



WACSSO

2021 WA STATE ELECTION POSITION PAPER



Introduction

This document sets out the position of the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) on key issues pertinent to public education in Western Australia. On the 13th of March 2021, Western Australia will hold its state government election. The election period provides an important opportunity for WACSSO to state our position on education issues to affiliates, political candidates, parties and stakeholders.

WACSSO celebrates the diversity of families in Western Australia recognising parents, and families as the first and lifelong educators of children. Reference to parents in this position paper includes parents, carers and families. WACSSO uses our vast affiliate network of parents of children in government schools across Western Australia to inform our advocacy work. It is this collective voice that speaks out on the issues presented in this position paper.

WACSSO encourages parents to use this position paper to help inform advocacy efforts within their local electorates on education issues relevant to their school community.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations pay our respect to First Nations and Traditional Custodians throughout Australia, recognising their connection to land, water, and sky.

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



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1.0 Student Wellbeing

1.1 Parental Engagement

The narrative of 'helicopter' or 'snowplough' parenting, which labels some parents as being over-engaged in their child's education, appears from time to time. This narrative often comes with unsubstantiated claims that this style of parenting is leading to children not developing life skills. WACSSO believes this narrative to be very damaging to the wellbeing of students and have negative impact to genuine engagement between parents, teachers, and schools. Research shows that parental involvement in a child's schooling increases the student's wellbeing and education outcomes¹. Western Australian Government schools must work to provide opportunities for positive parental engagement, that supports student wellbeing and strong education outcomes.

Communication between a parent and their child's teacher enhances the student's educational and wellbeing outcomes². Genuine communication between schools and parents is a critical factor in education. Schools must be better resourced to allow teaching staff the appropriate time allocation for communication with their students' parents.

WACSSO encourages the Department of Education to embrace parents as partners by resourcing government schools to be well equipped to facilitate and promote parental engagement.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to resource government schools to ensure best practice in parent engagement can occur;
- support teacher duties other than teaching (DOTT) allocation to allow for appropriate time to communicate with parents; and
- to reject narratives suggesting parent involvement in their child's education is harmful, unwelcome and of no benefit.



1.2 Mental health support services

One of the most important factors to support young people to be healthy and promote a strong sense of wellbeing is ensuring they have access to essential health and wellbeing services.

In recent years we have seen an alarming increase in the number of students with a broad range of mental health issues³, from primary school students presenting with anxiety through to acute episodes requiring crisis intervention. Intervention and support services in the earliest stages can mitigate the impacts of mental health across a person's lifetime.

School's main stakeholders are children and young people; therefore, it is critical to provide schools and their staff with the necessary services and resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of students. WACSSO acknowledges the impact to school staff, in particular teachers and Principals where there is a delay to, or absence, of access to school based mental health support.

The school psychologist or counsellor is often the first point of contact for families, playing an important role in assisting parents to access services for their child. Research suggests that mental health support in schools is under-resourced and that one of the biggest factors contributing to young people not seeking help for mental health is a lack of access⁴. The length of current waiting lists for children to see school-based counsellors, psychologists and health nurses are a barrier to students accessing timely support.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to fund additional school-based counsellors, psychologists, and health nurses to meet the demand for timely care to students;
- to support the co-ordination of mental health, counselling, and general health service delivery from school premises; and
- to ensure that teachers and education assistants are equipped with the appropriate professional development, resources, time allocation, and access to expert advice to support students with their mental health and wellbeing.

1.3 Future career pathways and wellbeing

Research into the attitudes of young people in relation to their future career found that 49% of young people aged between 16 – 25 believed their education did not prepare them with what to expect from working life⁵. With the unemployment rate of young people being far greater than other demographics, and in the current and projected COVID-19 impacted economy, the outlook can often seem daunting for young people. This is particularly concerning as poor career outlook and employment stability have a negative impact on a young person's sense of wellbeing⁶.

