



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Western Australian State Government
Submitting as a: Government agency
State: WA

Summary

Main submission

1. Foreword

With a population density of 1.0 person per square kilometre, Western Australia (WA) is responsible for servicing one of the most geographically diverse schooling sectors in the world and faces significant challenges in providing an equitable, quality education to all students.

This State covers almost one-third of the Australian land mass and is approximately 92% of the size of the eastern seaboard states combined. By comparison, New South Wales has a population density of 9.7 persons per square kilometre and Victoria 27.2 per square kilometre.

WA is home to 3.1% of Aboriginal persons, with 8.2% of students (one student in every 12) in the public school sector. Of these, 58.8% are enrolled in regional, rural and remote public schools.

Some of the most isolated schools in the world are in WA, with approximately 44% of all public schools located in regional areas. The closest town to a remote school is, on average, 400 kilometres away, with access mainly on unsealed roads. Remote communities frequently face multiple and complex health, social and family problems that need to be acknowledged and addressed in order to make a positive difference in student achievement.

The uniqueness of the WA context creates a challenging environment that is not conducive to the delivery of education within a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

Recommendation:

That the new *Australian Schools Agreement* for the WA public school system facilitates flexibility in the design of new initiatives in a way that enables WA to address the uniqueness of this State's context.

2. Teaching and Learning

The 2015 Louden report into conditions that existed in schools achieving significant improvements in literacy and numeracy outcomes found several common characteristics, including:

- stable long-term school leadership;
- well-developed explicit school improvement plans, typically articulated through operational plans, business plans, learning area plans and professional learning plans;
- reading programs based on explicit teaching of synthetic phonics in the early years;
- school-wide agreement on what and how to teach, rather than leaving these decisions to individual teachers, and
- significant investment in teachers' professional development.

While considerable attention by policy makers is focused on addressing underperformance, it is noteworthy that the WA Department of Education was recognised internationally for its gifted and talented program. In 2015, the program (and the only Australian State) was featured in a leading international policy publication. Secondary selective entrance programs in Western Australia, catering for students with exceptional academic, languages and arts abilities, offer the learning environment, differentiated curriculum and expert teaching that these students require.

Of particular concern is the performance gap between many schools with Aboriginal students and those with no or few Aboriginal students. The WA Department of Education is implementing the *Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework*, which sets expected standards when working with Aboriginal students, their parents, families and communities. The Framework supports employees to incorporate culturally responsive attitudes, values and behaviours into their everyday work so learning outcomes for Aboriginal students are maximised.

Providing for careers is especially important among Aboriginal young people, who tend to 'fall between the cracks'. In WA, five Aboriginal Workforce Development Centres are assisting students by developing tailored career transition plans, monitoring their progress after leaving school, and offering case management where needed to maximum post-school outcomes.

The WA Department of Education is also investing in the establishment of a Western Australian Centre for Excellence (the Centre) in the Explicit Teaching of Literacy, where teachers will work alongside university staff to design, trial, and deliver explicit teaching professional learning based on their successful literacy practices.

The key objectives include:

- the expansion and strengthening of explicit teaching practices in public school classrooms;
- the development of classroom resources to support the explicit teaching of literacy;
- coaching and mentoring programs delivered through identified schools;
- the delivery of professional learning programs on explicit teaching methodologies to public school leaders and teachers; and
- professional internships at the Centre for 60 public school teachers, who will become explicit teaching instructional leaders and mentors for their school networks.

High-performing countries are characterised by a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) literate population that celebrates discovery and innovation. In WA's public schools, STEM education is being strengthened through a number of commitments, including:

- investment in science laboratories and equipment in up to 200 primary schools;
- funding the delivery of professional learning for teachers to support the integration of coding into their teaching and learning programs; and
- establishment of DigiTech Schools to support the integration of digital technologies.

There is widespread recognition about the rate at which workforce needs are changing, greatly accelerated due to the rapid growth and evolution of technology. There are three key economic forces currently influencing the world of work that young people are entering into: automation, globalisation and collaboration (or flexibility).

The Foundation for Young Australians' analysis of 4.2 million Australian job advertisements from 2012 to 2015 led to the conclusion that by 2030, young people are likely to have many different jobs over their lifetime. To successfully navigate this complex future, students will need not only enterprise skills, but will need to be rapid learners, STEM-skilled problem solvers and communicators, and have an entrepreneurial mindset.

WA acknowledges that for many students, for a variety of reasons, a comprehensive Vocational Educational and Training (VET) program, rather than a university pathway, is the most appropriate. This is reflected in the number of Year 11 and 12 students participating in VET programs in WA public schools, which increased from 55% to 80% between 2012 and 2016.

Since 2016, the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) has required students to complete four or more ATAR courses or a Certificate II or higher qualification.

Recommendation:

That national effort is maintained to support teachers in the early years by expanding, strengthening and delivering strategies such as explicit teaching of synthetic phonics for greater success for individual students.

Recommendation:

That new meaningful qualifications, pathways and areas of study in the VET sector are identified, with a parallel reduction in courses of low benefit.

