

Mr Tim Watling  
Secretary  
Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations  
The Senate of Australia

Dear Mr Watling

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Senate's Inquiry into Teaching and Learning – Maximising Australia's Investment in Schools.

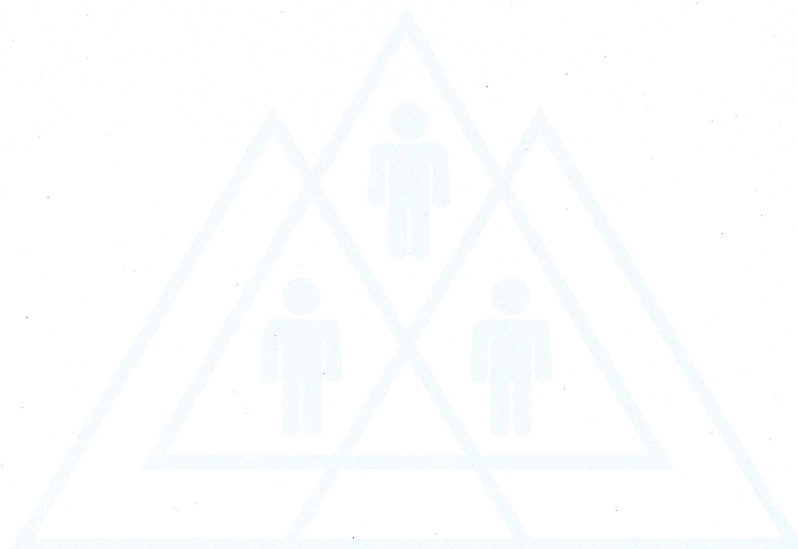
The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc (WACSSO) represents over 670 affiliated public school Parents and Citizens' Associations in WA. As representatives of parents of public school students, the intent of our submission is to relay the views of our affiliates regarding public education and schools. While this perspective may not always be one from a professional or academic background, we believe it to be equally important considering the broad influence parents have in their child's education.

I wish you all the best for your inquiry.

Yours faithfully

KR Catto  
President

Friday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012



# WACSSO Submission to the Senate Inquiry into

## Teaching and Learning 2012

### The effectiveness of current classroom practices in assisting children to realise their potential in Australian schools

Australia is an increasingly multicultural nation, with a range of cultures, linguistic backgrounds, social and economic situations and geographic locations. An education system that understands and caters for the different potentials, resources and meets the needs of each student is paramount to ensuring a strong future for all citizens. Secondary school students must have access to, and be assisted to select, a balanced program with an appropriate range of subjects to equip them with the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills, and personal attributes to enable them to function effectively in society. School-based curriculum must take account of the needs, interests and abilities of the students and contain a large degree of flexibility for that purpose. During the past decade, we have seen a multitude of evidence suggesting that the most effective classroom practices are those that meet individual student needs and create environments which facilitate achievement for all students. Strategies to accomplish this include improving teacher-parent communication, ensuring equitable classroom management and structure and the adoption of inclusive education strategies.

#### Inclusive Education

Inclusive education strategies that improve educational outcomes for all students will ensure that each child has the opportunity and support to achieve their individual aspirations. It is widely accepted that inclusion maximizes the potential of all students and is the preferred strategy in modern classrooms worldwide. The Australian public school system is tasked with taking all students, regardless of their personal circumstances or academic level. In many cases, our public schools enroll students from varying disadvantaged backgrounds, including geographically challenged, indigenous, (culturally diverse) and low socio-economic students. Special needs students, in particular those with learning disabilities, are also a major challenge facing schools. A 2002 discussion paper released by the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) State Government, "The Inclusivity Challenge," stated that,

Inclusivity in education starts with the recognition of our diversity. It is treating students as individuals rather than as a homogeneous group. Inclusivity embraces the idea that since everyone is an individual, we need to organise

schools, teaching and learning so that each student has a learning experience that 'fits'.<sup>1</sup>

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) states that we must "*support all Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens.*"<sup>2</sup>

As these statements and others show, school systems in Australia recognise the importance of inclusive education and widely accept that special needs students should not be disadvantaged due to their circumstances. Despite the overwhelming good will, however, this is an area that often lacks the funding and support it requires.

