



# WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to  
advance public education

## Submission to the Review of public education in WA

**WA Council of State School  
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## Acknowledgement of Country

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations pays respect to Traditional Owners throughout Australia, recognising their connections to lands, waters, and skies.

We acknowledge parents, families, Elders, and communities as first educators, sharers of culture and knowledge; and recognise the value these learnings hold for children and young people.

## Partnering with P&Cs since 1921

WACSSO acknowledges parents as the first educators in their child's life. We celebrate and value the diversity of families, recognising the vital role they play in supporting children and young people throughout their learning journeys. In this submission, WACSSO uses the word parent to represent the different people who are a child's primary caregiver. This submission is informed by the experiences and concerns of Western Australian parents of children attending public schools, Parents and Citizen Associations (P&Cs) and school communities.

## About WACSSO

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school students in Western Australia. Since 1921, WACSSO has provided services and representation at State and National level 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

Access to quality, well-resourced government education is critical for children's success. This understanding is embraced in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for children, listed as Goal 4 Quality Education "recognises the need to provide quality education for all, and most especially vulnerable populations, including poor children, children living in rural areas, persons with disabilities, indigenous people and refugee children" (United Nations, 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/sdgs/goal-4-quality-education>).

Furthermore, far from being a standalone area, education is powerful because it empowers not only individual outcomes but societal trajectory. "When children are offered the tools to develop to their full potential, they become productive adults ready to give back to their communities and break the cycle of poverty. Education enables upward socioeconomic mobility." (United Nations, 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/sdgs/goal-4-quality-education>)

WACSSO congratulates the State School Teachers Union of WA and its members for their commitment to promoting and improving public education in Western Australia for all people.

## Parents and critical partners in their child's education

WACSSO acknowledges the pressures and challenges Western Australian government schools face to deliver world-class education to all children. Public schools provide education for all children, WACSSO embraces this core principle, and we strongly support the strategic statement of the Western Australian Department of Education: every student, every classroom, every day. WACSSO aligns with improvement drivers one and five: "1. Provide every student with a pathway to a successful future; "5. Partner with families, communities and agencies to support the educational engagement of every student." (WA Education Department 2020). These drivers recognise that every student can be successful through constructive partnerships. WACSSO considers the partnership between the school and parents as critical to enhance educational outcomes and provide meaningful and positive school experiences for children.

WACSSO supports Focus 2023 (WA Education Department 2022). We are keen to see the development of authentic parent engagement approaches adopted across Western Australian public schools so that parents experience a consistent quality engagement practice when interacting with Principals and teachers.

Resourcing parent and family engagement well means good communication and improved relationship building with teachers and the school. A frustration that is reported to be raised often by Principals is that of parents wanting to have a discussion with a teacher prior to the school day starting. If this is a recurring event, better communication with the parent is required to inform when a teacher can schedule a suitable time for both the parent and teacher. Teachers must have an appropriate allocation of DOTT to allow for quality parent engagement.

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We must shift from the concerning narrative we have inherited as a leftover from the pandemic that parents are not welcome on school sites. Parents are critical partners in their child's education. Furthermore, the collective power of a positive group of parents working as champions of the school benefits the school community. Schools must recognise that it is significantly easier for parents to be partners in a school and in the education system if they are able to reflect, speak, and act collectively. (WACSSO, 2022)

## Changes to community expectations of our school leaders and teachers

Schools are places of familiarity for students and their families. As such, schools are well placed to nurture other areas of student development, such as social skills and health and wellbeing. WACSSO supports the role of educators across these areas. However, it is incorrect to expect public schools and those who staff them to manage high-level issues without support. Doing so unfairly burdens principals and teachers, places stereotypes and labels on school communities, and excuses essential partners and other services from their responsibilities. Critically it does not solve the specific, often complex issues being experienced by the student.

WACSSO often hears of parents desperately seeking assistance when their child faces challenges in learning and school. Parents will turn to the school for help because it is the place where the difficulties are playing out. Exceptional, caring, and passionate staff work hard to assist students experiencing challenges beyond learning. School staff are faced with students dealing with poverty, homelessness, the impact of living in remote areas, mental health, juvenile justice, family breakdowns, trauma, and more. These serious areas require specific expertise and multiple resources to assist students and their families in navigating and overcoming them. While schools are well placed to connect families to support services, schools must not be left alone to manage ongoing and resource-intensive support.

Principals, teachers, and support staff help because they care about children and young people. This care and passion, this humanness, must not be taken for granted and used as an excuse to load additional responsibilities onto the role of educators. Instead, the government must empower schools where there is a culture of care and compassion and where student learning outcomes are enhanced because the appropriate organisations and professionals support families and schools.

