



# WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to  
advance public education

**Submission to the Draft Regional Education Strategy.  
Strengthening public education in the regions.**

**WA Council of State School Organisations**

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## Acknowledgement of Country

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations pays respect to Traditional Owners throughout Australia, recognising their connection to land, waterways, 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&C 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 was informed by the experiences of Western Australian parents of children attending public schools, Parents and Citizen Associations (P&Cs) and school communities. In particular WACSSO calls upon the experiences of families living in regional, rural and remote communities and thank regional families who over the years have shared their experiences with WACSSO and sought our organisation support in representation and advocacy. In addition, WACSSO is a member of the Rural Remote Education Advisory Council which was established in 1997 to provide advice to Ministers for Education on specific issues and needs of rural and remote Western Australians. This Council remains committed to ensuring families living in rural and remote Western Australia have access to quality education and training.

## 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. For over 100 years, WACSSO has provided services and representation at State and National level to more than 660 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

Regional, rural and remote communities are places of strength and resilience. Often characterised by their close-knit ties and rich cultural heritage, Western Australia's regions should be viewed as places of opportunity where children and young people can thrive. Our regional schools are not just learning centres; they are vital community anchors that unite communities. Quality education, excellent schools, and genuine post-school opportunities all build resilient sustainable regional communities that benefit the State, and nation.

## The critical role of parents and families

WACSSO acknowledges the foundational elements of the four pillars identified in the strategy. However, we emphasise a critical omission: the importance of parents and families as essential partners in education.

Parents and families hold the first and lifelong connection to children into adulthood. Families carry with them the familial identifiers that, when passed along, build a child's identity, awareness of self and others, and their own cultural legacy. Additionally, there is significant evidence that success in schooling hinges on parent engagement (<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/strengthening-parent-engagement-to-improve-student-outcomes>). Any conversation about improving outcomes for children and young people that does not immediately identify the essential role of parents will struggle to gain a foothold, especially in the context of families living in rural and remote areas and Aboriginal families. Parent engagement is pivotal to the success of all students and parents should not be grouped with other stakeholders. We believe that parent and family engagement must stand as its own pillar, alongside the four existing pillars outlined in the strategy. This acknowledgment is crucial for fostering strong partnerships that enhance educational outcomes.

Families living in rural and remote areas face challenges unique to these locations. These include distance of travel to school, residential boarding, access to services including healthcare, social support, work and education opportunities, family obligations, access to resources - the list goes on. The parent-child relationship means that a parent is well-placed to provide context to the child's life and experiences beyond the school gate. As such, parents must be viewed as essential allies in supporting school initiatives to both build their child's engagement with school and support principals and teachers when issues arise.

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To achieve genuine engagement, and not limit itself to the assertion that it is critical, appropriate resourcing is essential. This is particularly the case for schools in regional locations, where programs and resources committed to parent and family engagement are unlikely to be a priority when there are many other more pressing resourcing needs, such as infrastructure and staffing. Resourcing our schools to build strong family engagement practices, will empower teachers to connect appropriately and genuinely with families. Teachers who connect well with their students' families and the broader school community are respected, appreciated, and seen as allies (WACSSO, 2017). Additionally, when considering the needs of Aboriginal families in regional locations, this argument is strengthened. The Australian Institute of Family Studies emphasises the importance of Aboriginal families being actively involved across planning and implementation stages of service delivery, including education. 'When Indigenous Elders, community members, and other local service providers are engaged in a consultative process, the most important needs of the community can be distinguished, and the most appropriate methods of implementation can be identified' (Price-Robertson, McDonald 2011, p6)

WACSSO remains concerned that there is in some education settings a narrative around parents of "a culture of entitlement and complaint" (Robinson, 2023, p10). The Understanding and Reducing the Workload of Teachers and Leaders in Western Australian Public Schools report points to an escalation in complaints from parents that progress beyond the school the Minister, and the additional workload for principals when this happens. WACSSO acknowledges the Department's establishment of the parent liaison office to assist parents in better navigating the complaints process. However, we call out the difference between parent complaints and advocacy. WACSSO disagrees with any suggestion that advocacy by organisations representing the voice of parents to improve outcomes in our public schools for all students is responsible for an increase in teacher workload. For the parent liaison office to adequately support regional families when issues cannot be solved at the school level, staff must understand the context of living in rural and remote communities. It is also essential that the parent liaison office is resourced to ensure Aboriginal families have access to culturally appropriate support people.

## **Pillar 1: Build the capability of our regional workforce**

WACSSO commends the government's initiatives to improve the retention and attraction of teachers to regional, rural and remote locations, and we acknowledge the wonderful opportunities that can come from working and living in the regions. However, we also recognise the challenges for schools to showcase these benefits when many regional schools have sub-par infrastructure, unreliable internet or technology support, which is especially relevant where regional schools rely upon SIDE support for lessons, limited or no appropriate staff housing, a high turnover of leadership, and the expectation for teachers to take upon additional teaching and learning areas than what they were initially hired for.

