



WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to
advance public education

WACSSO SUBMISSION

The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms

March 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.

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

Introduction

In preparing this paper, WACSSO highlights the role parents play in supporting schools and classrooms where students and teachers are safe, productive and able to enjoy the learning environment. Our responses take into account the voices of public school parents across WA, and their experiences.

This submission is also supported by background research from a review of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an assessment of the educational performance of 15-year-old students worldwide, which asks participants about aspects of school climate, including the disciplinary climate.

Area 1: The declining ranking of Australia in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) disciplinary climate index, making Australian classrooms amongst the world's most disorderly

According to PISA reports, Australian students have been reporting a disciplinary climate in their classrooms worse than the OECD countries' average. In 2012, most students in OECD countries reported having orderly classrooms during their mathematics lessons. In general, 68% of students said there is never, or only in some classes, noise and disorder, while in Australia, over 40% of students reported that this happens in most or every lesson (OECD, 2013). In 2015, PISA measured the climate of classroom discipline on students' accounts of science classes. Once again, the results suggested that Australian classrooms have a problem with in-class disruptions. The surveyed students reported experiences of not paying attention, not listening to the teacher's words and excessive noise and disorder.

From our consultation with parents, we know that classroom disruption is a real experience and is contributable to a number of factors (outlined later). Parents are concerned about the level of disruption in classrooms. Parents have the expectation that Australian public schools will provide educational experiences that give all children the best possible opportunities for the future. This can only occur when our public schools are appropriately resourced, well-staffed, supported by additional health and social services, and where families are considered essential partners in children's education. WACSSO celebrates the value of all children and firmly believes that every child has the right to high-quality public education no matter where they live, and what their socio-economic demographic, cultural heritage, religious beliefs, gender, or ability may be.

There is ample research demonstrating that the least disadvantaged students reported a more favourable disciplinary climate than the most disadvantaged ones. For example, urban school students reported a more favourable disciplinary climate than regional school students, who reported a more favourable disciplinary climate than remote school students. In addition, non-Indigenous students said they experienced a more favourable disciplinary climate than the Indigenous ones. Therefore, it is evident that this problem mainly affects Australian students who are already disadvantaged (Thomson et al., 2020).

Students who reported a better disciplinary climate in their classrooms scored an average of 55 points higher (about one and two-thirds of a year of schooling) in reading literacy performance than those who attended classes with a worse disciplinary climate. Classroom disruption and the impact it can have on students' learning outcomes and school experience is of significant concern to parents and WACSSO affiliates.

Area 2: The impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention

WACSSO affiliates care about the health and wellbeing of their classroom teachers. Furthermore, parents recognise that teachers play an essential role in their child's education and school experience. We call out the unhelpful narrative that sets parents and teachers in opposition to one another. WACSSO's experience is that overwhelmingly parents and teachers recognise the critical partnership required to enhance education outcomes for children and young people. This perspective is supported by the WA Primary Principals Association (WAPPA, 2018), and the Federal Government (Department of Education, 2022), among others.

WACSSO acknowledges the negative impact of high and medium-level student behaviour on teachers. Student disruptive behaviour has been associated with greater emotional exhaustion and lower occupational commitment among Australian teachers (Collie, 2021; Collie & Mansfield, 2022). Combined with a lack of support, this represents one of the reasons Australian teachers leave the profession or have periods of sick leave (Sullivan et al., 2021). The classroom is the teacher's workplace. It is reasonable to expect that a teacher's workplace has minimal stress, is safe, and is an enjoyable working environment. Such classrooms benefit teachers and students. It is imperative that the whole school culture is considered when addressing working and learning conditions.

Whenever teachers benefit from a positive school culture, they report greater job satisfaction and less burnout while working in disciplined and supportive schools (OECD, 2019c). Likewise, participating in continuous professional development activities is also expected to increase teachers' self-efficacy and satisfaction with their job (OECD, 2019b). There is also a strong link between parent engagement and student success (Department of Education, 2022), which highlights the value to schools and teachers of a highly engaged parent.

A poor disciplinary climate can significantly impact teachers, which in turn can negatively impact student learning and achievement. Therefore, schools and education systems must prioritise creating positive and supportive school environments for both students and teachers. While research highlights the benefit of teachers receiving direct instruction on how to deal with behavioural challenges as well as strategies on how to prevent classroom disruptions (Sargeant, 2019), it is unreasonable and ineffective to place this responsibility on teachers alone. The load of finding better solutions to what causes the disruptive behaviour in the first place requires a combined approach that involves teachers, schools, students, families, and support services.