## Teacher and principal workloads

Finding 7.2 of the Productivity Commission (2022) Review of the National School Reform Agreement Study Report states, "teachers work long hours, and their workload has increased.

Australian teacher workload is greater than the OECD average. Australian teachers spend more time on non-teaching tasks and less time on teaching tasks than their international counterparts. Teacher

workload has increased over time. Many teachers cite heavy workload as a reason for wanting to leave the profession" (Productivity Commission, 2022, p42). The review offers one solution: teachers are appropriately supported by the assignment of education assistants (EAs) equipped with the skills to provide support in crucial areas (Productivity Commission, 2022).

WACSSO affiliates value the role of EAs in the classroom and agree that skilled EAs can reduce teacher workload, especially in high-needs classrooms, which is why in WACSSO's submission to the Draft National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, we recognised that 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 (WACSSO, 2022).

Ensuring that schools are adequately staffed to teach the full curriculum well in all public schools is essential. WACSSO State Councillors based in electorates across Western Australia often report teachers secured to the school for a specific subject, taking on additional roles outside their area of expertise. The requirement of teachers to take on other subjects and duties is further increased if they teach in rural and remote areas.

Reviewing non-essential items on a teacher's schedule is worthy of consideration. However, we are cautious about categorising what is deemed essential and what is not in the school context. Where there is an opportunity to reduce non-teaching duties, such as delegation of administrative duties, it should be done. Removing extra curricula learning such as school camps, excursions, and swimming lessons raises concerns for WACSSO affiliates.

As mentioned previously, having specialised and expert teams to lead student wellbeing and mental health is critical. WACSSO affiliates have long called for improved support from trained mental health professionals.

WACSSO's regional affiliates continue to raise concerns regarding the high turnover of teachers and principals and the negative impact of a high staff turnover in small communities. High staff turnover takes a toll on the remaining staff in these schools. The staff must take on programs themselves to keep them running or train incoming teachers, both of which are an additional drain on their time. Unfortunately, with the loss of staff, sometimes programs such as specialised arts programs are dropped.

It remains essential for our affiliates that teacher-parent interviews and communication must be teacher-led, with parents having the right to meet with a classroom teacher or principal to discuss their child's needs.

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## Safe Learning Environments

WACSSO recognises the vital voice of students as emerging leaders to encourage and enact change within their communities. WACSSO affiliates have a clear expectation that public schools are places of safety for all students and for all staff. Feeling safe at school means that diversity is embraced. Our schools must be places of inclusion where the rich diversity of students and their families is celebrated. Inclusive school communities actively seek out and address barriers, implicit or implied, that discriminate.

The effects of high and medium-level aggression and violence negatively impact students, staff and families. It is unreasonable to expect that a student can learn well when they feel anxious or unsafe at school. Equally, it is unreasonable to expect a teacher to perform well when they feel anxious or unsafe in their work environment. Therefore, it is critical that an urgent collective approach is taken to address the disruption and increasing behavioural issues being seen in our schools and classrooms.

Schools that work to create strong family engagement cultures where parents are informed of and contribute to the school's behaviour policies create powerful partnerships with parents that better support students to take responsibility for their actions. Shared terminology and expectations of behaviour at school and home create a consistent message about behaviour and support the efforts of teachers to maintain a positive classroom climate.

(WACSSO, 2023)

In this submission, WACSSO makes a clear statement that anybody, including parents, using aggression or violence to express their dissatisfaction or frustration against principals, teachers, school staff, students or even their own children should be dealt with by the police, and within the law.

## The impact of COVID-19

Western Australia's response in education to the global pandemic highlighted the effectiveness of collaboration and strong education partnerships. WACSSO acknowledges the leadership demonstrated by Department of Education Director General Lisa Rodgers. Very early in the pandemic, Ms Rodgers ensured associations and peak bodies such as WACSSO were critical partners in supporting education to be available with as little disruption as possible to students. It was hard, it was challenging, but the work done by all who participated in the System Alliance Group meetings had a shared goal of supporting students, families, and education staff through the pandemic. WACSSO would like to thank all leaders and representatives who contributed to that group; our organisation considers that body of work historic.

WACSSO also acknowledges the efforts of Western Australian parents, who demonstrated their commitment to supporting schools to remain open for learning, with most families embracing school-based COVID-19 directives. Again, we reiterate that while parents were committed to supporting

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abstaining from entering school grounds to prevent the spread of disease, this exclusion was not meant to become normalised once the pandemic was over.

