

“Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools”

WACSSO Submission

About WACSSO

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school children in Western Australia. WACSSO provides services and representation at State and National level to 645 Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs), four school boards and two school councils in Western Australia. WACSSO is largely a volunteer organisation made up of a President and State Councillors (representatives) from geographically-based electorates and as such, the organisation has a wide representative reach across the state.

Through consultation with external organisations and affiliates, WACSSO has identified several key hearing health and wellbeing issues which are currently impacting on Australian students' access to quality education.

This submission deals with four of the terms of reference and some additional points within the scope of the organisation's representation of parents of public school students across the state.

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In addressing the theme: *Parent and community engagement*

Together, parents and teachers are pivotal in shaping and directing children's learning, development and wellbeing. Parental engagement is an essential element in showing children that education is important, building their confidence and fostering connections between home and school environments, all of which contribute to improving student's educational outcomes and well-being.

Despite an increased emphasis, across the education community, on utilizing parental engagement as a strategy for improving student outcomes, there is a distinct lack of policy surrounding the fundamental importance of parental engagement. There is a lack of conceptual and definitional clarity around what parental engagement is and, consequently, what should be measured.

We know that successful parental engagement has a distinctly positive effect on improving social and educational outcomes. However, because of the indistinct nature of this target area, it's difficult to pinpoint the specific characteristics of parental engagement that contribute to improving social and educational outcomes of students. Therefore, we need to, firstly, define parental engagement and, secondly, establish what constitutes successful parental engagement and the factors that make it so successful. This will allow more school communities to fine tune their efforts, which will result in improved student outcomes.

Most people aren't well versed, let alone versed, in parental engagement. At our own State Council table, at Parents & Citizens' meetings across the state, and no doubt Australia, there have been several questions raised on the topic of terminology. We hear both 'family' and 'parent' engagement, and then there is the question of 'involvement' versus 'engagement.' For those versed in parental engagement, we know that involvement does not always equal engagement. However, this is not a wide-ranging understanding. Given this confusion, any future work in this space should have as one of its primary aims the development of consistent language and terminology. This confusion is damaging and dilutes the parental engagement message. We need to decide as a nation, is it 'family' or 'parent' and what exactly is engagement; how does it differ from involvement?

There is a serious and demonstrated need for pre-service and ongoing teacher training courses to include compulsory parental engagement training – not just simply offering the courses. It is our position that this training must be mandated. We acknowledge that for success to occur it requires the active participation and willingness of not only the teachers but parents as well.

We also see an opportunity for the Federal Government to support organisations such as WACSSO to be champions of the parental engagement movement. It is becoming increasingly apparent that when people hear 'parent engagement' they think involvement and fundraising. In order to effectively implement and capitalise on the benefits of parental engagement, the Federal Government needs to initiate a big change in how schools think of parents and families and how they connect to them. But, there also needs to be work done with parents to be both more responsive and to be acknowledged by schools as essential partners in their child's education. In Western Australia, organisations like WACSSO and Parents and Friends Federation of WA (PFFWA) would be well placed to be champions of such a change.

This isn't about teachers working longer hours. It is about schools working differently. Successful parental engagement will result in time freed and productivity increases as a result of better working relationships. This should be liberating rather than oppressive for teachers. Parental engagement, when done properly, should never be a drain on any school's resources.

Finally, we recommend that the Federal Government:

- have a targeted initiative designed to promote and support parental engagement;
- develop parental engagement policy, including clearly defined terms of reference;
- support organisations such as WACSSO to be champions of the parental engagement initiative; and
- mandate teacher training courses to include compulsory parental engagement training.