



WACSSO

2022 FEDERAL ELECTION POSITION PAPER



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 first educators, sharers of culture and knowledge; and recognise the value this learning holds for children and young people.

Acknowledging 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.

WACSSO prepared this position paper with the help of Western Australian public school parents, Parents and Citizen Associations (P&Cs), school staff and school communities. We particularly want to thank those parents who have shared their experiences regarding the issues highlight in this paper.

Contents

Introduction	4
1.0 Equitable Funding for Public Education	4
1.1 Ensuring all schools receive the total funding of the School Resource Standard	4
1.2 Government funding for government schools must increase on a per-student basis at the same rate as non-government schools	5
2.0 Addressing the Impacts of COVID-19	6
2.1 Ensuring Government schools are equipped to deliver high-quality remote/online learning for all students	6
2.2 Resourcing all Australian schools to address the impacts of COVID-19	7
3.0 Mental Health and Wellbeing Services for Students	8
3.1 Expansion of Psychologists in Schools	8
3.2 Additional Support in Schools (Non-Clinical School Staff)	9
4.0 Students Living with Disability	11
4.1 National Disability Insurance Scheme	11
4.2 Student Achievement	12
5.0 Sustainability and Climate Change	12
5.1 Acknowledgement of young peoples' concerns about climate change	12
5.2 Increase focus on sustainability in STEM curriculum delivery	13
6.0 Information Communication Technology	14
6.1 ICT for Regional, Rural and Remote Students	14
References	16

Introduction

Australia will hold its Federal election in May 2022. The pre-election period provides an important opportunity for the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) and our affiliates to communicate their position on key issues to political candidates and parties, parents and education stakeholders. This document outlines the position of WACSSO on six key federal issues pertinent to education in Western Australia.

It is well evidenced that strong and valued relationships between schools and families improve children's educational outcomes and engagement in school and learning. Positive and productive engagement between schools and families must not be impeded by socioeconomic circumstance, cultural background, disability, language, a parent's education background or qualifications, or diverse family structures.

The Australian Government has a responsibility to acknowledge the critical role of parents in education and ensure that the aspirations of Australian parents, in all their diversity, is considered in the resourcing and development of national education policies, frameworks and systems.

The issues discussed in this position paper are:

1. Equitable Funding for Public Education
2. Addressing the Impacts of COVID-19
3. Mental Health and Wellbeing Services for Students
4. Students Living with Disability
5. Sustainability and Climate Change
6. Information Communication Technology

1.0 Equitable Funding for Public Education

Preamble

In 2011 the Review of Funding for Schooling (the Gonski review) recommendations were put to the Australian Government. The recommendations were designed to promote an equitable education system and ensure all schools were resourced to support their students to a minimum standard. Disappointingly, these reforms have not been implemented to their full potential. A substantial funding gap remains in Australia's education system, with government schools receiving significantly less federal funding than their non-government counterparts¹. The release of the Morrison Government's budget is another stunning example of non-government schools receiving federal funding at a rate far exceeding that of government schools. This federal bias of funding for non-government schools creates an education system based on an uneven playing field that neglects the public education system committed to delivering learning to all of Australia's children and young people.

1.1 Ensuring all schools receive the total funding of the School Resource Standard

The School Resource Standard (SRS) is a needs-based education funding model that was partially implemented following the Gonski review. It works by calculating how much public

funding a school requires to meet its students' educational needs. The SRS was only partially implemented as Government schools are supported to approximately 95% of their SRS, whilst most Catholic and Independent schools receive above the SRS.

The *Bilateral Agreement between Western Australia and the Commonwealth on Quality Schools Reform* outlines that the Australian Government is currently required to fund at least 20% of the total SRS for government schools, whilst the State Government commits to funding 75% of their SRS (this funding agreement is the same for all State Governments). In addition, the agreement highlights states and territories can claim expenditures not included in the SRS measure as part of their SRS target share of up to 4% of their SRS. This means government schools can be funded to just 91% of their SRS, creating an environment where schools must function on less than what is needed to meet the requirements of their students. It is unacceptable that Australia has created an education funding system that promotes the under-resourcing of government schools². All Australian students deserve access to an excellent education; to achieve this, government schools must be funded to receive a minimum of 100% of the SRS.