The Department of Education, in partnership with the Department of Training and Workforce Development, must continue funding existing career education programs, resources and services; and use relevant data to inform future initiatives to keep students and their parents up to date with workforce trends. This will promote student wellbeing by enabling students to make informed decisions about career development, and secondary and post-secondary study choices.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to commit to providing students with information and training to prepare them for the careers of the future; and
- to ensure vocational education training and work experience is available to all students across Western Australia.

2.0 Information Communication Technology (ICT)

2.1 ICT resourcing, support and teacher expertise

The rapid pace of new and emerging digital technologies means that schools must be equipped to develop the skills and knowledge of students so that they are “innovative creators of digital solutions, effective users of digital systems and critical consumers of information conveyed by digital systems”⁷. For this to be realised there must be ongoing teacher up-skilling and training as programs and technologies change. Schools need high quality networking infrastructure, specialist tech support within the school, and sufficient funds to ensure the hardware and software is kept current, secure and functional.

The Office of the Auditor General’s report on Information and Communication Technology in Education revealed that many Western Australian schools were making “significant ICT decisions” with only “limited ICT expertise”. In addition, the report found that many schools were relying on teaching and administration staff for ICT expertise, yet in many cases those staff were not equipped with the adequate skills and knowledge to provide this expertise⁸.

The report highlighted that while secondary schools generally had an adequate number of trained ICT support staff, primary schools, small schools, regional, rural and remote schools all faced greater difficulties in accessing ICT support. Factors such as location and school size should not impact equitable access to ICT resources and education for students.

Accessible, timely and funded support is essential to inform school-based decisions around ICT infrastructure. ICT in government schools must be accompanied by school staff with specialist expertise to inform sound ICT spending decision making. A school’s capacity to understand their current, and future technology needs directly impacts student access to and engagement with this vital technology, and as such can affect learning and outcomes.

It is essential that schools integrate ICT into everyday teaching practice. Teachers who deliver the Technologies Curriculum should have the professional expertise to support strong student understanding in what is a dynamic and evolving subject area. It is also reasonable to expect that every classroom, teacher and education assistant receive regular professional development to ensure ICT capability is utilised to its full potential and to enhance student learning across the curriculum.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to fund accessible and timely expertise to ensure schools build and maintain fit-for-purpose ICT infrastructure;
- to ensure all students have equitable access to ICT in Western Australian government schools; and
- to support on-going ICT related training for all staff relevant to their role to ensure best practice use of ICT in teaching and administration contexts.

2.2 Equitable access to digital technologies for students

Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) is a standard practice across many Western Australian government schools, with expensive devices becoming a familiar item on student booklists for parents to purchase. WACSSO has long cautioned of the risks associated with cost and accessibility of an expected BYOD culture and its impact on families.

A 2020 WACSSO parent survey revealed many respondents thought the cost of BYOD devices on school booklists were unreasonable. The survey highlighted that although some schools provided an alternative to BYOD for students who were unable to afford a personal device, this option varied across schools with inconsistencies in the quality of the devices, access to the device for homework, and availability of a device at all. Survey responses from parents suggested secondary schools did not have sufficient resources to provide students with a device when needed. In addition, feedback received also showed that many school-owned devices used by students were purchased and provided by Parents and Citizens' Associations (P&Cs)⁹.



It is reasonable to expect that all students attending Western Australian government schools have equitable access to digital devices for learning. A student's access should not be dependent on the technology focus of their school, their postcode, the fundraising capability of their school community, or the financial circumstances of their family. It is the responsibility of the government to equip government schools with the appropriate digital technologies to meet the needs of a modern education system.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to ensure no student will be disadvantaged by the implementation of a BYOD policy in a Western Australian government school;
- to allocate the necessary funding to meet the needs identified in the 2020 – 2024 ICT Vision for Teaching and Learning in Public Schools and Information and Communication Technologies Strategy; and
- to ensure high-quality ICT is available to students in all Western Australian government schools.

