



# WACSSO

**Western Australian Council of State School Organisations**

**Submission on the Draft Indigenous Action Plan 2010 - 2014**

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## **Background and Rationale for Submission**

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) was founded in 1921 as the representative voice of parents, citizens and students associated with government schools in Western Australia. WACSSO is a non-party political and non-sectarian body. There are currently over 750 government schools throughout the State with approximately 650 active P&Cs currently affiliated with WACSSO. WACSSO is therefore well placed to offer comments, feedback and suggestions for future developments relating to public education and training matters.

WACSSO has a mandate to influence the direction of education for the benefit of all students. Underpinning the workings of WACSSO are values and beliefs about children and young people and the importance of education. The following statements indicate the philosophical basis for this WACSSO submission and reflect our commitment based on informed appreciation and understanding about the place of public education for the future of all Australians.

WACSSO is committed to a public education system available to all young people irrespective of their age, socio-economic status, culture, gender, level of ability or where they live.

The philosophy underlying WACSSO policy centres around the principles of equality, excellence, and participatory democracy and recognises that all human beings depend on each other and so the future well-being of individuals is dependent on the future well-being of all.

All persons attending government schools have the right to an unrestricted and effective education of the highest quality to allow them to develop their full potential as individuals. As empowered citizens, these students can take every advantage of social, political, and economic opportunity; obtain fulfilment of their reasonable aspirations within the range of their abilities; contribute their skills and knowledge for the betterment of Australia; and be able to participate harmoniously in all aspects of society.

WACSSO believes that these views form an essential statement of principles for guidance in its practical activities toward achieving an excellent, empowering, public education system for all.

WACSSO knowledge and information pertinent to government schools and community development approaches in public education are relevant to the inquiry's terms of reference. The focus of our submission will be on the responsibility of parents and schools in particular, as WACSSO believes partnerships to be the heart and soul of a local community and the most important government investment in the future of the country. Any and all, negotiations by governments that affect the nature and wellbeing of our school communities are of concern to WACSSO.

### **Matters Considered:**

#### ***General Observations/comments***

It appears that 'readiness programs' in other states (not Western Australia) are aimed at children of the ages of 3 or 3 ½. A universal entry age must be determined to ensure a standard approach is implemented.

While recognising the disparity of outcomes for indigenous students and successive governments and individuals dedicated attempts to address this issue, there is little in this document to encourage indigenous parents to accept responsibility for ensuring their children receive an education and that failure to do so must incur a penalty.

The following targets are seen to be positive and achievable:

- ensure all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013);
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade (by 2018); and
- at least halve the gap in Indigenous Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020.

A significant flaw in this plan is by 'grouping' indigenous students irrespective of the lifestyle or educational/social disadvantage. Students who are indigenous and live in a stable environment with constant carers who are engaged in the workforce do not suffer the same disadvantage as students living with sexual abuse/domestic violence/alcohol & drug abuse, overcrowding etc. However as past experience shows many of the former group who have not suffered any disadvantage because of their aboriginality are those who obtain the benefits of current funding and programs.

There is no mention of Schools of Isolated Distance Education (SIDE) or School of the Air (SoTA) or any type of distance education provider. Is it envisaged that those education providers are they included in this plan and will they all be adequately resourced. This plan will be a huge burden on schools and unsustainable unless they are adequately resourced.

The failure to mention or address the impact of behaviour management and juvenile justice issues on education is a serious omission from this plan as these affect attendance and retention.

## **2. NATIONAL COLLABORATION**

"Recent research indicates that Indigenous children start school at a significant disadvantage. Nineteen per cent of Indigenous students were rated as 'far below age level' in academic performance and 39 per cent were 'somewhat below age 4". As far as we are aware, the testing of students is undertaken by child health with their development monitored by Preschool teachers with subsequently recommendations as to school readiness. Is this the most appropriate way to test and monitor readiness for school?"

### ***Readiness for school***

- "4. Develop outreach strategies to connect with early childhood education and care, health, welfare and community services at both local and system levels".

This is an extremely positive initiative that needs to be well funded, resourced and implemented with indigenous inclusion of older students i.e. Target parents and children with positive role models and examples.

- "7. Education providers will develop an on-entry assessment program to assess students' literacy and numeracy skills. This will help in identifying students at educational risk and implementing early intervention strategies."

The terms academic and literacy & numeracy testing are inappropriate as all students, irrespective of ethnic origin or even within a family, develop at different ages and stages. The assessment, while important, needs to reflect less on what a child knows academically and more on a child's development. I.e. fine/gross motor skills, cognitive etc. Relying too heavily on unrealistically achievable targets for indigenous students can be harmful and detrimental to their progress.

### ***Engagement and connections***

- “School-community partnership agreements in place with all schools with significant Indigenous enrolments by the end of 2011”.