1.2 Government funding for government schools must increase on a per-student basis at the same rate as non-government schools

A recent report by Save Our Schools Australia indicates that government funding (federal and state) for private schools has increased by nearly five times that of government schools. The report highlights that when adjusted for inflation, between 2009-10 and 2019-20 government funding for non-government schools increased by \$3,338 per student compared to \$703 per student for government schools³. The disparity in funding is even more stark, considering that most non-government schools receive above the SRS, whilst government schools are receiving approximately 95% of their SRS and in many cases less. It is unacceptable that non-government schools are being overfunded and resourced by the Australian Government at the cost of public schools. All Australian schools must be funded to their full SRS. In cases where they are not fully funded, this should be rectified urgently by Australian Government funding increases.

Position

WACSSO calls for the Australian Government to:

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

2.0 Addressing the Impacts of COVID-19

Preamble

The global pandemic radically shifted the way education services were delivered throughout Australia. We saw Australian students, teachers and parents familiarise themselves with remote/online learning, which in many cases proved to be quite challenging, yet at the same time opened new possibilities. Considerable resources, infrastructure and support services are needed to ensure the successful delivery of remote/online schooling. The pandemic revealed shortfalls in these areas that led to many students not having access to high-quality education. These shortfalls were exacerbated for vulnerable students and those living in rural and remote areas.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the wellbeing of students, teachers and families. Much of the impact on the wellbeing of school communities was due to a sense of uncertainty around schools being COVID-safe. It is essential that schools are not seen as high-risk locations, as parents must feel confident and safe when sending their children to school.

2.1 Ensuring Government schools are equipped to deliver high-quality remote/online learning for all students

The pandemic revealed that while many schools could provide high-quality remote/online education, students and families in low socio-economic households often struggled to access these services. Barriers to success include a higher risk of educational disengagement, inadequate access to technology, low levels of technological literacy, and a lower capacity to face the emotional challenges that off-site learning may bring⁴. Considering these barriers, delivery via online learning can greatly impact education outcomes for these students. It is unacceptable that when the pandemic put pressure on the education system, our most vulnerable students were the most affected.

A report published by the Parliament of Western Australia titled *Lessons from remote learning: COVID-19 follow-up to the Inquiry into Digital Innovation in Secondary Education* revealed that students who struggled most to access digital technology were those in regional areas and with low socio-economic status⁵. There is often a considerable cost associated with accessing the assorted technology requirements for online learning, which further compounds the strain and stress on families already facing financial hardship.

The flow-on effects of financial hardship and poverty greatly limit a young person's access to the core resources required to thrive at school. Some of these effects include a lack of access to the resources they need and financial barriers for students choosing a specific study pathway due to costs. For Australia to genuinely be an egalitarian country, we must ensure that Australian children and young people's education is not limited by their family's financial situation. One way to do this is to ease financial pressures for our most vulnerable families. WACSSO acknowledges the critical work of Services Australia in providing financial assistance to Australian families. However, many families still struggle with the cost of living, impacting their capacity to equip their children for school. The Australian Government must ensure that government assistance is at a level that allows families to send their children to school with all the resources required to participate fully in school activities, programs, and curriculum.

The pandemic drastically increased the number of students required to access their education via online learning, however distance education and online learning is not new to students

living in rural and remote locations. Many Western Australian children cannot access specialist support, senior school subjects of their choice, and extra-curricular enrichment activities due to their geographic location. Online learning is a methodology that is also beneficial where schooling is disrupted by causes such as natural disasters, illness, and extended travel away from home. The increasingly complex and exciting developments in online learning, further highlighted by the rate of the pandemic's spread that required schools across the nation to embrace this platform, have shown what is possible. Regardless of the effects of the pandemic lessening, the Australian Government must address the issues impacting the provision of online learning. Australia's education system must not miss the opportunity to strengthen the delivery and accessibility of online learning.

WACSSO calls on the Australian Government to work with all state and territory governments to analyse the learnings about the benefits and resources required for high-quality online teaching. We call for funding and resourcing in this area which will confirm to families that the Australian Government is committed to ensuring students have access to high-quality online education.

2.2 Resourcing all Australian schools to address the impacts of COVID-19

Western Australian parents have demonstrated their commitment to supporting schools to remain open for learning, with most families embracing school-based COVID-19 directives. However, the rapid rate of COVID-19 transmission in schools has left many parents, students and staff questioning the narrative that schools are COVID-19 safe spaces.

