



# WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to  
advance public education

## **WACSSO SUBMISSION**

***Response to the Commissioner  
for Children and Young People  
WA Discussion Paper:  
Education in Western Australia***

March 2024

# 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.

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\* 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 to, and State and National representation for, 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.

Based on our experience and context, WACSSO has selected to respond to the Commissioner's Education Policy only. We are conscious of the other papers currently available for review and see important links between all of them. We believe there must be strong links between areas of Government (such as the Departments of Education, Health, Corrections, and Communities) and how they engage with educational services. The impact of these services on areas such as child protection, youth justice and mental health services cannot be understated. Providing meaningful learning and educational opportunities is critical, given that education is one of (if not the principle) keys to better life outcomes. The educational opportunities for children and young people, regardless of circumstance, are critical, and as such, the connectedness of all Commissioner policies currently open for comment is important to articulate.

## Building strong foundations for learning in the early years

How might Western Australia build a more sustainable and accessible foundation to support children and families engage in early education and care?

WACSSO supports the idea that a locally based, full-service school model is one way to address early education and care delivery to families. We also support families being given the choice to engage (or not) with this service and that it should be offered in a culturally appropriate way. A key outcome of the early stages of education is working with families to develop readiness to learn skills in their children. Encouraging and developing these skills early has positive downstream effects on student learning once the compulsory attendance age is reached. Our parents and affiliates report that a focus on play-based learning at these early stages of education has been most beneficial to their children.

Should the WA Government continue to invest in Child and Parent Centres?

The Reducing Poverty and Improving Child Development in WA Report [1] highlights the criticalness of the early years. “What happens to a child in their first few years of life can have lasting impact on their future outcomes with quality formal care improving development, school readiness, and future success (into adulthood).” [2] The Report highlights the role of Child and Parent Centres as important early intervention support that “reflects the particular circumstances, needs, and characteristics of the community.” [3]

WACSSO supports investment in programs and services that provide proven positive outcomes for children. Child and Parent Centres (PCPs) were established to provide families with easy access to advice, experts, and services for children prior to reaching school age. Importantly, PCPs allow schools to engage with families and, where required, provide additional support to help children have the best start to school.

Government must carefully consider the value of early investment in families and children and weigh the long-term rewards of expert, evidenced-based services at an early age. Families and schools must be consulted before services are withdrawn, and ideally, families and schools would be consulted before the establishment of Child and Parent Centres.

[1] [Reducing-Poverty-and-Improving-Child-Development-in-WA.pdf \(ngala.com.au\)](#)

[2] [Reducing-Poverty-and-Improving-Child-Development-in-WA.pdf \(ngala.com.au\)](#) (p13)

[3] [Reducing-Poverty-and-Improving-Child-Development-in-WA.pdf \(ngala.com.au\)](#) (p16)

## Learning and educational attainment

Is there opportunity to review assessment tools to ensure relevance for differing experiences, especially when considering the needs of vulnerable, disadvantaged and Aboriginal students?

Any review of tools used to assess student ability should include consultation with parents. Parents with experience navigating support systems and healthcare networks are well-placed to provide informed advice on children's experiences when engaging with assessment tools.

While reviewing assessment tools may be necessary, parents report that access to key health professionals, including psychologists and psychiatrists, is a more critical issue. Real action must be taken to resolve the overloaded health department and demand for therapists in the private sector. WACSSO supports efforts to increase the number of specialised professionals who can diagnose, treat and support children as they navigate complex mental health concerns. Additional support and resources in this sector would also provide much-needed benefits for schools, which may be struggling to accommodate undiagnosed children or children who, unable to see a professional, are not able to access suitable treatment options. These factors are putting undue stress on parents, students and school staff.

Regarding assessment tools used in schools, we have received feedback from our parents and affiliates that the testing process for gifted/talented programs has cultural and socio-economic bias and improvements are needed. The testing system used is considered by some to have a cultural bias that will disadvantage students from a minority background who are academically gifted. Additionally, the notifications and communications about GATE in primary school are variable, and perceived social barriers can prevent parents at some schools from gaining this information. Primary schools have a role to play in opening access to information on GATE programs and pathways, and this information should be uniformly available to all.

How can we improve school communities so that all children and young people feel connected, valued and supported?

Encouraging parent engagement in the school community and the learning experience of children helps young people feel valued and supported. Parents who build strong networks with other parents in the school community, whether through volunteering or attending events, also assist with students feeling connected (both to their peers and the school).

