



WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to
advance public education

Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

WA Council of State School Organisations

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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.**

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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 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.

In preparing this paper, we have responded to nine areas, and in doing so taken into account the views of parents expressed to WACSSO via both formal and informal channels. We have also referenced previously submitted positions, which can be found on our website at <https://www.wacssso.wa.edu.au/advocacy/submissions/>.

What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA? Should these go beyond academic performance (for example, attendance and engagement)?

WACSSO celebrates academic achievement, viewing technical skills, critical abilities, and knowledge development as the core purpose of education. Children learn and develop best when the whole child is considered. Academic achievement should not be measured without consideration of the wellbeing of students. Furthermore, the NSRA should consider the other crucial influences in education, teachers and parents. Significant discussions are being held about the load of teachers and principals, as well as the pressures facing families across Australia. Siloing the critical roles each of these groups is detrimental to a world leading education system.

WACSSO stands with other peak parent bodies who call for family engagement to be considered as an essential element of building a better and fairer education system. Parents are essential partners in education, schools and teachers must be supported to have welcoming, culturally appropriate, and safe family engagement policies and practices.

The funding model of schools also needs to be addressed in the NSRA. The current funding model is inadequate when it comes to ensuring that public schools can be in a position to provide world-class

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education to their students (and a world-class working environment for their staff). We reiterate our position from our 2022 Federal Election Paper, which is that:

The Australian government commits to funding government schools to a minimum of 100% of the School Resource Standard; and it ensure federal funding for government schools increases as a minimum to the same amount per-student as non-government schools.

How can all students at risk of falling behind be identified early on to enable swift learning interventions?

WACSSO encourages a broader approach to this issue. We know that some students struggle at school, which can be overlooked because of the stretched resources available, particularly in Australian public schools. Parents are often required to access external sources of support and treatment (such as psychology) for which there are long wait times and then little collaboration between external agencies and schools. For students to thrive, they need a combination of supports and where these aren't offered in a school, the school should be open to collaboration with external experts.

WACSSO also asserts that parents and caregivers are a child's first educator, and their views and concerns should be taken into consideration when implementing learning interventions. Far too frequently, IEPs are established without parent engagement or input and thus essential pieces of information are missing from the consideration process for these students.

Alternatively, schools that have clear family engagement strategies actively seek to build a collaborative approach of knowledge sharing and care for students. These schools often run early education and pre-kindergarten programs building strong family school ties before a student starts formal schooling. Proactive schools will be connected to their communities and have professional relationships with community health, playgroups, and other social services. They will be ready to welcome children before they are enrolled at school; this knowledge is essential to support vulnerable families to feel connected to their schools.

What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from school, systems, government and the community to deliver this?

Schools who are doing well with supporting good mental health have strong relationships between all members of the school community; parents, students and staff. Respectful relationships where parents can advocate for their child, and take informed advice from experts about the optimal learning environment are critical.

One of the most important ways to support children and young people to be healthy and promote a strong sense of wellbeing is to ensure they have access to professional mental health and wellbeing

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services. Schools are excellent places to deliver these essential services, as they provide a familiar and supportive environment that is readily accessible. However, government schools lack adequate access to school psychologists, increasing the risk of mental health problems in students being overlooked and untreated.

In 2021, the Federal Government commissioned a report into Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. The findings of that report made it clear that the key points for intervention are early in life. This supports the need for early, expert support in schools. The report had other findings in relation to mental health and wellbeing services being provided in schools, some of these include:

- The over-representation of young people experiencing mental illness made it essential to act early in life.
- Psychologists in schools have the capacity to provide early intervention and counselling support to reduce the need for students to be removed from schools to receive care.
- There is currently a skill shortage of school psychologists and counsellors.
- It is recommended that the ratio of school psychologists to students should increase to 1/500 (an increase of 100 per cent on the current rate).

Would there be benefit in surveying students to help understand student perceptions of safety and belonging at school, subjective state of wellbeing, school climate and classroom disruption? Would there be value in incorporating this into existing National Assessment Program surveys such as NAPLAN?

WACSSO is a strong supporter of the student voice. Children think about and are impacted by big issues such as poverty, climate change, discrimination, mental health, and identity. Children and young people are ready to tell their stories when supported by safe and genuine means to share their views and experiences. WACSSO calls for society to have the courage to listen to the experiences of our children and reflect honestly on how we build barriers instead of breaking them down.

If surveying students (or any stakeholder) the surveyor needs to be prepared to action items that point to a consistent theme that is either a positive to be amplified or a negative to be addressed. Seeking feedback, and doing nothing is unacceptable.

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To what extent do school leaders and teachers have the skills and training to support students struggling with mental health?

WACSSO hears from parents, and our affiliates that teachers and leaders have minimal resources, skills and training to support mental health issues. While parents have the expectation that school staff should have a level of understanding of the mental health issues that students can face, they recognise it is generally not a teacher's area of professional expertise. There is limited support available within the school itself, with few public schools having permanent psychologists and for those who do, the psychologist is overwhelmed with the work needed to be done for students and has limited capacity to support or upskill teachers and school leaders. The challenges experienced are increased in rural and remote areas.

It seems that the most effective practitioners in this area are those with personal experience (they have a child themselves with mental health issues). Parents have reported a sense of relief, and of feeling heard when they are supported by staff members who truly understand the challenges being faced. While it is important for teachers to understand and be equipped to support students struggling with mental health, more importantly teachers, schools and families need to access expert support to help care for the young person experiencing these difficulties.

What change(s) would attract more students into the teaching profession?

Teaching can be a wonderfully rewarding career, and with investment into the profession, attracting committed and talented people benefits education. Better pay conditions and improving student placements to include payment so students are not negatively impacted by taking time off their regular work is needed. A quality buddy/mentor system to support new graduates is essential. Proper, extensive education on behaviour management and adapting to the contemporary classroom setting would also be beneficial.

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WACSSO have also, in the past, advocated for a serious and demonstrated need for pre-service and ongoing teacher training courses to include compulsory parental engagement training – not just simply offering the courses. It is our position that this training must be mandated. We acknowledge that for success to occur, it requires the active participation and willingness of the teachers and parents.

What change(s) would support teachers to remain in the profession? What additional reforms are needed to ensure that the schools most in need can support and retain highly effective teachers?

Ultimately teachers must be recognised by society as the expert professionals they are. Professionals have a vital responsibility to teach society's future. Safety and workload are real concerns that must be addressed, and parents have a role in this area. Funded opportunities for professional development, immediate action to address workload issues, training in conflict, resources (Departmental) for dealing with complex students and families, higher remuneration and clearer career pathways that allow for senior roles that still have interaction with young people. Letting teachers to deliver classes in their professional area of expertise only (not being asked to teach subjects they are unqualified for) would relieve workload pressure.

In the case of rural and remote schools, infrastructure is essential. Teachers need to be assured they have suitable housing and transport, the ability to return home for holidays and supports to assist with assimilation into the community.

How should digital technology be used to support education delivery, reduce teacher workload and improve teacher effectiveness? What examples are you aware of?

In our 2022 Federal Election Paper, we urged the government to commit to increasing resourcing and support for government schools to ensure all students have access to high-quality remote learning technology and commit to investigating the benefits of online learning and to resourcing programs and infrastructure to enhance online learning beyond the pandemic. This remains our position. With the current generation being exposed to technology at an increasingly young age, it is essential that they

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develop the skills (and have access to the resources in an equitable way) to be set up for success in the future. Curriculum and resourcing should anticipate changing technology and equip students to be productive users across all platforms.

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