2.3 Increase capabilities to provide education remotely

WACSSO would like to acknowledge the efforts of the Western Australian Government, the Department of Education, principals, teachers, school staff and school communities in their response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Education delivery during the pandemic highlighted that the remote learning capabilities of government schools are an area of vulnerability. The Grattan Institute's report COVID Catch-Up: Helping Disadvantaged Students Close the Equity Gap notes that nearly half of all Australian students are at risk of having their learning and wellbeing compromised due to school closures and restrictions associated with Covid-19¹⁰.

The Department of Education's 2020-2024 ICT Vision for Teaching and Learning in Public Schools and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Strategy provides a framework for the expansion of remote learning technology and planning. WACSSO supports the plan to create better-connected schools and achieve outcomes that increase "access to rich online resources, virtual classrooms, enhanced collaboration, and remote learning." For these outcomes to be achieved students, teachers and schools must be suitably resourced. The appropriate technological

infrastructure must be in place to provide high-quality ICT services throughout Western Australia to overcome geographical barriers that currently limit a student's education¹¹.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to resource all government schools with the facilities and programs required to deliver remote learning;
- to provide teachers with the resources, training and time allocation to deliver high-quality remote learning; and
- to ensure all students are appropriately supported and resourced to have access to remote learning services when required.



3.0 School Planning – Infrastructure

3.1 School population planning

Overcrowding is an issue faced by many Western Australian government schools, with growth in some locations, particularly new suburban areas in the Perth Metropolitan area, exceeding the number of students those schools were planned and built for. These impacts are also apparent in areas where infill housing developments are occurring. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported an increase of 6.1% in Western Australian Government school enrolments from 2015-2019. Comparatively Catholic schools in WA showed a 0.5% increase and Independent schools a 1.3% increase¹². Feedback from WACSSO affiliates highlights that much of this growth is concentrated in particular areas, putting a strain on a school's ability to cope with an increasing population.

Infrastructure planning is at the core of schools' inability to address population issues. The use of 'temporary' transportable buildings does not provide a quality long term solution to student oversubscription issues. Transportable buildings have often been recycled from one school to another, they are situated in schools at the cost of green space and playing grounds, and in some cases the transportable buildings are not fit-for-purpose to the specific learning area requirements.

WACSSO recognises the short term solution transportable buildings can provide for schools with significant growth in student enrolments, however as is often seen, short term becomes a number of years. The Department of Education must recognise that schools experiencing rapid growth in student numbers see additional pressures on other areas of school infrastructure such as canteens, sport facilities, toilets, staff facilities, parking, library, and impact on student travel routes. Schools with these population issues are made clear with figures from the WA Department of Education showing there are approximately 2,580 transportable classrooms used at schools this year (2020), with one school having a total of 37 on site¹³. Areas with schools at risk of operating beyond capacity require more accurate population projections to ensure school planning and all related infrastructure can accommodate further influxes in student enrolments.

Conversely, there are schools in Western Australia that are affected by declining student populations, particularly rural and remote primary schools and district high schools. Support is needed for schools with low student populations to provide a wide range of education opportunities for all students. Schools with declining student numbers may be unable to provide the most basic of ATAR and VET programs. This has numerous flow-on effects, which extend beyond educational disadvantage of the individual student into the disadvantage of the local community. Many rural

and remote families are faced with difficult decisions of whether to send their child away from the family home for schooling or for the child to remain at the local school with limited choice of subjects. Alternatively, the family may move out of the region to facilitate secondary schooling exacerbating the overall declining trend in regional populations. By strengthening the capacity of regional, rural and remote education, particularly in relation to secondary education, local communities are also strengthened.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to provide greater transparency in the planning and communication of school population projections;
- to ensure new schools are planned with the foresight to ensure they can meet influxes of students in the future; and
- to improve provision of secondary education resources, pathways and options for schools in regional, rural and remote areas to help retain secondary students.