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## **Living and Working in the Regions**

Often, teaching staff for regional schools are sourced from metropolitan areas. Our affiliates report that teachers whose first experience of a rural or remote community is their teaching placement are often unprepared and overwhelmed by the change of living and working environment. WACSSO repeats its caution that an essential consideration for recruiting and retaining regional, rural, and remote staff is providing pre-service knowledge and support regarding living and working in regional, rural, or remote WA. This kind of support should cover the unique needs of regional students and families and an outline of the expectations, and opportunities, living and working in the regions brings teaching staff.

## **Housing**

Another area that continues to be raised is the lack of appropriate staff housing. WACSSO members have reported teachers being required to travel long distances on country roads to and from school, live in shared housing, be allocated properties in poor condition, live in motel accommodation with their families, and principals desperately trying to find accommodation with local government assistance to house teachers.

An urgent review is required into Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH) housing and specifically investment in education housing. When staff housing is discussed, supply, quality, maintenance, and rent prices are ongoing topics. A review of the Tenant Rent Setting Framework Policy must be included in this strategy to ensure the Policy adequately supports and is not an impediment to the delivery of the GROH program.

## **Teacher and Principal Turnover**

Consistency in our schools is of importance to regional families. Schools that experience a high turnover of teachers and principals suffer. Unintentionally, when there is high turnover it sends a message to regional school communities that there is a lack of stability in the school's leadership team and staff. The frequent relationship removal and then required rebuilding with a new school leader or teacher can result in decreasing levels of trust and a sense of apathy in the school community as they question whether their school's success is a priority. We have affiliates report schools that have a change of principal three to four times over a two-year period; to be told it is because the principal is needed at another school is disheartening.

High staff turnover also burdens the teachers, education assistants, and support staff who remain at the school. Affiliates report changing programs with each new principal, a new set of resources, and even new timetabling. High turnover is disruptive and can negatively impact student learning outcomes.

## **Teacher Resources**

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Teachers living in regional WA have less access to classroom resources. The Australian Education Union 2023 survey reported that 85% of teachers spend their own money to ensure that students do not miss out on important classroom activities; stationery, classroom equipment, library resources, and textbooks were among the items purchased. Western Australia was one of the top three states and territories where teachers spent over \$1000.00 (Australian Education Union, 2023). These costs can be higher for teachers in regional areas, because of the higher cost of items compounded by the increased need for basic supplies in these areas. A per-annum teaching resources grant for regional teachers would help negate this cost and ensure that teachers do not shoulder essential classroom supplies.

## **Expert Support and Professional Development**

A critical resource for teachers is the expert support they can access. Providing teachers with access to professional expertise, such as school psychologists and child developmental practitioners, creates professional partnerships that assist teachers in addressing the complex behaviours they now face in classrooms. Furthermore, these experts can work closely with families and the school to improve outcomes for that child. Expert advice is essential in regional areas, where our affiliates continue to report lengthy delays in accessing specialist appointments for their children. In 2023, WACSSO conducted a survey that captured the school experiences of families with autistic children. The feedback was clear that onsite services at government schools, such as psychologists, speech therapists, and occupational therapists, is limited. When parents seek private providers, wait times for these external therapists are often excessive, and the collaboration between schools and these providers can be problematic. Again, we see that the issue is even more pronounced in regional, rural, and remote areas, where access to services is even more constrained. Teachers with immediate access to experts at the school level will at least see timely support put in place for the student while external support is sought.

Funded, relevant, well-informed, and timely professional development plays a critical role in a teacher's ability to manage the complexities of today's classroom. However, in the regions, removing a teacher from the classroom for professional development can be challenging as principals strive to find the appropriate relief staff. Additional funding for professional development provision is required for regional schools.

## **Pillar 2: Expand curriculum delivery**

The School of Distance Education (SIDE) is well-placed to provide innovative programs for regional students, and WACSSO encourages the government to continue to invest in SIDE to ensure its education delivery meets the needs of all Western Australia students. When receiving feedback about SIDE, there is a mixed response. Where there is school-based support for students, such as a dedicated SIDE coordinator on school grounds, students seem better able to navigate the duality of SIDE learning and in-person classroom learning. The highest levels of success come when the coordinator has professional capability in the subjects that SIDE is delivering. Equitable access to resources, mainly digital technology, is also raised in SIDE discussions; not all students will have personal access to the

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appropriate internet and technology that their peers do. The Department must ensure SIDE is not cost prohibitive especially where SIDE is used as a core subject learning platform.

Families whose children attend school through Schools of the Air hold this learning as incredibly valuable and an essential education delivery method that allows children to live and learn at home. It is vital that Schools of the Air are resourced to meet the needs of world class education delivery to out students living in some of the most remote parts of Western Australia.