WACSSO affiliates have expressed disappointment that initiatives in place pre-COVID, such as volunteer parent helpers in Kindy, Pre-Primary and Year 1 classrooms, have not re-emerged now that restrictions have been lifted. Many parents are keen to volunteer time in the classroom, assisting with reading in the morning or supporting the work of the classroom teacher. It was typical pre-COVID that many schools or teachers would welcome parents volunteering in this way, creating connectivity between the school and families and supporting those children in the classroom who may need extra attention on certain tasks. Removing these opportunities was understandable during the pandemic, but not reinstating this option post-COVID makes for many missed opportunities to provide support, build community and improve connectivity.

It is important that schools embrace the diversity of their families and community. Schools must be places where children, young people, and their families are not only accepted but celebrated. Schools that work on building inclusive school cultures resource their staff to understand and appreciate diversity and to implement community-building programs. Importantly, the leadership teams model an attitude of learning and growth and seek partnerships and collaboration to encourage understanding, safety and belonging across the school community.

How can schools provide a more holistic education that balances the focus on academic achievement with a view to embedding foundational skills and supporting social and emotional wellbeing?

Our parents report that ensuring teachers and parents are collaborative partners who engage without judgment is critical to social and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, during the orientation of new families, the social and emotional needs of the child should be discussed (along with the academic capabilities), and this must be done in an open and empathetic way, without pressure on children being 'behind' or 'ahead' of their new cohort. The school's welcome and introduction process is an important opportunity to set both tone and expectations on both sides, contributing to children's positive wellbeing.

Parents also suggest schools include parent and/or student representatives on wellbeing committees (where schools have them). Additionally, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Behaviour Management Plans should include wellbeing goals and measures. Finally, parents have called for more funding for qualified school psychologists and/or trained wellbeing staff for the schools that want and need them. Currently, many P&Cs are providing the funds needed for additional days and hours on-site for essential staff members, a cost that should be covered by the school or Education Department.

What opportunities are there for alternative learning settings that are not just focused on managing students with complex needs?

WACSSO affiliates continue to report rising anxiety and wellbeing concerns in children and young people. Anxiety and its impacts are becoming increasingly familiar to parents, and among the observed results are increasing numbers of young people refusing school. WACSSO supports efforts to increase the number of specialised professionals who can diagnose, treat and support children as they navigate complex mental health concerns that contribute to school refusal.

It is difficult to be precise about the number of students who have been experiencing school refusal, but according to a report published by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in November 2019, research shows that there may be over 50,000 unaccounted detached students across Australia. [4] There is also growing anecdotal evidence, reported through many media outlets, that the number of students disengaging from school has only increased since the onset of the pandemic. A more precise breakdown of why students disengage from school is required to enable schools, families, and educational policy to develop appropriate mitigation strategies. Ideally, a research project or investigation should be commissioned to understand more deeply the decision-making process that occurs when students disengage from school – this is needed for the WA context, as much of the research is focused on how COVID shutdowns impacted schools and students in the Eastern States. The research must include and investigation on how we can support learning for students who have disengaged. Leading out of the research, WACSSO hopes that schools will have the information they need to adopt collaborative, proactive solutions and intervention models that could help parents navigate through these extremely stressful and disruptive times.

[4] [Industry Report - Those Who Disappear – Prof. Jim Watterston \(unimelb.edu.au\)](#)

How can we better include children and young people in decision-making in their school communities?

Students need age-appropriate agency. They should be asked for their thoughts and opinions and consulted ahead of major decisions that impact them.

Parents want their children to have a voice in their own education. Most schools have student leadership programs, but some schools are better at ensuring the student leaders and the wider student group participate in decisions made in their school (where reasonable and appropriate). Additionally, there are many forms of leadership, and the school context should reflect this. Student Council is one form of leadership; however, within a classroom, within particular subjects and within the community space, there are additional opportunities to lead, which may appeal to different types of students. Creating opportunities to both consult with students and allow them to showcase their talents will have positive outcomes. Schools doing consultation well could support schools that need advice and see a consultative process as beneficial to their students.

What can we do to support children and young people with all of their needs – social, physical, cultural and educational – that supports the education system and schools in improving outcomes?

Parents agree that funding is key to supporting young people with all their needs. The announcement of full funding of public schools in WA earlier this year is welcome and well overdue. What is needed in schools to support children and young people is a very long list; infrastructure and facilities continue to be raised by our affiliates as a significant aspect of the educational environment in need of funding. Too many WA schools are not fit for purpose.