Recommendation:

That 'on-demand' assessment instruments are developed to enable teachers to gauge student progress in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and areas of the curriculum other than literacy and numeracy.

3. School Leadership and teacher capacity

Teacher quality is acknowledged as the single most important school variable influencing student achievement. High-performing systems around the world are clear that improving the effectiveness of teaching has the most significant effect in lifting student performance and, therefore, school performance.

For the WA Department of Education, building the capacity of principals is fundamental in leading teachers to improve the quality of their teaching. This deliberate connection is described in the *Classroom First Strategy*: every teacher an effective teacher; every school a good school; and every student a successful student.

Linked to this, the WA Department of Education is currently developing a comprehensive school leadership strategy. The strategy, which is at the cutting edge both nationally and internationally, is aimed at ensuring high-quality leaders are identified, attracted to, and retained in, all schools through new and redesigned identification, selection and capacity-building processes.

Provision of quality education for students in rural and remote schools is a key concern in WA. The WA Department of Education has addressed this challenge, in part, through initiatives such as the Rural and Remote Training Schools project. This

project promotes rural and remote teaching to university students, identifies schools with capacity to support pre-service teachers, and works with universities, pre-service teachers and school staff to ensure a positive and effective practicum experience.

The project has been highly successful, as shown by the fact that:

- 82% of participants have been employed by the Department of Education; and
- 93% of employed participants commenced their teaching career in rural or remote WA after graduation, with a 90% retention rate for these new teachers in these schools.

Another successful project is the Training Schools project, in which final-year pre-service teachers (interns) undertake an intensive, extended practicum (internship) under the tutelage of high-performing mentor teachers for up to 12 months, has also achieved positive results.

In an independent evaluation, principals rated intern graduates higher against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers than graduates of traditional courses, and 96.9% of internship graduates strongly agreed or agreed that the internship enabled them to be more classroom-ready in their first year of teaching. Retention of interns is strong; across all cohorts from 2010 to 2016, 73.7% of employed interns were still employed as at September 2017.

Increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers and school leaders is expected to lead to large gains in student improvement. The recruitment, development and retention of Aboriginal staff are key strategies for improving Aboriginal student outcomes.

The WA Government has recently committed to investing in more one-on-one attention for students in the classroom, including an additional 300 FTE Education Assistants, 50 FTE Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers and 120 FTE teachers introduced into classrooms. The additional teachers will allow senior teachers to improve classroom learning in their schools, lead mental health programs and provide more support for Year 11 and Year 12 students when needed.

The recent investment by the WA Government to improve broadband services and access to ICT within public schools will be utilised by the Department to explore new ways of enhancing education opportunities for students, particularly those in non-metropolitan areas.

Provision of quality education for all students is contingent upon attraction and retention of a high-performing workforce. Given WA's geography, this is a significant challenge in rural and remote locations and can be overcome in part through the use of innovative ICT strategies.

Recommendation:

In the context of WA's uniqueness, it is recommended that national work is undertaken to identify innovative ways of utilising Information Communications Technology to deliver both general and special education in non-metropolitan schools, and for trials to be undertaken in key locations around Australia.

Recommendation:

Continue to focus on building capacity of school leadership and teacher quality, by identifying gaps and implementing strategies to fill them, particularly in ways that benefit regional, rural and remote schools.

4. Parent and Community Engagement

There are many complex issues having an impact on the education of Australian young people, which often extend beyond those that schools can influence or respond to, and reflect issues evident among family units and in the broader community.

In the report, *Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes; Every Day Counts*, many factors that are related to student achievement, beyond the domain of schools, are identified. A whole-of-community approach that provides support for disadvantaged families and encourages parents to invest in, and care about, their child's education and learning, will yield greater returns.

Research has shown that in order to achieve optimum outcomes for students, the impact of a complex range of needs must first be recognised, and issues mitigated. This is the key catalyst for WA building on its successful Child and Parent Centres in primary school settings and adopting an extended or full service schooling approach for secondary schools.

The WA Government has committed, through a trial of a Full Service Schools model, to the provision of a range of core and additional services to schools in low socio-economic areas, including:

- after-school activities;
- childcare;
- training in life skills;
- TAFE and VET services;
- targeted specialist health services;
- classes to reintegrate early school leavers; and
- alternative curriculum, including part-time community-based projects.

A Full Service School pilot is being established at Armadale Senior High School, to commence in 2018.

Due to significant State investment over many years, universal access to Kindergarten (two years before Year 1 and one year before full-time schooling) has been a reality in WA since 1995 and participation is normalised. This solid universal platform includes all Aboriginal, disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

- The Child and Parent Centre initiative provides facilities and services in 21 disadvantaged communities in WA on public primary school sites. Support is provided to local families with children from pre-birth to eight years of age (with an emphasis on pre-birth to four years old). The programs and services are delivered in partnership with non-government agencies and are intended to develop the capabilities of families to support their child's early development, and ultimately improve the development, health and learning outcomes of young children, particularly those at risk of not achieving their potential.
- Professor Jack Shonkoff states that optimal outcomes for vulnerable children are achieved by supporting the adults who care for them to build their capacities.