## **Post-School Success**

All parents seek for their child's school experience to equip them well for life beyond school. WACSSO looks forward to the recommendations that will come from the Pathways to Post-School Success review. It is essential that students attending regional schools have every opportunity to explore and engage with genuine career and education pathways. Students living, studying, and working in regional WA have a diversity of skills and achievements that should be recognised.

WACSSO acknowledges the work of the Department over recent years in improving career education. We strongly recommend strengthening opportunities for regional students to explore the world of work and understand the broad range of possibilities for their future. This includes access to career practitioners, career conversations, and career taster programs. To fully take advantage of the opportunities that exist in the regions, and to reduce the workload of school staff who have competing duties, a dedicated careers coordinator position based in each district office would assist schools with local industry networks, student placement, accommodation, and career pathway opportunities.

## **Students with Disability**

It is important that students living with disability have the same opportunities to access meaningful work experiences and career pathways as their peers. While there may be some additional considerations for appropriate work placement it is essential that schools have access to a network of local and regional employers who are committed to access and inclusion in the workplace, and genuine career pathways for students with disability. Again, we refer to the potential role of a regional career coordinator who can work with schools, local business, and organisations such as People With disabilities WA (PWdWA) to improve career pathways for students.

## **Cultural Learning and Knowledge**

WACSSO hopes to see the recognition of Aboriginal students' cultural knowledge and cultural learning formalised. Particularly relevant to local school communities, further work is needed to empower the curriculum to embrace more deeply local on-Country learning; this learning benefits the whole school community and can have broader application outside of their immediate context.

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### **Pillar 3: Strengthen support for student wellbeing**

In 2022, WACSSO submitted to the Senate Inquiry into The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters; two years later, our conclusion remains the same: We call for a collective effort from both the education and health sectors, informed by dedicated research, to address the growing disengagement of our children and young people, which is directly related to reduced mental health and wellbeing.

WACSSO acknowledges that student wellbeing is a universal issue, affecting all families regardless of their location. However, regional families face unique challenges, such as long travel distances to access services, limited availability of mental health professionals, and (for the many who board) the additional stress of being away from home for extended periods.

Parents are understandably frustrated by the delays in getting support for their children. The introduction of complex behaviour coordinators is a step in the right direction, enabling schools to identify and implement early intervention strategies. WACSSO strongly advocates for these strategies to be developed in collaboration with paediatric and occupational health experts, working closely with families to ensure better outcomes.

While schools are well-positioned to observe student health and wellbeing, other government departments are required to address their core services better. However, due to the lack of accessibility to qualified health providers in regional, rural, and remote areas, schools are often forced to fill these service gaps. This leads to a reliance on non-expert staff in schools and undermines service quality. Affiliates, especially in smaller rural and remote communities, are alarmed by the withdrawal of critical services from their communities. If schools are expected to address these regional service shortages by providing resources to support their students, then the government must increase funding for schools to provide health and social services.

The Draft Regional Strategy currently lacks clear objectives for specific student cohorts, particularly those with unique health and wellbeing needs, and those who require improved outcomes. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive strategy to support regional students living with disability. This strategy should be defined by clear targets and performance indicators, aimed at enhancing the educational outcomes and school experience for students with diagnosed disabilities, as well as those with other complex needs. It may be that this work dovetails with that currently underway as a part of the School Education Act Review.

All our schools must encourage culturally safe and responsive communities. Building such communities requires school leadership support and the engagement of Traditional Owners in local communities. Our schools need to have Aboriginal leaders, Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers, and Aboriginal support staff. Targeted recruitment strategies in local communities, family engagement



programs before school starts, and support for Aboriginal students attending residential colleges off Country are some considerations for the Regional Strategy. WACSSO looks forward to learning from the Kimberley Schools Project and determining what initiatives can be taken from the Project to expand into other regions.

#### **Pillar 4: Develop partnerships to create opportunity**

WACSSO supports the statement that education is a shared responsibility. In fact, we assert that success in educational outcomes cannot be achieved by a school working with a child alone; engagement of the parent/s and family is essential. To achieve the optimal outcomes of a successful partnership of this nature, we must be aware and accommodating of the challenges facing regional families, including being under-resourced by government services, which places additional strain on families, especially in vulnerable communities.

We urgently call for the government Departments of Health and Communities to be critical partners in the Draft Regional Education Strategy. Furthermore, there is opportunity for the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, the regional development commissions, and the Western Australian Local Government Association, all of which have regional experience, to play an active role in building the Strategy.

WACSSO supports the ongoing work of the Rural Remote Education Advisory Council (RREAC) which brings together representatives from all education sectors, industry, and advocacy associations. We stress the importance of the State Government engaging with RREAC to help build a more comprehensive Regional Strategy that provides clear objectives with time frames and performance indicators, ensuring transparency and accountability.

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## References

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6. Western Australia Council of State School Organisations, 2017, WACSSO Submission Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

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