# WA Regional Education Strategy 2024 - WACOSS Submission

The Western Australian Council of Social Service Inc. (WACOSS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to The Minister for Education, Hon Dr Tony Buti MLA on the Draft Regional Education Strategy.

WACOSS is the peak body for the community services sector in Western Australia and works to create an inclusive, just and equitable society. We advocate for social and economic change to improve the wellbeing of Western Australians, and to strengthen the community services sector that supports them. WACOSS is part of a network consisting of National, State and Territory Councils of Social Service, who advance the interests of people on low incomes and those made vulnerable by the systems that have been put in place.

The major concern of our members is the wellbeing and future prospects of disadvantaged and vulnerable children, young people and their families – how we can best work with them, the frontline services that support them, and their local public schools to overcome barriers to reach their full potential and thrive.

WACOSS has recently conducted regional consultations with frontline services to inform our state budget submission – to be published on 25ᵗʰ October 2024. We also recently held a roundtable with principals from public schools in disadvantaged areas, frontline community services and researchers, co-convened with the State School teachers Union of WA which has informed both this submission and our state budget submission.

## Vision

> *"Our vision is for every one of our students (in the regions) to have equitable educational opportunities that will enable them to achieve their potential and put them on a pathway to a successful future."*

The proposed vision for the strategy is laudable. The Minister and Department for Education would do well to take it to heart and to strive hard to make it a reality. It is one that WACOSS and our members can and would support. We would be keen to do all we could to assist local community services (particularly early education and care services, child and family services and youth services) and regional schools to find ways to work together.

I note we have put 'in the regions' in brackets above because we believe that this vision should apply equally to all students in WA – with special attention being taken to how we service and support the educational needs of those in regional and remote areas.

Our concern however, is that education opportunities within Western Australia (and Australia more broadly) are still far from equitable, that our public-school system is under-resourced and insufficiently supported, and that many dedicated teachers are burning out, while vulnerable students are missing out or falling through the cracks.

There is a long list of recent reports documenting insufficient and unequal resourcing of our public education system at both state and federal levels. We have listed some of the most relevant ones for your reference, and provided links to them in the footnotes and in the reference List at the end of this submission.

Public education is a cornerstone of the Australian economy.

It is the way that we build the capability of our young people to be our future workforce – to become citizens and carers, innovators and entrepreneurs.

It should also be the way that give every child the opportunity to thrive – to identify their talents, interests and passions, to help build and fulfil their dreams.

The future capability and brilliance of our young people – and hence public education – is where we should be investing our current wealth and transitory economic advantage to building a stronger future and a more diverse and resilient economy.

However, recent decades have seen a growing divide in our education investment, such that more public investment is going into supporting private schools in privileged areas, while public schools in disadvantaged areas are chronically under-resourced.

Our national testing results have flatlined for a number of years while our international education ranking continues to decline.

Meanwhile we are seeing a growing exodus of experienced teachers, claiming they are stressed and burnt-out, feeling under-valued and over-whelmed.

Our young people are growing up and trying to find their way in life in a changing and challenging world.

In recent years researchers, youth workers and teachers have documented rising youth anxiety and uncertainty, undermining their sense of safety and belonging within our community – a leading to a sense of social isolation that undermines their hopes and aspirations for the future.

These challenges compound in communities with high rates of socio-economic disadvantage, where teachers and other students struggle to deal with children who are not developmentally ready for school and those struggling to process childhood trauma manifesting troubling behaviours in the classroom.

## Community engagement and partnership

To effectively enable *"school staff to work side by side with communities to know and understand the aspirations that they have for future generations"* as the vision suggests, takes dedicated resourcing and empowerment of local education and community leaders to actively engage and be empowered to develop and actively maintain place-based solutions. These depend on networks or personal relationships and trust at the local level that cannot be mandated or directed within a centralised services model. There is however a role for sharing capacity-building and lessons learned, active networking and system navigators to support the development and resourcing of local solutions.

To make families feel like they are partners in the education of their children, you need to have teaching and support staff who have the time know-how and confidence to actively engage with them. There need to be structured and resourced opportunities for parents and teaching staff to engage around a common purpose, and activities that can give local communities a sense of ownership of their school and its surrounding child-friendly environment. Successful schemes might include co-designing and jointly building a playground or recreational facilities, or actively engaging and employing cultural elders to play a structured role in school engagement and cultural learning.