How will this work when there are numerous indigenous groups represented, what can be done differently this time to ensure longevity? Does the Aboriginal Student Parent Association (ASPA) get resurrected?

- “9. Governments commit to maintaining appropriate advisory arrangements to ensure Indigenous perspectives can be considered when developing policy and programs”.

When considering indigenous responses it is important to be aware of who is making the comments. Parents are consistently retrospective and this may not be a true reflection on how students will respond in the future and could hamper student opportunities.

- “10. As part of a National Strategy for Indigenous Languages, a study will be commissioned into the feasibility of a national panel of experts framing the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and considering how out-of-school schemes might work”.

No indigenous languages were written, thereby leaving huge gaps in interpretation, spelling, pronunciation etc. The Northern Territory has recently banned teaching in indigenous languages because of lack of success. In the few cases where it was successful it was deemed to be wholly due to individual teacher dedication. English as a second language (ESL) has been operating in numerous schools. This recognises that students speak a first language other than English and the approach to English teaching is moderated accordingly. Unfortunately there is a shortage of ESL trained teachers. If this was to be adopted nationwide, all teaching facilities would need to offer ESL training as a standard.

- “15. Schools will involve Indigenous families, teachers and Indigenous education workers in the development of personalised learning plans for all Indigenous students from the first year of formal schooling to Year 10 to support improved educational outcomes. Issues relating to health and wellbeing that impact on education will be addressed by this process through the cooperation of health services with the assistance of education providers”.

This is sustainably unrealistic. Notwithstanding the interdependence of health and well being on education, educators are educators, let them do their job and educate and have youth workers in schools to attend to non educational issues and concerns.

- “17. Education providers will strengthen school accountability and reporting to families and the community on Indigenous student outcomes”.

This is a valid but simplistic goal which can be seen as unrealistic given the living conditions for many students & families. In some circumstances, they are unaware of where they will be living or with whom from one day to the next. Perhaps an accountable body to which schools can report when parents are not contactable or responsive to the schools concerns.

### **Attendance**

Accountability must be placed on carers and the community. Making changes within schools, establishing program on the hope that students will attend school is unrealistic. There appears to be no noted

expectation on indigenous parents or students to make a commitment to ensure attendance at schools. Failure to gain recognition from the community and individuals that they are in control of the problem seriously limits any opportunity for real change.

### ***Literacy and Numeracy***

The focus and change must be on the understanding that all indigenous students have the capacity to achieve. Too frequently assumptions are made that because students are disadvantaged socially they do not achieve and therefore expectations are not placed on these students.

### ***Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development***

- “Increased appointment of high performing principals and teachers to hard-to staff schools, which will lead to students with poorer outcomes being taught by the best teachers”.

What are the performance measures to determine what/who a high performing principal is? How is this outcome achieved?

- “Focused in-service professional development of principals and teachers to increase their cultural competency and equip them with specific teaching strategies to successfully teach and lead improvements in the learning outcomes of Indigenous students.”

In establishing better training for teachers it is vital that while this is being undertaken, we do not undermine and interrupt the education of indigenous students.

### ***Pathways to real post-school options***

- “The proportion of young Indigenous people aged 20-24 who have attained Year 12 or a Certificate II or above.”

Does this include all apprentices and trainees?

- Post-School Transitions - Establishing compulsory one day work component. Regular attendance at school is the most significant factor to consider. If the student does not attend school every day, what is the chance of regular attendance in a work environment?

### **Summary**

Generally the draft policy included some terrific ideals, some goals achievable some less so, some scarily unrealistic. It appears that all this document is offering in reality is an extra tier of administrative burden to be borne by the system and the individuals within it. Proper resource allocation must be enforced and not become an additional burden which detracts from actual teaching time. In the instances where, in particular early childhood and school leadership/teacher training, specific government programs are mentioned these must be adequately resourced. Concerns must be raised where some students are having their education interrupted if they are the "guinea pigs".

The two most important issues affecting outcomes are:

1. Attendance - the state government, while developing its own strategy, is resourcing this according to Socio Economic Index (SEI), this does not necessarily reflect the schools needs. There needs to be

an adequate number of attendance officers so that teachers can teach and not need to deal with attendance issues. Where attendance and welfare funding are linked there needs to be an adequate timeframe which does not allow for prolonged absence from school.

2. Teaching – We are aware that good teachers get good results, however, the impact of onerous administration on good teachers' flexibility to deliver lessons in the best way for students to engage has the potential of being detrimental on the educational outcomes for the students.

In summarising, WACSSO believes that every child is entitled to a quality education irrespective of family and personal circumstances. All parents and carers must be given every opportunity to ensure their children receive an education including support and encouragement from all stakeholders. Governments must be held accountable for the provision of quality education without placing inappropriate burdens on students, families and communities.