3.2 Maintenance

Many schools in Western Australia require significant maintenance, this is clearly illustrated by the competitive nature of requests for maintenance in our government schools. Feedback from WACSSO affiliates highlights the large number of schools applying for maintenance and the frustration associated with some schools receiving assistance while others miss out. The State Government's announcement in September 2020 of a \$200 million school maintenance package was a welcomed



step, which will provide some relief to many schools in need of maintenance. It is important that the State Government follow through on its promise that this funding will be available for all Western Australian Government schools based on objective criteria. Providing students with safe and functional buildings and equipment should not be a competitive process for schools. The issue of school maintenance is ongoing and must continue to be appropriately funded to ensure that aging infrastructure in Western Australian schools is safe, fit to cater to the needs of a modern education system, and is accessible for all students.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to allocate ongoing funding to schools throughout Western Australia to address the need for maintenance; and
- to invest in renovations and upgrades for schools with outdated facilities.

3.3 School transport planning

Public transport options for students are imperative to ensure students can attend school. Students most likely to have issues relating to transport and attending school are students living in regional, rural and remote areas, and students with disability.

In Western Australia School Bus Services are contracted to provide students with safe and free transport to schools. This service is crucial and highly valued. The experience of WACSSO affiliates suggests that there are occurrences where the School Bus Service does not have the appropriate facilities to meet the needs of students with disability. In addition, WACSSO is aware of a situation where a student who required wheelchair accessible transport was unable to access transport from the School Bus Service as a vehicle with this capability was not available. WACSSO has also been advised there is a lack of flexibility in routing School Bus Services. WACSSO acknowledges the need for policies to be in place to limit bus travel times for students, however the School Bus Services must be sufficiently funded to provide the transport students with disability require.

Research tells us that students who live in rural and remote areas have reduced access to education services, attend school less frequently, are less likely to go to university and are more likely to drop out of school before completing secondary school¹⁴. School Bus Services have an essential role in addressing the availability of transport to schools and must be government funded to ensure reliable access to school for students living in regional, rural and remote areas.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to fully fund contracted transport services to make school transport accessible and available to all Western Australian students who require it;
- to ensure contracted transport services have appropriate facilities to cater for students' individual needs; and
- to ensure planning and infrastructure support safe active travel to schools.

3.4 Schools as community hubs and service centres

Government schools offer a range of valuable facilities which are often only used during school hours. Quality school infrastructure can be a valuable community asset in providing important spaces for community engagement and interaction. Schools who take an innovative approach to the use of their facilities become vibrant community hubs bringing benefits to the school such as the ability to fundraise, place activation during low use times, security, and strengthening the school's connection to the broader community.

When referring to access to health and community services for students a number of factors can influence the utilisation of important support services. Health and community services must demonstrate best practice and be inclusive and accessible. Factors such as location, cultural and linguistic diversity, living with disability, sexual orientation, socio-economic-status, and family circumstance should not be a barrier to a student receiving the support and services they require. Where parents experience an ease of access to quality services for their child, the take up and ongoing engagement with that service is improved.

Government schools are well placed to be the common environment that connects students and families to important community and health services. WACSSO invites health and community services to embrace a whole child approach in supporting education outcomes by working together to identify and understand the barriers that exist in parents accessing the appropriate services for their children.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to recognise the community infrastructure and services asset schools can bring to a community.

4.0 Students with Disability

4.1 Department of Education specialist staff to support National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provides students throughout Western Australia with essential services, many of which can directly impact students' educational progress. The establishment of a NDIS plan can be a time consuming and confusing process for parents. It is vital that the appropriate supports for students in school settings are obtained. To ensure the provision of these vital resources in the NDIS plan, strong collaboration between the student's family, the NDIS service provider/s, and the school is essential. WACSSO affiliates have highlighted that parents desperately need support to develop appropriate educational goals in their child's NDIS plan, and to ensure these supports can be provided in the school context.