Additional resources, guidance and support are needed for public schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, remote communities and areas with a significant Aboriginal student population to assist community engagement.

While community engagement is identified clearly in the Strategy's vision statement, it also plays a key role in Pillar 3 (strengthening support for student wellbeing) and Pillar 4 (developing partnerships to create opportunity). Community engagement can also play a critical role in supporting Pillar 1 (building the capability of our regional workforce). A well-connected and engaged regional workforce are more likely to feel like they belong and are valued by their local community, more likely to develop friendships and networks that support their resilience and wellbeing. They are more likely to stay and to thrive – and to inspire their students as a result. Those connections and relationships can then help to connect them to local opportunities and networks that can inform the advice and support they provide to their students, helping them seek assistance where needed, or to identify work opportunities and placements.

Community engagement can be both formal and informal, with structured events used as opportunities to support active and ongoing engagement. We believe that there is an opportunity for greater and more consistent engagement between public schools and local child, youth and family services. There are some schools that do this extremely well, and places where strong ongoing relationships have emerged over time that add value to what the school is able to offer its' students in the way of support, advice and life opportunity. However, these arrangements are largely ad hoc and dependent on the leadership, insight and connections of individual principals, teachers and community leaders. While there are a few schools where there are active and ongoing partnerships and service arrangements (such as those who are partners in co-located Child and Parent Centres, or the trail "Full Service School" model at Chalice) we do not have a systematic approach to developing and supporting these arrangements across our public-school system. Critically, many of the schools who would benefit most – including those that are regional and remote areas, in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, or have high Aboriginal or CALD populations – may have the least capability and resources to independently pursue these options.

These are the communities that will benefit most from the implementation of an Integrated Child and Family Services Hub model in line with national policy recommendations[1] and WA Labor election policies for Educare and Full Service Schools.[2] WACOSS and our members support expansion of the existing Child and Parent Centre model in line with national best practice service integration and navigation, as outlined in our recent Election Platform.[3] This should also be informed by the findings of the current valuation of CPCs in WA by The Kids Research Institute (formerly Telethon Kids Institute).

[1] Murdoch Children's Research Institute (2024) *National Child and Family Hubs Network.*
    SVA (2023) *Enhancing the impact of integrated early years supports in Australia.*
[2] WA Labor (2017) *State Election Platform.*
[3] WACOSS (2024) *Make WA Fair: Leaving no-one behind*.

## Pillar 1: Build the capability of our regional workforce

There are currently strong parallels between the workforce challenges faced by teachers and community service workers in the regions. The common key issues of attraction and retention are underlined by significant challenges in access to affordable and secure regional housing, and often also timely and affordable access to childcare. Attracting new staff into regional roles is strongly influenced by career opportunities and security of tenure. It is a big and uncertain life decision for young workers to take on, and hence their impression of the support available, plus their ability to fit into the local community and feel they belong are critical to delivering sustainable outcomes, ensuring quality teaching and providing continuity of attachment to students and their families. Taking on a regional or remote placement should come with added job security and a fast-track to permanency for those who commit and succeed. More could also be done to ensure teachers and school staff have access to appropriate regional housing (e.g. GROH), and to provide more effective transition and support services to regional teachers and school leaders.

Current staff appointment processes that attach teaching positions to individual schools reduce the ability of teachers to move between schools, making staffing regional and remote schools much harder. The Department of Education could have greater influence over the quality of teacher placements and access to experienced staff in regional and remote areas by taking a more active role in the central employment of teachers. This would reduce duplication of effort and provide economies of scale that also allow it to have a greater oversight role in career progression. It would also reduce current inequalities faced by regional schools and those in socio-economically disadvantaged areas in procuring quality teachers and other school staff.

We recommend a review of the Independent Public School model that looks at best practice and educational outcomes in other jurisdictions – with a focus on parent, staff and student satisfaction as well as student academic and wellbeing outcomes, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

## Pillar 2: Expand curriculum delivery

Delivering a full curriculum in regional and remote schools creates challenges due to the comparative lack of teacher specialisation and can be further hampered by a lack of resources. Effective curriculum delivery in regional and remote locations remains a major equity concern.