Teacher training for inclusion education strategies must begin at university levels. Unfortunately many tertiary undergraduate courses do not currently provide adequate training for teachers to comfortably address the needs of a special needs student in their classroom.<sup>3</sup> While many teaching degrees do include non-compulsory units specific to special needs education, in many cases these units only provide generic content instead of practical training advice.<sup>4</sup> Due to the lack of tertiary courses training student in the area of special needs education, there is a current shortage of high qualified special educators in Australia. If the philosophy of inclusive education is to be truly accomplished in Australian schools, it will require an active approach by tertiary education providers and Governments to address this shortfall and ensure that all schools have access to highly trained special needs educators.

### Teacher-Parent Communication

It is well documented that engaging parents in their child's education has a dramatic and positive effect on student outcomes. Ensuring that parents are fully informed on their child's academic performance, behavior and attendance is critical to ensuring a students success in the classroom. In situations where the teacher facilitates a collaborative partnership with parents, it is proven that the student performs better academically, shows increased attendance rates and lower behavioral problems. The 2011 National Professional Standards for Teachers sets the following precedent in regard to parent engagement,

Teachers should demonstrate respect and professionalism in all their interactions with parents/carers and the community. They are sensitive to

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<sup>1</sup> ACT Department of Education

<sup>2</sup> MCEECDYA

<sup>3</sup> Forbes, F

<sup>4</sup> Forbes, F

the needs of parents/carers and can communicate effectively with them about their children's learning.<sup>5</sup>

The document also sets the 'graduate' (base) standard for engaging with parents/carers as, "Understanding strategies for working effectively, sensitively and confidentially with parents/carers."<sup>6</sup> By enforcing these standards, local schools can ensure their teachers are working collaboratively with parents to achieve an optimum academic outcome for students.

Engaging parents and carers in classroom activities must be recognised as a learnt skill that requires training and support for all teachers beginning at tertiary level and supported by professional development throughout a graduates career. Currently this is not the case. While many teachers do communicate effectively with parents, many others, in particular graduates, have little direction and are ineffective in this area. As a result, good examples of teacher-parent communication are ad-hoc and rely on a teacher's individual experience, personality and abilities. A holistic approach where the importance of partnerships with parents and how to facilitate these relationships is included as a compulsory part of tertiary teaching courses would ensure that all teachers were equipped with the skills and knowledge to ensure they can engage with parents effectively. In addition, ongoing professional development and the adoption of a buddy-mentoring system where graduates are paired with experienced teachers would see this area improve.

### Classroom Structure and management

Classroom structure and management is an important aspect in ensuring that all students receive the individual attention and support they require. All classrooms should facilitate a positive learning environment where all students, regardless of their academic level, are encouraged to perform to the highest level. The teacher-pupil ratio and overall class size has a significant effect on the quality of teaching, the learning experience of students and student outcomes. In addition, the physical structure of classrooms should be relevant to location, year group, subject matter and academic level of students. They must also take into consideration any disadvantaged students, including those with learning disabilities, and ensure that appropriate support for these students is provided. Teachers must also have access to effective behaviour management strategies and programs to ensure that students won't be distracted in their learning due to behavioral issues.

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<sup>5</sup> AITSL

<sup>6</sup> AITSL



The success of school-based behaviour policies depends on the commitment of students, parents, carers, teachers and school staff. This is best achieved when behaviour policies are collaboratively developed and effectively implemented the involvement of all members of the school community.