Parents understand that transmission of COVID-19 in schools is not entirely preventable, however mitigation strategies must be implemented to reduce the risk. These strategies include supplying masks to students and staff, rapid antigen test (RAT) programs, and classroom ventilation technologies. In addition, Australian schools must be consistently resourced with these products to ensure they are safe; a national resourcing commitment from the Australian Government will give families more confidence that there is no undue risk associated with their children attending school.



After the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, a national recovery strategy and investment are required. The Australian education system must come out of the pandemic stronger, with the experiences of all education systems across the country considered. Australian schools must be resourced to pursue works programs to improve school ventilation, technology connectivity and infrastructure, and enhanced outdoor learning areas. State and territory governments will require additional federal support to ensure government schools are supplied with these COVID-safe resources in the short term and can undertake retrofitting and building modification as required to ensure adequate ventilation in the longer term.

The pandemic has caused society to reconsider how we interact in work, social, and education settings. Targeted building modifications, innovative classroom and learning environment design, and clear safety strategies will reassure school communities that the safety of students and school staff is a priority. It is important that the Australian Government lead research into best practices for creating healthy school environments to ensure schools are better prepared for future pandemics.

Position

WACSSO calls for the Australian Government to:

- commit to increasing resourcing and support for government schools to ensure all students have access to high-quality remote learning technology;
- commit to investigating the benefits of online learning and to resourcing programs and infrastructure to enhance online learning beyond the pandemic;
- ensure all families have the resources and financial support required to send their children to school ready to learn each day; and
- invest in research to ensure Australian schools, classrooms and learning areas are modified and built to meet best practice design standards that address air quality, technology requirements, and social wellbeing.

3.0 Mental Health and Wellbeing Services for Students

Preamble

Positive mental health and wellbeing is currently one of the most critical challenges faced by young people in Australia. This is evident in a Telethon Kids Institute report that compared two student wellbeing benchmark studies that were six years apart, measuring the mental health and wellbeing of young people (school students) from Western Australia. The data from this report revealed that the rate of students experiencing moderate to high emotional distress had tripled in this time (2014-2020)⁶. These figures are alarming and highlight that more needs to be done to support the mental health and wellbeing of students. Governments at every level must address this issue immediately by increasing the resources and support services provided to government schools.

3.1 Expansion of Psychologists in Schools

One of the most important ways to support children and young people to be healthy and promote a strong sense of wellbeing is to ensure they have access to professional mental health and wellbeing services. Schools are excellent places to deliver these essential services, as they provide a familiar and supportive environment that is readily accessible. However,

government schools lack adequate access to school psychologists, increasing the risk of mental health problems in students being overlooked and untreated. In October 2021, The Australian Government released the *Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Report*. WACSSO congratulates the Australian Government on this critical research and supports the report's recommendations. We also acknowledge and thank the people and organisations who contributed to the report by sharing their lived experience of mental health and suicide.

Dr Fiona Martin MP, Committee Chair's Forward statement highlights that the evidence was clear that the key points for intervention are early in life. This again supports the need for early, expert support in schools. The report had other findings in relation to mental health and wellbeing services being provided in schools, some of these include:

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

These findings reveal the vital benefit of expanding psychology and counselling services in schools. All levels of government must act quickly to facilitate the roll-out of these critical services.

The demand for psychology services outside of schools has also had a noticeable spike in the last few years. A recent survey by the Australian Psychological Society has revealed that one in three psychologists are now so busy they can no longer take bookings, and three out of four psychologists now have waitlists and are turning people away. Regional, rural and remote areas experience even greater wait times⁷.

WACSSO supports the statement from the Queensland Mental Health Commissioner Ivan Frkovic, when calling for a whole-of-government and cross-sector focus:

"Some of our greatest potential for positive impact is building mental health and wellbeing in the settings of everyday life—that is, where people live, where they work, where they learn and where they play⁸."

The Australian Government must lead these critical cross-sector collaborations. Action and investment at the Federal level will improve access to the services by allocating resources, creating incentives and implementing programs that will boost the supply of psychologists and school psychologists. Providing mental health and wellbeing services in schools is essential to ensure that children and young people who cannot access services outside of school will be identified, supported, and given access to the mental health care they need.

3.2 Additional Support in Schools (Non-Clinical School Staff)

The National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) provides additional wellbeing support to school communities through an intergovernmental agreement between the Australian Government and the states and territories. WACSSO recognises the importance of non-clinical pastoral care in schools, acknowledging the value many schools place on having the additional support of a non-clinical person.