WACSSO affiliates have also raised concerns about the disparity between schools reintroducing excursions, incursions, school camps, swimming lessons and the opportunity for parents to participate in school experiences such as school carnivals and assemblies. WACSSO views these celebrations as important school experiences and milestones. Such experiences build social connections, provide lifelong memories, celebrate diversity, and recognise the efforts of students and staff. We strongly encourage all schools to reintroduce these activities.

Regarding the impact of Covid-19, this submission refers to WACSSO's 2022 Federal Election Position Paper. Response and recovery to world disaster events such as a global pandemic is a Commonwealth responsibility. WACSSO recognises that a new federal government is now in place, and it must lead through the ongoing recovery process.

Our students and their families, our P&Cs and their schools are still in recovery and require support to build on from the effects of the pandemic. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the wellbeing of students, teachers, and families. It is essential that people experiencing anxiety and mental health concerns from the pandemic are supported to heal and recover. Similar to how we respond to disasters such as bushfires and storms, professionals with experiences in long-term disaster environments must be available to assist schools in providing for their communities.

“A national recovery strategy and investment is required. The Australian education system must come out of the pandemic stronger, with the experiences of all education systems across the country considered. Australian schools must be resourced to pursue works programs to improve school ventilation, technology connectivity and infrastructure, and enhanced outdoor learning areas. State and Territory governments will require additional federal support to ensure government schools are supplied with COVID-safe resources in the short term and can undertake retrofitting and building modification as required to ensure adequate ventilation in the longer term.

The pandemic has caused society to reconsider how we interact in work, social, and educational settings. Targeted building modifications, innovative classroom and learning environment design, and clear safety strategies will reassure school communities that the safety of students and school staff is a priority. It is important that the Australian Government lead research into best practices for creating healthy school environments to ensure schools are better prepared for future pandemics.” (WACSSO, 2022, p8)

There cannot be a discussion about the school experience during the pandemic without raising online learning and access to equitable access to digital technologies. “The pandemic revealed that while many schools could provide high-quality remote/online education, students and families in low socio-economic households often struggled to access these services. Barriers to success include a higher risk of educational disengagement, inadequate access to technology, low levels of technological literacy, and a

lower capacity to face the emotional challenges that off-site learning may bring. Considering these barriers, delivery via online learning can greatly impact education outcomes for these students. It is unacceptable that when the pandemic put pressure on the education system, our most vulnerable students were the most affected.” (WACSSO, 2022 p 6)

The parliamentary report *Lessons from remote learning: COVID-19 Follow-up to the Inquiry into Digital Innovation in Secondary Education* (WA Government, 2021) revealed that students who struggled most to access digital technology were those in regional areas and with low socio-economic status. Families know too well the high cost of laptops, iPads, and internet access. These items are often out of reach for some families, who often feel pressured to go into debt to purchase them. Families report to WACSSO having to share laptops, feeling embarrassed that they cannot afford the latest items, and their children feel pressured to have the latest technologies. This pressure adds to the strain and stress on families already facing financial hardship. “The flow-on effects of financial hardship and poverty limit a young person’s access to the core resources required to thrive at school. Some of these effects include a lack of access to the resources and financial barriers for students choosing a specific study pathway due to costs” (WACSSO, 2022, p6). For public education to truly be accessible for all children, our schools must be resourced to remove the learning barriers of poverty.

## **An equitable education provision across diverse student populations and regions**

This submission's opening statement refers to the government's role in resourcing quality education for all children. WACSSO represents over 660 P&Cs in school communities across Western Australia. These P&Cs volunteer in their school communities with students with diverse cultural backgrounds, Aboriginal students, students living with disability, students living in regional, rural and remote areas, LGBTIQ+ students, students from different socio-economic backgrounds, and students of different ages, all at differing stages of the school journey. P&Cs are incredibly proud of their schools and students, and they care, which is why they work so hard to fundraise to provide additional resources.

While P&Cs readily donate to provide extra resources, WACSSO's affiliates continue to call for the federal government to commit to funding government schools to a minimum of 100% of the School Resource Standard; and ensure federal funding for government schools increases as a minimum to the same amount per student as non-government schools.

## **Conclusion**

WACSSO acknowledges the dedicated and professional people who work in Western Australia’s public education system. Schools are communities with the core responsibility to educate children and young people so that they can lead rich and fulfilling lives, reach their potential, and contribute to future generations. Parents have the critical role of raising healthy and happy children. Parents are responsible for ensuring that they are active and positive contributors to their child’s education and school



experience. Schools and parents must work together in partnership. This submission reflects the philosophy of a strong parent and school relationship.

We thank the Review Panel for considering this submission and look forward to the findings and recommendations from the review.

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## References

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