## Curriculum

Curriculum must provide a broad and balanced program to allow students to develop according to their abilities and to permit easy change of direction at any period. The introduction of NAPLAN and a planned National Curriculum has generated a mixed reaction from parent of public school children in Western Australia. While there are clear benefits to NAPLAN in assisting Governments to procure resources to schools most in need, the public availability of results is generally seen as negative for a variety of reasons. There is increasing evidence that teaching practices are becoming NAPLAN centric, where 'teaching to the test' is a common occurrence. It is generally accepted that 'teaching to the test,' while possibly having a positive effect on overall NAPLAN results for that school, will have a detrimental effect on an individual student's education by distracting them from other curriculum requirements. Teaching styles that broadly cover many topics through various teaching styles will facilitate a greater chance for students to retain that knowledge long term. Measures should be taken by school systems to arrest the occurrence of 'teaching to the test' styles of teaching as a result of NAPLAN in public school classrooms.

There is currently a perceived acceptance of students reaching curriculum benchmarks rather than a push to achieve at a higher level. As a result, students may feel less compelled to achieve beyond the required curriculum benchmark and reach their full potential. WACSSO encourages teachers to engage students comprehensively beyond the requirement set by curriculum guidelines. In addition, curriculum should focus on current society job demand requirements and every effort should be made to deliver subjects based on academic requirement and employment opportunities post education, especially in secondary schools. To ensure that students can fully utilize vocational and higher learning opportunities available to them post-secondary education, schools should have capacity to deliver alternate learning opportunities to students at different levels within year groups.

## The structure and governance of school administration – local and central – and its impact on teaching and learning

In many states of Australia, local and central school administration has undergone several dramatic changes with the introduction of autonomous school initiatives such as Independent Public Schools (IPS) and Empowering Local Schools (ELS). Local schools now have greater control over many aspects of their administration, direction and ability to suit the individual needs of the community they service. However, the devolution of power from a central office to local schools and the removal of an intermediate 'district office' tier of support has also had some negative implications. Within schools, autonomous school initiatives have also had a varied impact on the operation of school councils, now called school 'boards.' While many school boards function well with strong collaboration between the Principal, staff, parents and other community members, in other cases some boards have not been successful in ensuring each section of the school community is represented fairly.

### Central Administration and Governance

In Western Australia, the restructuring of the Education Department in 2010 saw the closure of District Education Offices and the introduction of Regional Offices which cover substantially larger areas and rely on a school networking system to facilitate local support. The removal of District Education Offices has resulted in less local support for school principals and staff. In comparison to District Offices which serviced much smaller regions, Regional Offices support larger catchment areas and therefore their resources are stretched over a greater number of schools. Many schools that once had a District Office relatively close must now travel far greater distances to receive support and training. In effect, the local tier of support that schools received has been completely disbanded and this has had widespread negative implications on schools, especially those in rural and remote areas.

Professional development, a main agenda of former District Offices, is now facilitated through the development of school networks. Unfortunately, the school network system has yet to be proven sufficient in ensuring that schools and staff receive the support and professional development they require. The number of PD days for staff has dropped with the loss of District Office staff who organised these events in the past. The implications of this are that some teachers may not be receiving the support and resources they require professionally and in the classroom.

## Local Administration and Governance

Successful local administration and governance in schools revolve around a performance based model set against benchmarks which determine where funding is procured. All local school outcomes should be measurable or auditable and set against appropriate student outcome goals. There are many facets to a successful local governance structure that has a positive effect on teaching and learning.

Local school governance structures should:

- be equitable to all students and do not seek to benefit individuals or groups of students at the expense of providing quality education for all;
- increase the quality of teaching and learning at the school;
- increase cooperation between schools and school communities;
- do not require the generation of external funds to provide a quality education;
- provide opportunities for parents and the wider community to play an active role in school governance without increasing the burden and legal liability of volunteers; and
- maintain and appropriate and effective support structure at system level.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the points above, all members of local school management groups, including school councils/boards, have a responsibility to participate in training or professional development that will assist them in fulfilling the requirements of their position. With the high turnover rate of school council/parent group members, regular and on-going training for members is vital. Governments should ensure that local school administrations are adequately resourced to deliver the high quality service expected of any public school.