In 2018 The Australian Government Department of Education and Training released the NSCP Evaluation Report reporting on the effectiveness, implementation, and benefits to the emotional wellbeing of students and the broader school community. Report findings highlighted the positive impact of the program and the range of issues being supported. Peer and family relationships were the most common issues faced, with around 9 in 10 chaplains reporting dealing with these issues at school. This was followed by approximately 8 in 10 chaplains who had reported dealing with behaviour management such as anger, grief and loss, sense of purpose and self-esteem, and around 7 in 10 chaplains, dealt with social inclusion issues, bullying and harassment and self-image⁹.

Interestingly, the *2018 NSCP Evaluation Report* noted that although parents were largely unaware of the qualifications required by chaplains (with the exception of a valid police and working with children check), they perceived the most important qualifications to include a qualification in psychology, counselling, youth services, child development or childcare.

WACSSO requests that the NSCP be reviewed to consider whether peer and family relationships, anger, grief and loss, sense of purpose and self-esteem, social inclusion, bullying, self-image can also be supported by non-faith-based workers. The comparison is not to replace faith-based chaplains, but to allow for consideration that the NSCP show no bias and accept that both faith-based and secular support workers can provide essential wellbeing support in schools.

Public schools are wonderfully diverse and must be inclusive communities where cultural identity, diversity, gender identity, spirituality, and ethical decision-making are embraced. WACSSO hopes that all non-clinical support workers, support and respect the diversity of children and young people and their families.



Position

WACSSO supports Recommendation 41 of the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention- Final Report calls for the Australian Government to:

- conduct an independent evaluation on the effectiveness of existing programs that support wellbeing in schools, including the National School Chaplaincy Program, with a focus on the outcomes of children participating; and
- implement an agreement to increase the ratio of school psychologists to a minimum of one full time equivalent on-site for every 500 students across all levels of school.
- Additionally, WACSSO calls for the Australian Government to:
- review the National Chaplaincy School Chaplaincy Program to allow for both faith-based and secular non-clinical support workers; and
- commit to increasing incentives for the school psychologist profession to ensure there is a necessary supply of school psychologists.

4.0 Students Living with Disability

Preamble

In Australia, students living with disability face additional challenges in school and education. These challenges can place a significant strain on families as parents allocate additional time and resources to ensure their child has every opportunity to reach their potential. Many of the disability services accessed by students are resourced, designed, and facilitated by the Australian Government. However, parents often report shortfalls that impact accessibility and learning outcomes for their children. The Australian Government must fund inclusive education systems and provide appropriate services that enable equitable solutions for people living with disability to access education and training.

4.1 National Disability Insurance Scheme

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) strives to provide students with disability access to funding for essential services, many of which directly impact students' educational progress. The establishment of an NDIS plan can be a time-consuming and confusing process for families. Western Australian schools report many parents seek advice and assistance during the planning and implementation process to ensure the provision of vital resources in their child's NDIS plan. This is a time-consuming process and there are many teachers without the time or expertise required to support families in this process. Strong collaboration between the student's family, the NDIS service provider/s, and the school is essential to ensure the best learning environment and outcomes for the student. Parents of children with disability have highlighted that there is an urgent need for an additional National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) funded role to support families and schools to ensure the appropriate supports are in place for excellent outcomes for children with disability via their NDIS plan.

4.2 Student Achievement

Students with disability have on average less year-to-year educational growth than their peers without disability. The *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* highlights students with disability will often face individually unique challenges during their learning journey. The Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education calls for education systems and educators to have high learning expectations for students with disability and seek to optimise learning outcomes; and any support measures provided to individual students to strengthen opportunities for them to participate in the classroom and in out-of-school activities alongside their peers, rather than marginalising them. 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 schooling¹⁰."

Position

WACSSO calls for the Australian Government to:

- support specialist roles to assist parents and schools to include appropriate educational goals in NDIS plans for students; and
- fund assessment and reporting models acknowledging students' individual educational growth.

5.0 Sustainability and Climate Change

Preamble

Climate change is an issue of great concern for young Australians. Many young people feel that there has been a lack of action taken to reduce carbon emissions and that their calls fall on deaf ears. The anxiety young people feel about the future is compounded by the polarized state of the discourse around climate change and climate action in Australia. Despite this, it is incredibly encouraging to see that young Australians are eager to engage in sustainable practices, as they realise this to be a fundamental principle for a thriving future. The Australian Government must lead strong climate action by embedding sustainability principles in all government decision-making and allowing young Australians to take advantage of all the opportunities that come with preparing for a sustainable future.