Additional items that need appropriate funding include learning materials, internet capability and technical support, expansion of the chaplaincy program to the non-secular sector, specific culturally aligned staff/supports depending on student and family needs, appropriately trained teaching staff to cater for all needs of students, equitable access to all activities (eg excursions and extra-curricular activities), support where needed for essentials (eg technology, uniforms, lunches) so that children in families who cannot afford these items are not going without. Our parents keenly anticipate the communication of the plan for how full funding to public schools in WA will be rolled out by the Government.

## Equity and inclusion

How do we ensure the National Child Safe Principles are embedded in all Western Australian Schools?

Embedding high-level principles in the education setting requires engagement with all stakeholder groups within the school setting. This includes parents. Parents who are knowledgeable and engaged in their child's education and the school environment can positively influence culture and encourage accountability when it comes to embedding principles and practice.

WACSSO is aware that the National Child Safe Principles include high levels of communication with children and families, providing ways for them to engage or raise a concern if necessary, encouraging openness and accountability, giving clear process if concerns are raised, and prioritising cultural safety as well as physical/emotional safety. Authentic, informed and empathetic communication with parents, creating a partnership between them and the school, with the child as the beneficiary, is the most successful and positive approach to take in our view.



How do we embed a framework for differing multicultural and culturally and linguistically diverse communities to ensure we celebrate their difference and address racism?

WACSSO encourages the government to create culturally appropriate resources and provide relevant, applicable education. The only path to supporting people from diverse populations is to collaborate with them directly, listen, and respond to their needs and outcomes. Respecting individuals' identities and beliefs when working with diverse populations is vital. Additionally, taking the time to learn, accept and integrate cultural practices and embedding them into educational or engagement strategies is essential. This approach must be funded as part of a school's role and delivered by staff with appropriate life experience and qualifications.

How can children and young people be supported to express their views in culturally safe ways?

Parents report that one way of encouraging children and young people to feel safe is to demonstrate respect and inclusion of families through engagement. When children and parents feel safe and respected, they are more likely to express their views. Examples of programs that provide a safe space include Deadly Sisters and Follow the Dream (Clontarf). Other schools use initiatives such as sharing circles and informal conversations to build trust and engagement.

WACSSO encourages schools to lead by example in this space by setting up systems that encourage trust and relationships, train and develop staff, and encourage and reward respect for diversity within the community. School leaders also need to anticipate that there will be individuals who don't demonstrate respect. Feedback to WACSSO indicates that where the Principal and leadership teams are committed to building inclusive school communities, the same attitude is better embraced across school staff and the school community. Leadership teams, Principals, in particular, must be afforded the time to build community relationships. WACSSO cautions that community relationship building does not fall into the non-essential duties. Strong community relationships help imbed cultural understanding and learning.

For children and young people with disability and complex needs, how can we ensure equitable access to a quality education?

Parents who are directly involved in raising children and young people with complex needs call for a focus on three outcomes: equity, safety and access. Combined with education and training, these three outcomes would improve the situation for those living with disability and complex needs and their families while also fulfilling the articulated need for a human rights approach to care and treatment. As a part of the focus on these outcomes, a 'benefits model' should be encouraged – this model focuses on the benefits these children and young people bring to their communities rather than their deficits.

Ahead of diagnosis, parents and families typically need support. WACSSO understands that getting a diagnosis can take time and financial investment, and every delay in the journey to diagnosis and treatment has an impact. Once diagnosis has occurred, there needs to be transparency regarding the allocation of NDIS funding, which helps inform the parent choice of schooling for their child. Regarding funding more broadly, investment in school resources, professional development for staff and infrastructure are all required to facilitate access to high-quality education for students with complex needs. The NDIS review discusses the need for an ecosystem with connected support within mainstream services. [5]

[5] <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/ndis-review-glance.pdf>



Parents have also emphasised to WACSSO that early intervention is essential. Clearer pathways for parents to access diagnosis, treatment and funding are also required. Support and collaboration are also key factors that will improve conditions for children and families. Parents also express that there is an incredible wealth of knowledge in the community and that speaking with those who have lived experience is essential to inform stakeholders properly. WACSSO encourages co-designed, person-centred inclusive plans with services that reach across the lifespan. The current NDIS program is not inclusive of all life stages. One example is the education system – when children change providers or move from primary to high school, the process is unstable. A goal should be to remove barriers families and individuals face, thus facilitating success. Success could mean, for example, a smooth transition between schools and minimising harm and or setbacks for students.

## Connection to education

What initiatives are available in schools to foster children and young people’s engagement with education? What initiatives are available to prevent their disengagement?