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<sup>7</sup> WACSSO

## The influence of family members in supporting the rights of children to receive a quality education

Parents have a unique knowledge and understanding of their children and it is primarily their responsibility to ensure that their child receives a high quality education suited to their individual needs. A significant body of both international and Australian research has found correlations between parent engagement in education and indicators such as improved school readiness, high retention and graduation rates, enhanced academic achievement, high motivation, greater ability to self-regulate and better social skills.<sup>8</sup> In low socio economic and rural and remote areas especially, it is vital that schools that develop authentic partnerships with families and communities. Providing a wide variety of opportunities for parents to engage with the school will strengthen the partnership between teachers and parents and ultimately increases student outcomes.

Effective and regular communication between the school and parents is key to ensuring that families are supportive of their child's education and engage with opportunities to become involved. Parents are entitled to continuing, quality information regarding their children's education through a variety of report mechanisms. Schools can utilize the advantages of modern technology, along with traditional channels such as newsletters, to implement effective parent communication strategies based on the individual circumstances of that school community. In addition, engaging with parent bodies attached to the school, such as Parent and Citizen Associations, encourages family members to play an active role in supporting their child's education.

Parents have several important responsibilities in ensuring their child's right to a high quality education. These include:

- ensuring their child is provided with education as prescribed by legislation;
- becoming informed about the development levels of their child;
- communicating with children, teachers and other members of the community to facilitate their child's learning;
- teaching basic morality, behavior and manners to their child by example and active assistance;

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<sup>8</sup> WACSSO

- encouraging learning outside of the school environment, in particular their involvement in early childhood education;
- providing a safe and productive environment for students to study outside of school;
- ensuring the attendance of students at school and incorporating community support (i.e. not be served at local shops during school hours);
- participating in any school based or classroom activities where it is appropriate to do so; and
- informing Governments about their expectations concerning their child's education;<sup>9</sup>

Of course, not every family has the capacity or ability to provide their child with the resources they require outside of school to reach their full ability. It is the responsibility of Governments to ensure that parents have access to assistance to ensure they can be a positive influence and support their child's education. This includes parental education and training to support their child, financial support, including access to subsidized resources, and personal support. Rewarding parent participation through initiatives such as the School Passport Program in Western Australia has been proven to increase parent/carer involvement in their local school and increase regular student attendance.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, it is generally accepted that families show an increased capability and desire to support their child's education when they are part of a collaborative school community. A collaborative school community is one in which its parents, students, staff, the principal and wider community work together towards achieving the best educational and personal outcomes for each and every student, and one which meets the needs and aspirations of the whole school community.

A collaborative school community is one where:

- members of the school community are open, honest and willing to work collaboratively and share ideas;

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<sup>9</sup> WACSSO

<sup>10</sup> Community Development Foundation



- the whole school community cooperates, both internally and with outside parties, and there is an enthusiastic, vibrant and positive environment for its members;
- school decision-making groups acknowledge and fulfil their roles and responsibilities;
- a partnership exists between students, parents, the principal and school staff;
- there is openness and members of the school community are valued and empowered to contribute in many ways to the organisation and management of the school;
- members of the school community share in the development of a vision and aims for the school, and move forward together to achieve these aims;
- students are actively encouraged to achieve their full potential;
- there is a team of committed and enthusiastic staff; and
- there is an ability to share not only successes, but also problems and their solutions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> WACSSO

## The adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment

Today's evolving classroom environment is continually moving away from traditional teaching methods. With advances in modern technology, the widening role of teachers and a recognition that individual students respond differently to various learning styles, schools must provide educators with the right tools to ensure their students can reach their full potential. Along with the right tools, school systems must have the capacity to deliver training and support to teachers in order to fully utilize the benefits to students that any new or existing teaching aid brings. Governments have a clear responsibility to ensure that appropriate funding is procured to schools so they can provide teachers and their classrooms with the latest, most effective learning tools to promote an optimal learning environment.