In summary, WACSSO supports initiatives that create the best possible working environment for teachers, as this in turn has the greatest positive impact on students. We know that one of the biggest factors relating to student success is the teacher in the room, and initiatives that support teachers and lead to the attraction and retention of highly talented practitioners are important to WACSSO and our affiliates.

Area 3: Teachers' views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them

WACSSO has chosen not to respond to this Area.

Area 4: The robustness, quality and extent of initial teacher education to equip teachers with skills and strategies to manage classrooms

WACSSO has long called for improved teacher training, mentoring, and support resources to better prepare new teachers for the challenges of the workplace they are entering. It is essential that teacher training prepares teachers for delivering a full curriculum, as well as giving them skills, strategies, and resources to manage complex behaviours, and diverse student needs. Parent engagement skills are also necessary. Mentor teachers who have high professional capabilities are invaluable assets to new teachers. However, the mentor and the graduate teacher must be resourced to make use of the professional relationship with appropriate DOTT and time reserved for in-class observance and reflection.

WACSSO affiliates who live in regional, rural, and remote communities often point out that new teachers whose first placement is in a rural or remote setting come with a wonderful enthusiasm to teach in these communities. However, the challenges of moving away from their homes (this is often a first out-of-home experience for younger graduates) can be daunting and overwhelming for the new teacher. WACSSO affiliates recognise that teachers who are welcomed into the community in which they will be teaching, and who have safe and good quality housing, have a much better work and social experience. These teachers typically form connections to that community, and are therefore inclined to stay at their school for longer.

Area 5: The loss of instructional teacher time because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms

Whenever teachers spend significant time managing student behaviour, they have less time to focus on instruction. This can result in reduced instructional time and lower student achievement. According to PISA, Australian teachers spend an average of 14% of their teaching time managing disruptive behaviour, compared to 8% across OECD countries.

This loss of instructional time can significantly impact student learning outcomes, teacher wellbeing and job satisfaction. It is worth considering that the loss of instructional time is not just due to major disruptions such as violence or bullying, but also because of minor disruptions such as talking out of turn, refocusing students, students not following instructions, and students coming in and out of the classroom. Non-student-based disruptions that take away from teaching time include technology issues, timetabling, interruptions from administration and other teachers, allied services appointments and requests from parents.

WACSSO asserts that it is crucial for schools and the government to look beyond classroom disorder and distraction to what is causing disruptive behaviour and how that can be appropriately addressed. Parents have raised concerns about the loss of teaching time, as well as the lack of time teachers have available to consult and meet with parents to discuss individual student concerns. They have also raised the impact of under-resourcing of teacher/EA time to adapt and deliver learning for students with disabilities or learning difficulties.

The teacher-student-parent relationship is crucial for student success and parents need to be able to have appropriate one-on-one time with teachers if required. Unfortunately, the restrictions put in place during the pandemic of parents stopping at the school gate have been used by some to infer the benefits of not having parents on school grounds. WACSSO strongly opposes this narrative, instead calling for teachers to have adequate time for genuine parent-teacher engagement.

Area 6: The impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students' learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined classrooms

Research (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) has shown that a positive disciplinary climate can lead to better students' academic outcomes, including improved test scores and graduation rates. The school climate, composed of good quality relationships and an orderly environment, is related to a higher average of students' academic performance at the school level since the general school atmosphere directly affects teaching and learning (OECD, 2013). Furthermore, a positive and respectful atmosphere with reduced levels of disruption can promote academic resilience among disadvantaged students, reducing socio-economic disparities (Agasisti et al., 2018).

Overall, continual disruption in the classroom can significantly and negatively impact students' school experience, academic outcomes, and wellbeing, causing disengagement and gaps in learning. Therefore, it is crucial that government, schools, parents, and students work together to create safe, supportive, and structured learning environments to ensure that all students can thrive.

Area 7: The stagnant and declining results across fundamental disciplines as tested through National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) attributed to poorer school-leaving results and post-school attainment

According to the Ey (2019), the results of PISA 2018 showed the most significant decline in the performance of 15-year-old Australians over time since PISA testing began in 2000, whereas the results achieved in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) for Year 9 students, which assesses students of similar age, have slightly improved in equivalent subjects since testing commenced in 2008. Both tests assess equivalent skills. The difference between them is that PISA aims to evaluate 'the extent to which 15-year-old students have acquired the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in modern societies', while NAPLAN assesses the essential 'skills for every child to progress through school and life'.

Furthermore, PISA does not just ascertain whether students can reproduce knowledge; it also examines how well students can extrapolate from what they have learned and apply that knowledge in unfamiliar settings. This is reflected in how PISA questions are asked and differ from NAPLAN.