5.1 Acknowledgement of young peoples' concerns about climate change

The effects of the changing climate and the lack of action on climate change is undoubtedly a significant burden on the wellbeing of young Australians. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) *A Climate for Change: 2019 Young Ambassador Report* highlights that 86% of young Australians saw climate change as a threat to their safety and there was a strong view that

older generations were failing to act by safeguarding the future¹¹. In addition, the report found that many young people feel threatened by climate change and powerless to act, heightening anxiety to the detriment of their wellbeing. Young Australians need their concerns to be heard and acknowledged, and for sustainability principles to underpin all government decision-making.

5.2 Increase focus on sustainability in STEM curriculum delivery

The increase in society's need for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) based solutions to sustainability, and the growth in careers in these areas, offers a great opportunity for governments to resource a strengthening of teaching expertise, improve facilities, and deliver hands-on practical sustainability projects for Australian students. This will benefit young people by investing in their future and equipping them with the skills to develop careers in STEM, which in turn benefits all Australians as it is essential to transform our economy.

Sustainability is becoming increasingly important as governments, businesses and communities look for new ways to improve strategies to reduce our carbon footprint, improve performance in preserving natural spaces, and reduce the creation of unnecessary waste. Creating a sustainable future will rely on the application of 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. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported a 27% increase in renewable energy jobs in 2019 from the previous year and a 120% increase in these jobs over the last 10-years¹². Study in STEM subjects at the secondary level and beyond will be key to successful careers in new industries.

It is disappointing to see that despite the huge potential for links between STEM and sustainability, many teachers delivering STEM education are not fully qualified to do so. The discussion paper Teaching 'out of field' in STEM subjects in Australia highlights that approximately one in every eight STEM subject teachers were not fully qualified¹³. A significant factor that adds to the STEM teacher skills shortage is that other sectors can often be more appealing for someone with STEM qualifications. We see other sectors far more willing to put resources and value on STEM expertise, which leads people to shift away from a career in education. To address this issue, we need governments to support and incentivise careers in teaching so that Australian students have access to high-quality education and are prepared for the industries of the future.

Position

WACSSO calls for the Australian Government to:

- be leaders in climate action and acknowledge the reality of climate change and the effect it has on young people; and
- set ambitious targets for carbon reduction that match or better overseas jurisdictions; and
- invest in programs to attract STEM expertise into teaching and classrooms.

6.0 Information Communication Technology

Preamble

Families and schools having access to high-quality internet service is essential for students to be able to fully engage with a high-quality modern education. Throughout Western Australia, there are many families that experience poor quality internet service, which impedes their children's education. Whilst this must be addressed across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas, of particular concern is the poor internet infrastructure and services is prevalent in rural and remote school communities. Investing in internet infrastructure goes beyond improving access to education, it also will enable communities to have greater access to health services, disaster response, industry connections, and many more crucial services. Investing in high-quality internet infrastructure is an investment in the future of all Australians, allowing us to be better connected, and to deliver and receive services more efficiently.

6.1 ICT for Regional, Rural and Remote Students

Rural and remote areas suffer the most significant ICT delivery issues, which impact on a range of different services, including education. These issues occur for various reasons relating to telecommunication, including deteriorating infrastructure, technology that is obsolete and not suited to the climate of an area, additional network capacity not keeping pace with increasing demand, lack of maintenance of infrastructure and many more. The *2021 Regional Telecommunications Review: A step change* in demand highlights 16 key findings and 12 recommendations relating to telecommunications issues people face in regional, rural and remote areas¹⁴. The review also highlights that the demand and need for high-quality



telecommunications have dramatically increased in these areas, calling for immediate action, so these communities are not left behind. It is primarily the responsibility of the Australian Government to ensure people living in regional, rural and remote have access to the vital telecommunications needed to receive a modern, high-quality education.

Position

WACSSO calls for the Australian Government to:

- commit to implementing the 12 recommendations listed in the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review;
- invest in the infrastructure necessary to ensure all Australian students have access to high-quality internet service; and
- ensure that quality internet services are accessible for all Australian families.

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