### The Digital Revolution (Information and Communication Technology)

Significant advances in technology over the past decade have led to an increase in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in public schools to aid teachers in ensuring their students receive a high quality education. The rapid development of mobile phone, computer and other digital technologies has led to several new initiatives in schools such as the introduction of electronic whiteboards, iPads and laptops for every student. If fully supported through appropriate funding and resourcing, this technology has the potential to have a dramatic and positive effect on student outcomes. The effective use of ICT to supplement a student's education helps to accommodate the varying learning styles of modern students. It has been well documented that the effective use of ICT in classrooms leads to an improvement of student outcomes.

Unfortunately, while Governments continue to roll out new ICT initiatives in schools, in many cases they have not provided the funding and resources needed to ensure that this new technology can be fully utilised. Many public schools lack the training and ongoing professional development for teachers to use this technology effectively and the IT support staff to ensure that equipment is maintained and serviced properly. There are also issues with the currency of software on existing computers and the stability of bandwidth, especially in rural and remote areas. As a result, while schools may have advanced technology in place, they lack the support, knowledge and resources to utilize it effectively; this is detrimental to the quality of education our students receive. All public school students must have equitable access to digital technology that will optimise their educational outcomes. Government's must provide funding to ensure there are modern information and digital technology systems in place

that are supported through both the training of staff and the provision of school-based technical and maintenance support.

### Online Tools and Communication

There is an increasing opportunity for schools to provide teachers with online tools to monitor student performance, connect with parents, make resources easily available outside of school hours and promote greater communication. Online communities that operate in a similar fashion to existing sites such as Facebook, could be tailored specifically to suit the purpose of a school community. They could allow teachers and principals to easily and securely communicate information to parents, monitor student progress, allow resources to become available online and host a range of other functions. With the majority of Australian households connected to the internet and the introduction of the National Broadband Network, accessibility would not be an issue. In addition, with the time constraints of today's world in which many families consist of two working parents, an online community with information that could be accessed any time would be of convenience. In a world that increasingly relies on the internet for connection and information, school communities and systems must embrace this social shift and ensure that they provide modern tools for teachers to connect with students and parents both in class and after school hours.

## Factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system

With 25% of teachers in Australia expected to retire in the next 4 years and current teacher shortages in the subjects of math's, science and technology, attracting and retaining new graduates to the profession is vital. Government initiatives such as salary increases, bonuses, improved curriculum and school buildings investments do not appear to have had the desired impact on the supply of teachers. The main issue affecting teacher retention is that teachers currently reach the top of the pay scale within a decade, meaning individuals must leave the classroom if they wish to further increase their income. The National Professional Standards for Teachers, adopted by all states, will help to address this issue by introducing further career paths for accomplished teachers.<sup>12</sup> A lack of male teachers, especially in primary education, is also an issue facing many schools. Governments must work collaboratively to formulate strategies that attract and retain male teachers in the education sector.

### Teacher Bonuses

There is a significant amount of evidence that suggests the payment of financial incentives to teachers where it is predominantly linked to student academic results do not work. This corporate approach of paying a small number of teachers one-off bonuses is counterproductive and divisive. Evidence shows that in most examples of teacher bonus reforms around the world, the impact on students has been negligible, and in some cases the negative impact on teachers has negatively affected school improvements.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> AITSL

<sup>13</sup> Jensen, B

## Other related matters

### The Role of Parent and Citizens Associations (P&C's) and other school organisations

Government schools benefit not only from the involvement of an official parent body, but also the active interest and work of the local community. As such, members of the local community play an important role in assisting the school to provide the best quality education for its students. The role of parent bodies attached to schools should be:

- to act as a forum for discussion and formulation of the parent view on issues concerned with the education policies and well being of the individual school, it's students and the wider school system.
- to convey parent views to the individual school decision-making bodies;
- to elect Parents & Citizens' Association representatives to School Councils and/or other school decision-making bodies;
- to use and promote democratic practices that enable all parents to participate in school structures;
- to receive and raise funds either by themselves or in conjunction with other bodies associated with the school;
- to promote public schooling within the local community.

Wherever practical, schools and parent bodies should make every effort to embrace and facilitate a productive, collaborative relationship centered around providing a quality education for students in their local school community.



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