There is ample research to support the notion that students who perform poorly on literacy and numeracy assessments are likelier to have poorer school-leaving results and lower rates of post-school attainment tests, such as tertiary education or employment. Nonetheless, many factors can influence students' academic achievement and post-school outcomes, and disruptions in the classroom are just one of them. Other factors impacting students' outcomes include socioeconomic status, family support, school resources and individual learning styles and abilities.

In summary, there may be some correlation between disruptions in Australian classrooms and poorer NAPLAN results, but it is essential to consider a range of factors when examining students' academic achievement and post-school attainment.

Area 8: How relevant the work of the Australian state, territory and federal departments and agencies is to address this growing challenge

Disruption in Australian classrooms is a growing issue that must be addressed by States, Territories, and Federal departments and agencies. The WA Department of Education has implemented the Student Behaviour in Public Schools policy and procedures. This policy addresses student behaviour through a whole school approach to building a culture of positive behaviour that values students' strengths, abilities and diversity. In addition, the policy focuses on empowering staff through training and support to teach and sustain positive behaviour and adopt restorative approaches where the relationships are at the centre.

WACSSO supports the efforts of the Western Australian Department of Education as it aims to create safe and positive learning environments for students and support teachers to manage disruptive behaviour effectively. However, we call out what seems to be the increasing position that schools are left to address the often complex issues being faced by children and young people. We propose that the disruption and increasing behavioural issues being seen in schools and in our classrooms does not only stem from the school environment. Instead, students are coming to school with what are often complex influencing factors including mental health and wellbeing concerns, disadvantaged family situations that require additional support, peer pressure and a range of other factors.

Schools must be resourced to identify students requiring assistance. This includes having good access to expert allied health services no matter where they are located, including in regional, rural and remote areas.

Area 9: How leading OECD countries with the highest disciplinary climate index rankings are delivering orderly classrooms to provide strategies on how to reduce distraction and disorder in Australian classrooms and possible solutions

Australia could implement several strategies to improve its PISA disciplinary climate index performance. Here are a few examples:

1. Improve teacher training – Australia could invest in comprehensive teacher training programs that focus on maintaining discipline in the classroom and creating a positive learning environment. These programs could include training on classroom management techniques, conflict resolution, and addressing disciplinary issues promptly and effectively.
2. Increase support for student wellbeing – Australia could implement programs that support student mental health and wellbeing, which can help create a positive learning environment and reduce the frequency of disciplinary issues. These programs could include counselling services, peer support programs, and mindfulness training.
3. Foster a culture of respect and responsibility – Australia could emphasise promoting respect and responsibility among students. This could involve incorporating character education programs into the curriculum, encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning and behaviour, and promoting a sense of community and belonging in the classroom.
4. Strengthen partnerships between schools and families – Australia could work to strengthen partnerships between schools and families, which can help create a supportive environment for students and reduce the likelihood of disciplinary issues. This could involve regular communication between teachers and parents, parent education programs and community outreach initiatives.
5. Implement restorative justice practices – Australia could consider implementing restorative justice practices in schools, which can help resolve conflicts and reduce the frequency of disciplinary issues. These practices involve bringing together the parties involved in a conflict to find a resolution that is fair and equitable for all the actors involved.

On average, Australian students reported similar levels of disciplinary climate in their English classes to students in New Zealand and a less favourable disciplinary climate than the OECD average. It is challenging to make direct comparisons between different countries' classrooms due to differences in cultural and social contexts, teaching methods, and disciplinary policies.

It should be emphasised that the disciplinary climate in Australian classrooms can vary depending on the school, the teacher, and the student population and that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing discipline issues. That said, it is frequently the case that already disadvantaged students are more likely to experience the ill effects of classroom disruption. It is essential to consider a range of factors, including teacher training and support, school culture and leadership, student behaviour and needs, and community engagement to create a safe and effective learning environment for all students. Ultimately, WACSSO firmly believes that every child has the right to high-quality public education no matter where they live, what their socio-economic demographic may be or their cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This submission recognises parents as essential partners in education. It also acknowledges the positive benefits that flow for children (and also teachers) when parents are engaged in the educational journey. Parents hold a unique knowledge of their child, their background, their strengths and the challenges they may be facing; as such parents play an important role in supporting safe and productive classrooms and school environments.

Schools that view parents as valued education partners create family engagement cultures where the school's behaviour rules and expectations are discussed and reinforced at home. 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.

Critical to successful school and parent collaboration is communication that is timely, truthful and constructive. Putting in place appropriate communication channels where parents and teachers can stay informed about behaviour (both areas of success and areas for improvement) allows for improved results. Parents express frustration when they find out about an issue that has been going on for some time before it is raised with the parent.

By working together principals, teachers and parents can support efforts to address behaviour issues and create a positive learning environment for all students.

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