More could be done to support regional teachers and school leaders with curriculum planning and resources, as well as potentially using supported digital delivery to provide specialised content in smaller remote schools. Professional development remains a major challenge for regional and remote teachers.

To be effective in supporting academic, social and emotional development for all of our children, the curriculum needs to take a holistic view of the child's developing needs and to bridge the developmental pathway from the early years to adulthood. Better access to quality affordable early education and care services remains a critical issue for young children in regional and remote WA. Increasing numbers of children are not developmentally ready when they commence primary school. This results in them struggling in the classroom and at risk of falling further behind as their education progresses. It can also be disruptive for other students and make balancing teaching and managing behaviour within the classroom very challenging. These problems are not just confined to regional and remote areas but are also increasingly manifesting in schools with disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. We are experiencing significant ongoing issues with a lack of timely diagnosis and support for children with developmental difficulties that are increasingly impacting on

primary school teachers, as highlighted by the recent Select Committee Inquiry into Child Development Services in WA.[4] Schools are effectively bearing the cost of the under-investment in child development services and youth mental health services, which is ultimately impacting academic outcomes – particularly where these problems are compounded.

Greater support is needed within schools – particularly, but not exclusively, those in regional, remote and disadvantaged areas – to tackle the range of challenges related to developmental and behavioural difficulties. This includes supporting children and young people to become more self-aware and better able to self-regulate, as well as providing additional support within schools to manage challenging behaviours and aggression within the classroom, and to provide appropriate support and referral to students facing mental health challenges or experiencing significant trauma. Schools cannot and should not be expected to deal with these issues alone – but within the current context of capped funding for community services during a decade of significant population growth, there remain limits to the external help that can be called upon.[5]

These issues cut across Pillars 3 (student wellbeing) & 4 (partnerships) below.

## Pillar 3: Strengthen support for student wellbeing

Recent research points to a significant decline in the wellbeing of young Australians over the last decade, with increasing issues arising in the post-COVID period.[6] There are a range of factors contributing to increased anxiety and poor mental health, including the impact of social media as well as uncertainty about the future. While it is important to look at how we include elements of self-awareness, self-care and self-regulation within the curriculum, there are also limits to how much schools can cover. Successfully dealing with challenges relating to developmental, emotional and behavioural problems requires a joined-up approach that includes better outreach and support to parents, children and young people by community services, as well as improved cross-referral from schools to local services.

Support services for student and staff wellbeing need to accessible and appropriate. There is concern that the centralisation of services does not meet the needs of regional and remote students, or those in disadvantaged areas. Teachers continue to report feeling over-burdened, and there is a real risk that high rates of burn-out will lead to workforce retention issues and a loss of knowledge and skill from our public education system. Critical support services should be regionally located and sufficiently resourced to be able to deliver effective outreach and support services across all schools within their jurisdiction. Student health and wellbeing coordinators are needed in regional high-schools, along with an increase in the number of school psychologists and counsellors.

More needs to be done to specifically support the needs of students living with a disability across our public-school system, in line with States and Territories recent National Cabinet commitments to deliver foundational supports ($10 billion over 5 years) in December 2023. [7] WA needs to develop a comprehensive strategy for students with a disability that clarifies how the principles of inclusion will be universally implemented, and ensures funding and support services are made available on the basis of functional assessments – so that students living with a disability do no miss out on timely support because they cannot access timely diagnosis in WA. Ensuring that there is

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[4] Select Committee (2024) *Inquiry into Child Development Services*. See also WACOSS (2024) *Submission.*
[5] Nous Group (2024) *Leaving no-one behind: the economic imperative to invest in WA community sector workforce*.
[6] BCEC (2021) *Stronger together: Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia*. CCYP WA (2021) *Girls' Wellbeing Report*. See also Wellbeing Monitoring Framework. AIHW (2023) *Australia's Welfare.* Ending Loneliness Together (2023) *State of the Nation report*.
[7] NDIS Review (2023) *Fact sheet: Foundational supports for all people with a disability.*

appropriate training in place and specialised staff available in schools based on the level of need will be critical.