Building on this platform, WA created KindiLink, a pilot project for Aboriginal three-year-olds in 37 schools with a high number and proportion of Aboriginal enrolments. This pilot offers six hours per week of play-and-learn sessions delivered jointly by a qualified early childhood teacher and an Aboriginal educator.

Another new commitment in WA is EduCare, which will increase the number of long day care and outside school hours care service providers operating on public school sites. There are clear benefits for children and families by collocation of these services on school sites – not only because it will be more convenient for families, but also because it will create opportunities for continuity and cohesion of program delivery.

WA has strategically and financially invested in key initiatives that seek to boost the confidence and capacity of parents/caregivers through family-centric and culturally safe services on school sites that focus on children prior to full-time schooling. These initiatives seek to simultaneously support children's development and learning and positively influence the home learning environment.

Recommendation:

In order to view a child's education and wellbeing holistically, the Commonwealth Government needs to maximise its support for disadvantaged families through services brokered or provided by education systems.

Recommendation:

That the Commonwealth Government examine how funding provided to states and territories for preschool (the year before full-time school) can be included as additional education funding, with per capita base allocations and equity lines consistent with those that will apply for school funding. This will remove the current inequities whereby different funding arrangements apply according to the different models of delivery that prevail in each state and territory.

5. Enabling Conditions

To respond to the unique challenges of the WA context, and for system-wide and school-based initiatives to have maximum impact, enabling conditions need to be in place and sustained. The features of effective systems have been the subject of considerable international research. There is a range of enabling conditions that may lead to improved student outcomes:

- empowering principals through greater decision-making authority;
- principal capacity-building;
- intelligent accountability mechanisms;
- an empowerment mindset amongst principals and teachers;
- collaboration within and between schools;
- a focus on improving the quality of teaching and the educational experience of students;
- a commitment and capacity within the central authority to actually deliver and support meaningful authority and not circumscribe it in such detailed ways that schools gain little benefit;
- decision-making authority over key aspects of school operations such as staffing and one-line budgets; and
- investing early in a child's life and education.

When principals are empowered, they create a school culture in which teachers are intrinsically motivated, satisfied and perform at their best. The benefits of engendering among principals a strong sense of empowerment are reported in the literature as:

- increased motivation and investment in the success of their school;
- greater ownership;
- more openness to change;
- initiating innovative practices that support effective teaching and learning;
- tendency to solve problems rather than seeing challenges as roadblocks;

- acceptance of stronger accountability;
- stronger buy-in to system goals;
- taking more initiative and being more entrepreneurial; and
- a stronger sense of commitment, responsibility and motivation.

Variables affecting student success are complex and varied, and all students benefit most when they are exposed to policy, programs and pedagogy specially adapted to their circumstances.

WA public schools are now funded using the student-centred funding model (SCFM), which allocates funds for each student enrolled in a school, with different amounts allocated depending on their year level. Targeted funding is allocated for schools with eligible students to meet the specific learning needs of:

- Aboriginal students;
- students facing social disadvantage;
- students with English as an additional language; and
- students with disability.

Equally important is the ability of WA's Department of Education independent public school leaders to select their own staff. This enables the best match possible to the needs of the students and the improvement initiatives in the schools' strategic and operational plans.

Recommendation:

That the new Australian Schools Agreement facilitates states and territories to:

- build and capitalise on the enabling conditions of autonomy and empowerment;
- strengthen school leader capacity; and
- develop and implement policy, programs and pedagogy that are adapted to their local circumstances.

6. Intelligent Accountability Systems

Intelligent accountability in education by O'Neill highlights that teachers and learners need to be held to account. This requires intelligent systems of accountability that do not alter primary activities of public education systems. That is, systems that clarify and set high expectations and support the collection and provision of relevant evidence about achievements that can subsequently be assessed by those to whom professionals and institutions are accountable.

In WA, the Department of Education has an integrated accountability framework, as well as a growing sophistication about how its core business is monitored; i.e. the academic and non-academic outcomes of students. The main strategies are:

- Delivery and Performance Agreements that identify key activities independent public school principals and their schools are required to undertake;
- the Schools Funding Agreement that specifies outcomes and performance measures for all funding received by schools;
- tools and support to assist principals and their staff to monitor, self-assess and plan the allocation of resources and initiatives;
- an extensive suite of school, system-level student and staff performance data that are benchmarked and available to principals and Education executive; and
- an Expert Review Group (ERG) that investigates and provides reports, which include mandated improvement strategies to address areas of concern, on underperforming schools.

The ERG also contributes to the development of strong public schools by conducting performance studies of schools displaying exemplary practice to inform system improvement and promote empowerment in educational leadership.

While establishing direct cause-effect relationships between student achievement gains and specific interventions or policies in isolation has always been challenging in human service organisations such as education, the work of ERG has demonstrated its contribution to a strong public school system, one that has found increasing confidence with the public. Since 2008, in 77% of cases, there has been a sustained and significant increase of 15 NAPLAN points or more between the time of review and 2017 NAPLAN results becoming available.

Recommendation:

In order to maintain states and territories' flexibility, accountability requirements in the new Australian Schools Agreement should not negatively alter the primary activities of public education systems.