Educational goal setting, reasonable and necessary supports to achieve them, and co-ordination of support delivery at schools could be facilitated through specialist Department of Education staff working in partnership with families through the planning process. Specialist staff could co-ordinate support provided during school hours, student's need for specialist transport and/or transportable equipment, such as wheelchairs or personal communication devices, and therapy services to be utilised during the school day. This can be a complex process, including scheduling appointment times that align with classroom activities and ensuring administrative requirements are completed. The absence of a collaborative and efficient process causes stress, and wastes time and resources for parents, students, teachers, and support providers. Schools are already carrying an administrative burden to manage NDIS supports delivered to many students. Specialist roles would ease this pressure on school administration workloads and ensure NDIS plans include meaningful educational goals and appropriate delivery of supports in classrooms to improve outcomes for students with disability in Western Australian government schools.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to support specialist school-based roles to assist parents to include appropriate educational goals in NDIS plans for students, and to co-ordinate delivery of supports during school hours with providers;
- to resource and provide assistance to guide parents and schools through requirements for NDIS funded service delivery in school contexts; and
- to support increased collaboration between the Department of Education, schools and the National Disability Insurance Agency.

4.2 Student achievement

Students with disability have on average less year-to-year educational growth than their peers without disabilities. The Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools highlights that the rigidity of the Australian Curriculum is partly to blame for this, as it lacks focus on a student's individual growth. Students with disability will often face individually unique challenges during their learning journey, the adoption of individual assessment and reporting models to evaluate how a student's learning needs are understood and met, can promote individual educational growth for students.

WACSSO supports Recommendation 1 from Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools which states that schools "Embed a focus on individual student achievement through continuous learning progress in the policies and practices of all schools and systems, with the expectation that each student should achieve at least one year's growth throughout each year of schooling¹⁵."

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to support the individual teaching, assessment and reporting model acknowledging students' individual educational growth;
- to support the setting of aspirational growth expectations for students with disability to encourage individual measured growth in learning for every school year; and
- to ensure high-quality resources are provided to schools so that students with disability are supported to set and realise aspirational education goals.

4.3 Increased training for Teachers and Education Assistants

WACSSO affiliates have long highlighted concerns regarding the training and qualifications of Education Assistants working with students with specific education support needs. It is imperative that all staff working with students with disability are equipped with the professional skills, knowledge and resources to provide appropriate specialised assistance. We acknowledge that Education Assistants provide valuable learning support for students, however there are cases where the Education Assistant, despite their best efforts, is not adequately qualified to deal with the complexities of an individual student's disability. Too often the students with the most complex needs in our schools have the least qualified person in the classroom directing their education. More resources must be allocated to ensure all staff are appropriately qualified to support students in their care in Western Australian government schools.

Currently in Western Australia there is no requirement for Education Assistants working with a deaf student to hold a formal qualification in Australian Sign Language (Auslan) from the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters. This is just one example where inadequate training of staff impacts access to education and restricts future employment and community engagement opportunities for deaf students.

Appropriate professional development and training of Education Assistants will work towards decreasing the barriers to education that students with disability face and increase their options to complete their schooling and to access further career and higher education pathways upon finishing school.

WACSSO opposes any argument that the cost to be borne in training and employing appropriately qualified Education Assistants to support students with disability would result in undue financial hardship for the education system. We contend that qualified education support staff are an investment in not only a strong world class education system, but consideration should be given to the lifelong cost of sub-optimal education and the burden placed on individuals, families and society this results in.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to make it a requirement that Education Assistants working with deaf students must have a formal qualification in Australian Sign Language (Auslan);
- to provide additional funding to support teachers access appropriate training and resources to deliver education to students with a range of disabilities; and
- to provide an increase in specialised training for teachers and Education Assistants.

5.0 Sustainability

5.1 Acknowledgement of young people's concerns about climate change

WACSSO acknowledges and welcomes recent State Government initiatives that seek to address waste management and resource use in Western Australia. However, the anxiety young people feel about the future is compounded by the polarized state of the discourse around climate change and climate action in Australia¹⁶.