The school to work (and/or school to higher learning) transition is a critical time in the lives of all young people – however research suggests that it is doubly critical for young people living with a disability. On the one hand there is evidence that further education can deliver a double boost to the employment outcomes of young people living with a disability – further lifting their likelihood of securing employment. Having a university degree is associated with an 18.2 per cent increase in the chance of being in work compared to a person who did not complete school. For people with disability, having a university degree is associated with an additional 16.2 per cent higher probability of being in work. [8] On the other hand, the evidence suggests that few young people living with a disability receive adequate and meaningful career planning advice and support at school – increasing the risk that they will spend long periods in unemployment and potentially never secure meaningful employment that makes the most of their true talent and capability.

To this end we recommend a quality post-school transition process that includes: person-centred transition planning, beginning early (by year 9); work experience opportunities and the facilitation of part-time work; a focus on foundational skills; and career development planning.

Some of the most critical child and family services are those that provide support during the first thousand days and the early years of child development. WA is now playing catch-up to other jurisdictions and developing a First 1,000 Days Framework, led by the Child and Adolescent Health Services (CAHS) within the Department of Health, as part of the Sustainable Health review. At this stage the extent to which Education, those involved in early education and care services, and broader child and family services are actively being engaged and involved in setting priorities to reflect their needs and concerns. Recent research has demonstrated the impact of hubs and explored best practice models for service delivery including navigation and cross-referral.[9]

One key area of opportunity to strengthen student wellbeing is to better integrate schools, ECEC services and other child, youth and family services to put schools at the centre of their local communities as a place for accessing advice and support. Western Australia has to date created 22 Child and Parent Centres with key services located on or adjacent to school sites. These are a version of the Integrated Child and Family Hub model that is being rolled out nationwide.[10] The model enables the delivery of integrated early support services to communities where child health and development are at most risk, and can also provide safe access to health and family violence services for women in controlling and abusive relationships. WA Labor's 2017 election policy committed to create more 'Full Service Schools' and to develop early childhood education and care services on the grounds of new public schools – both of which are consistent with the national hub model.[11] The Deloitte Economics study in 2023 identified priority areas for new hubs based on socio-economic disadvantage and developmental need, identifying Halls Creek, Meekatharra, Leinster-Leonora, Derby-West Kimberley and Withers-Usher as priorities in WA.[12]

The findings of the *Australian Child Maltreatment Study* in 2023 and 2024 highlight high levels of untreated trauma within our community, with one in three girls and women and one in five boys and men having experienced child sexual abuse, and close to two in five children exposed to domestic

[8] BCEC (2024) *Employment and disability in Australia.*
[9] MCRI (2023) *National child and family hubs network project.* Honisett et.al. (2022). *Do Integrated Hub Models of Care Improve Mental Health Outcomes for Children Experiencing Adversity?*
[10]Deloitte Economics (2023) *Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family hubs*.
[11] WA Labor (2017) *State Election Platform*.
[12] Deloitte Economics (2023) *op.cit.* WACOSS (2024) *Make WA Fair – Leaving no-one behind*.

violence.[13] Youth who experience child maltreatment are 2.9 times more likely to have a mental disorder, 5.8 times more likely to have PTSD, and 4.1 times more likely to abuse alcohol.

Harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) and rising rates of peer on peer sexual abuse among young people are a major concern.[14] There are strong links between harmful sexual behaviours and access to violent and abusive pornography online. Experts warn that a strategy based on prohibition alone is not an effective strategy, as young people can easily find ways to access harmful content – hence there is a pressing need to educate young people to be critical readers and understand what is fake and inappropriate.[15] The Australian Centre for Child Protection has worked together with the Department of Communities and the network of Child Sexual Abuse Therapeutic Services and Indigenous Healing Services in WA (CSATS & IHS) to develop a *Framework for Understanding and Guiding Responses to Harmful Sexual Behaviours in Children and Young People*. There is currently a nationwide pilot program to develop counselling and support services for young people who are users and victims of harmful sexual behaviours and peer abuse, with Allambee Services delivering counselling for child sexual abuse and HSB in WA.

