigma isn't helped by things such as subject blocking, approaches to timetabling and counselling students away from the ATAR pathway. There is also a persistent perception among parents that ATAR courses are resourced at a higher level than non-ATAR courses and that there is a disparity of teacher quality. It is recommended resourcing and quality of staff be investigated by the panel, and if there is an unexplained disparity that this is addressed by schools.

Generally speaking, more needs to be done to lift the learning experience on offer at public schools (as discussed in the "Facing the Facts" Report); we know from our parents that students who are already at a disadvantage because of their individual learning needs for example, are often further disadvantaged because of their school location (eg, regional or outer metropolitan). These disadvantages extend to post-school pathways and limit future opportunities for these students, and therefore need to be addressed.

WACSSO has also heard from stakeholders that alternative schools (engagement centres, special education schools etc) limit educational pathways, and those offered do not always provide the best outcomes.

## Why do students make the decisions that they do on courses and programs? What are the consequences of student decisions?

Choosing ATAR subjects in Year 10 and the pressure on students to 'choose a career' at this point can be a heavy burden for students, particularly if they do not feel properly prepared for the decision. It is also a decision that can be confronting for parents who are trying to assist their child navigate the options available. A system that allows students to choose subjects based on interest, with more flexibility when it comes to higher education (eg, less pre-requisites or broader first-year units at university), would allow students to follow their passions, in turn improving performance. Making choices based on predicted careers is less accurate and more stressful for students and families.

WACSSO has heard from parents that there is limited access to taster courses to inform pathway choices, particularly in remote and rural areas. Additionally, in these areas, an uptick in students selecting general courses limits the number and breadth of ATAR courses these schools can offer face-to-face. Parents have said that face-to-face by the school, rather than online via SIDE, is a better pathway to success for students and so they are disappointed that it is not an option for more ATAR subjects.

While the decision in Year 10 feels early and heavy for students and their parents, this is because discussions about pathways and options in Years 11 and 12 happen quite late. It would be good to engage families on the options available earlier in high school so that there is more time to plan. This is not about bringing the decision earlier but about starting the conversation earlier. This is particularly the case for students at schools where resources and subject options are limited. Discussions about subject choices, or the fact that this will be expected, could be woven into the transition process for Year 6 students preparing for high school. According to their parents, the most ideal situation is for their students to make decisions based on interests, talents and passions. If these can be teased out earlier, encouraged and built on with support given to show students and families the pathway options, that would positively impact subject choices and success.



## How could students be better supported to make decisions on senior secondary pathways?

Parents report to WACSSO that the provision of careers advice in schools is very non-standard; some schools do an excellent job, and some do a very poor job. Ideally, the role of careers advisor should be held in high esteem by schools and the Education Department, rather than be an add-on for a teacher, which can often be the case.

Parents and students seek more access to career taster opportunities and expos and better access to TAFE and universities. Ideally, careers advice should include sessions and resources for parents on how to assist their child navigate the pathways available to them at their school, plus there should be transparency on all pathway options available (eg, NOA, VET/work pathways etc). It would be good to provide the right words, terms and talking points to parents so that discussions taking place with individual students in schools can be mirrored by parents at home. Schools necessarily have relationships with the whole family, so making use of these relationships and the communication channels they provide will help get messages to parents and minimise confusion.

Parents have reported to us of their experiences with schools being unwilling to hear what families and students want to do, instead pushing them down particular avenues not of their choosing. This activity needs to stop. Shutting off the ATAR option to students, for example, is sub-optimal. There are many pathways available that students can choose from once they have uncovered their interest area. Students should be nurtured and supported in finding the best way to turn their interests and passions into a career.

Parents have also reported that the course and pathway options available are not clearly communicated by some schools. Additionally, students can be left to explain the options to their parents. Having clearer pathway information available to parents, directed to them as a specific audience and which states what options will be available if a student chooses a certain pathway would be beneficial. Having staff available in schools who understand the pathways available and can help parents navigate the options would also be beneficial to many families.

As mentioned above, the timing of when careers discussions start between schools and families is crucial. If the discussions about post-secondary pathways happen too late, the options available can come as a surprise to parents and students (the options presented by the school might not match expectations). The earlier and more transparent communications between the school and families are, on all things, the better the outcomes.

## **Are there opportunities to strengthen student engagement, and if so, how can this be done?**

WACSSO encourages schools to establish and then leverage the parent-school relationship to enhance engagement. Parents who understand and support the school's student engagement goals become active partners in their child's learning and post-school goals. It seems schools sometimes forget the networks, connections, and resources families provide in supporting their child's post school pathways.

More investment by government in extra-curricular activities is required. Parents observe that students form friendships in sporting teams and after-school clubs, and friendships lead to stronger engagement with the school community. Secondary schools can build upon participation in programs such as Kidsport or similar to introduce or extend non-sporting extra-curricular activities to strengthen engagement.

As mentioned above, WACSSO believes encouraging subject choices in line with passion and interest (not only in line with ability) increases student engagement.

## **Are there opportunities to improve student wellbeing as they progress through senior secondary pathways?**

Our parents have been vocal about the impact of OLNA and Year 9 NAPLAN on student wellbeing. As discussed earlier, reviewing the use of OLNA and/or NAPLAN as a graduation requirement and pre-requisite for certain pathways would have a positive impact on wellbeing. If the OLNA/NAPLAN requirement is to remain, it needs to be explained much more clearly to parents and students.

## **How could outcomes be strengthened for students who leave school early?**

Students who leave school early exit from a familiar environment and enter one that is unfamiliar and potentially lacking in the same level of structure and support. Prior to leaving school, outcomes for individual students could be strengthened by schools working in partnership with families to support the choice and help facilitate meaningful employment experiences. A school following up on a student who has exited may also be welcomed by families.

A transparent approach by the Department of Education with parents and students as to the timeline and process for transitioning from school to the workplace is needed. This would be supported by reduced wait times for an actioning and releasing the NOA, enabling employers to offer school hours work placements, which in turn allows the student to transition to meaningful work hours sooner.

## How could outcomes be strengthened for diverse cohorts?

Genuine family engagement with people who are open to understanding the particular needs of students from diverse backgrounds is critical. Parents often express to WACSSO that while schools may be willing to listen, it is not until they connect with a staff member who has lived experience (whether that be personally, or well-established professional experience) that they feel they are truly heard and provided with support that addresses the needs of their child. Schools who have strong engagement practices will have already created environments where students are supported. A range of established networks will be in place to ensure students have mentors, service providers, and industry connections to enhance their post school learning and career pathways. Understanding the importance of these connections for success emphasises the specific skills and expertise required in the careers advisor role as a facilitator of education, industry, and services relationships.

**WA Council of State School Organisations Inc.**

151 Royal Street  
East Perth  
Western Australia 6004

PO Box 6295  
East Perth  
Western Australia 6892

**p** (08) 9264 4000  
**f** (08) 9264 4948  
**e** [info@wacssso.wa.edu.au](mailto:info@wacssso.wa.edu.au)