Young Western Australians need their concerns to be heard and acknowledged, and for recognition of sustainability principles to underpin decision making at all levels in the public education system.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to acknowledge the reality of climate change and the effect it has on young people; and
- to set ambitious targets for carbon reduction.

5.2 Increase focus on sustainability in STEM curriculum delivery

Sustainability is becoming more and more important as governments, businesses and communities look for new ways to improve our environment and reduce consumption and waste.

Creating a sustainable future will rely on the application of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to enable research and the design and application of innovative solutions. With developed and developing nations aiming to become more sustainable we are seeing global growth in careers in STEM areas. Study in STEM subjects at secondary level and beyond will be key to successful careers in new industries. Regional Sustainability Initiatives: The Growth of Green Jobs in Australia highlights growth over the last 20 years in sustainability focused industries¹⁷.



In addition, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported an 27% increase in renewable energy jobs in 2019 from the previous year, and a 120% increase in these jobs over the last 10-years¹⁸.

The increase in society's need for STEM-based solutions to sustainability and growth in careers in this industry offers a great opportunity for the State Government to resource a strengthening of teaching expertise, improve facilities and to deliver hands-on practical sustainability projects for Western Australian students. This will benefit young people by investing in their future and equipping them with the skills to develop careers in STEM.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to provide resources for schools to deliver high quality and engaging STEM curriculum content; and
- to provide specialist training and peer support networks for science teaching in primary schools.

5.3 Expansion of sustainability projects in schools

There are over 800 government schools accommodating over 300,000 students throughout WA. With a significant amount of infrastructure, staff and students, the education system has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the environment. Systems and technology within schools must be implemented to reduce negative environmental impacts and to promote schools as working models of sustainability. The implementation of sustainability projects in government schools such as installing solar panels, water efficiency projects, recycling and a range of other initiatives are already being delivered in schools, and are most successful where there is strong collaboration between school leadership and local communities. Often P&Cs are at the forefront of initiating, planning, funding, and assisting with implementation of these projects.

WACSSO applauds the October 2020 announcement of the State Government's investment of \$1.5 million in water efficiency measures in Western Australian government schools, and calls for this, and other sustainable infrastructure and technology measures to be rolled out across all Western Australian government schools. WACSSO also recognises that such programs not only benefit environmental outcomes but can also be related directly to job creation, and are a boost to local economies.

Programs that reduce water and electricity usage, and generate renewable energy can bring significant financial savings to schools; and provide students with opportunities for active learning about practical ways to reduce the carbon footprint of schools and how that has a positive impact for the whole community.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to support the roll out of water saving measures across all Western Australian schools;
- to support the rapid expansion of solar electricity generation systems across Western Australian government schools; and
- to include energy efficiency as a key feature of all new school builds, renovations and expansions.

5.4 Waste management in government schools

With over 300,000 students and upwards of 20,000 staff in Western Australian government schools, our education system generates a significant amount of waste. Research shows that although Australian schools have a strong culture of waste education, the levels of waste per capita continues to increase. WACSSO seeks a system wide approach to waste reduction, collection and recycling. Where available, WACSSO calls for school waste to move away from a single bin system, allowing schools to make use of local municipal collection and associated recycling programs.

The collective efforts of the public education sector and a state-wide government procurement approach to environmentally friendly waste management would reduce costs for schools and make a significant difference to sustainability goals for Western Australia.

We acknowledge the efforts of the many schools and their communities participating in waste management programs and student activities that increase awareness of the impact of waste and strategies to reduce landfill.

Position

WACSSO calls for the State Government:

- to support system wide guidance for schools on best practice for waste management;
- to promote the collaboration between the Education Department and local government authorities to allow participation in local recycling and waste management services;
- to ensure procurement of waste management services prioritises sustainable practice of recycling and reuse; and
- to provide resources to promote collaboration between local community networks and schools to implement student led waste management programs.

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