This issue is challenging for schools to manage safely while looking out for the wellbeing of all children and young people involved. Teachers, school counsellors and psychologists and other staff are now mandatory reporters of child sexual abuse in WA.[16] However it is critical that staff responding to sexual behaviours have the training, support and advice to be able to respond in a fashion that is trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate. It is critical to be able to understand the difference between developmentally appropriate exploration, activities that are inappropriate and may be harmful, and those that are indicators that a child has been abused and is acting out harm they have experienced. There are risks to both over- and under-reacting, of criminalising young people inappropriately, and of missing evidence of underlying trauma and possible ongoing abuse. This is another area where education, network and relationship building, and strong partnerships between schools and associated support services can play a critical role in looking after the wellbeing of students and teachers alike.

Aboriginal education is another area that requires dedicated attention and resources to effectively close the gap in educational outcomes. As our Aboriginal population has higher levels of concentration in regional and remote public schools in WA, how we resource and support our regional schools, and how they are able to engage with local families and community leaders, is likely to be crucial to achieving outcomes. Implementation of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework needs to be properly guided and resourced, possibly through formation of an Aboriginal education team and partnership with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. Cultural sensitivity training for teachers and staff is critical to making this happen. The delivery of this training, together with the symbolic building of stronger ongoing local community ties, presents a major opportunity for local relationship building with community elders and families – hence there needs to be a careful mix of centralised guidance and resources with local engagement to be truly effective in recognising local cultural differences and building enduring relationships. Creating opportunities to build and acknowledge a sense of place in partnership with local elders can be critical for building trust and engagement with local Aboriginal families.

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[13] Australian Child Maltreatment Study (2023) *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia.* See also ACMS (2024) *Key Findings*.

[14] Hunt et.al. (2024) *The prevalence of peer sexual harassment during childhood in Australia*. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 08862605241245368.

[15] ANZATSA (2021) *Young People and Harmful Sexual Behaviour: Healing is Prevention*. Symposium Perth.

[16] Department of Education WA (2024) *Child Protection in Department of Education Sites Procedures for Teachers* (Effective 1 May 2024).

One critical pathway to success for Aboriginal children is the provision of culturally secure early childhood education and care services by ACCOs that are linked to local schools and on or near school grounds where possible. Done well this can help ensure children are school ready while building engagement and trust with parents and extended family.

## Pillar 4: Develop partnerships to create opportunity

Throughout this submission we have foregrounded opportunities to develop partnerships with local community-based organisations and services – including early childhood education and care, child and family services (including integrated hub models like CPCs), local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and local elders, and specialist services dealing with harmful sexual behaviours, child abuse, trauma, and youth mental health services, as well as disability support services.

Reform is needed at the state government level in the funding and delivery of human services to ensure there is sufficient capability for service delivery in the regions that responds to population growth, changing demographics and community need. Service providers and public schools need to be sufficiently resourced and connected to be able to work effectively together in partnership to provide truly joined-up services to children, young people and their families. Schools cannot be expected or left to do this on their own. However, having schools engaged and supported can provide the most effective pathway for children, young people and parents to navigate access to critical support services in a timely fashion. If we get this right then we are dealing with challenges much earlier in the lives of our citizens to significantly improve their future education, health and wellbeing outcomes and dramatically reduce the costs to our service system of unresolved problems that inexorably increase risks of future chronic health problems and poor life outcomes.

The challenge is that effective partnerships need to be local ones – they are strongest when they are embedded in direct relationships grounded in knowledge, trust and respect. They also need to reflect the unique local combination of challenges, partners and opportunities. Professional learning, guidance and leadership provided by the Department of Education can play a critical role in supporting and enabling them, and in helping transfer the learnings from other places facing similar challenges – but they cannot be centrally run. Longevity is also a critical issue, particularly when shared locations and resources are involved – which necessitate some capacity and support for local agreement making.

Looking forward, the independent evaluation of Child and Parent Centres in WA undertaken by The Kids Research Institute should provide a basis for the WA Government to implement best practice models and learnings from other states to progressively roll out integrated child and family hubs on or adjacent to public schools into communities of greatest need.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch with us if you would like to discuss any on the issues raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely,

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