WACSSO has observed initiatives that set children up for a productive day of learning enhance engagement. For example, breakfast programs that provide nourishment and an opportunity to connect with other students and teachers or parents have been proven to positively affect attendance and engagement.

Where needed, initiatives that provide positive reinforcement for attendance are crucial. WACSSO understands research shows that non-attendance is linked to poorer academic achievement and long-term student outcomes. [6] Parents need to be engaged and supported when it comes to school attendance initiatives for them to succeed. Where families have children who refuse to go to school, appropriate support and resources should be investigated. Resources should be culturally appropriate, based on specific needs and include staff who can monitor changes in attendance behaviour and engage with the family and student to identify the best way forward. For the child’s benefit, learning needs must continue to be supported while interventions are being planned and implemented. WACSSO also advocates that students and families experiencing ‘school can’t’ need access to SIDE resources and instruction.

What systemic barriers to participation do children with complex needs experience, and how can they be addressed by the education sector?

WACSSO has advocated to the School Curriculum and Standards Authority that re-examining the “Currency of Evidence” for Equitable Access Adjustments for ATAR Course Examinations is needed. The reasons for the re-examination of these Adjustments are threefold:

1. they lack equality;
2. they do not take into account the challenges experienced by students from regional/remote areas and low socioeconomic backgrounds in accessing the services and funds needed for the review of existing diagnoses; and
3. the onus is placed on schools to have provided adequate accommodations and documentation of these accommodations when currently there is inadequate resourcing for students with learning disabilities.

Other systematic barriers include the lack of widespread professional development available for public school staff to respond to students with complex learning needs. Very often, the staff who are capable of responding appropriately to the needs of these children are those who have existing or personal experience with complex learning needs. Upskilling a broader cross-section of staff is needed. Along with professional development, particular resources (such as quiet spaces, engagement strategies, the ability to take breaks, sufficient Educational Assistants etc) should be standard across the public school sector.

Additionally, the mindset and culture of the school must be one of inclusion, which in many cases will require a culture change. WACSSO asserts that an inclusive culture and approach will benefit both children with complex needs and children more broadly across the diverse groups in the community.

Parents have also expressed to WACSSO that there is a need for flexibility and adaptability in the education system. This approach is needed for teaching time, assessments, and tracking students' progress. Parents of students with complex needs have suggested adding emotional regulation to the curriculum for students. These parents believe this addition would benefit all students and could include content that allows students to understand how to build their own regulation and the ability and capacity of others regarding self-regulation.

WACSSO also supports the need for universal clarity of language around accommodations, especially in the space around NDIS and Education. Clarity will reduce confusion and frustration and save parents and school staff time. In our policy, WACSSO also calls for lower teacher : student ratios to assist with classroom management and the experience for both students and parents. We assert that teacher : student ratios and class sizes significantly impact learning experience and outcomes.[7]

[What support mechanisms can schools put into place to enable children to express their views, and raise issues or concerns about their education or wellbeing?](#)

At WACSSO Conference 2022, an agenda item was raised regarding the National School Chaplaincy Program. Since then, this program has been reviewed, and a more secular approach has been initiated, a move supported by WACSSO affiliates. In many schools, the Chaplain or School Wellbeing Officer role is partially funded by the P&C. This role is an essential one, and while the use of P&C funds to support this function is appropriate, the position should be fully funded by the government so that it is available each day to students who need it and to a uniform standard.

[What options are available to support children and young people with complex needs to participate in mainstream education, where doing so best suits their needs?](#)

Creating options for children and young people to participate in mainstream education requires systems that reduce and/or manage the administrative burden on schools and provide clear processes for external providers to attend and deliver support on-site at schools (for example, NDIS support and mental health services - not just the triage/referral process but counselling/therapy services). True inclusion could also mean integrating specialist education settings within a mainstream school context. Mainstream schools should be supported to employ qualified Auslan interpreters for Deaf students in order to achieve truly inclusive education, which in turn requires a workforce response to ensure availability of skilled staff as well as adequate education funding. Access to education and interaction with peers and the wider school community through a fully immersive specialised Auslan setting can deliver positive educational and social outcomes, and should be available to families who feel it best meets the needs of their child.

[7] [wacssso-policy-2023.pdf](#)

Should schools consider establishing advocacy services or advocate roles to better serve children and young people who are at risk of school exclusion or disconnection?

WACSSO supports this suggestion; in our affiliates' experience, young people have shown themselves to be good advocates if given the opportunity and appropriate support. The key to the success of an initiative of this nature is engagement between children and young people seeking this role and a suitably qualified person.

