

Hon Dr Sally Talbot MLC
Committee Chair
Select Committee into child development services
Legislative Council

Inquiry into child development services

The WA Primary Principals' Association (WAPPA) is pleased to make a submission to the Inquiry into child development services.

WAPPA is the professional association of choice for public primary school leaders in Western Australia. WAPPA represents over 1150 members, consisting of principals and deputy principals, from across the state. WAPPA's membership covers approximately 85% of WA's 553 primary schools. WAPPA also comprises members from a range of school types that include primary students, such as Ed Support, District High Schools and K-12 settings. In total there are over 600 schools in WA, in which primary students attend.

The WAPPA Board consists of the President and 10 Board Members, who represent the vast diversity of school leaders across our state. WAPPA's 2022-2024 strategic plan, ***Strengthening our Support*** outlines our four pillars of Support, Advocacy, Connection and Leadership Development. It is through this document and subsequent strategies, that WAPPA's core business of advocating for improved primary outcomes, focuses on the importance of equitable resourcing of primary schools.

Our submission is based upon the professional opinions and experiences of public primary school leaders, WAPPA position papers, reports and research projects undertaken on behalf of WAPPA. In my role as President, I regularly travel the state to hear specifically about the concerns of school leaders and we also have a Support Line for members to call when they require advice. In addition to these strategies, WAPPA brings 32 Chapter Chairs and 11 Board members together to our State Assembly, twice a year, to discuss the issues that impact our members most.

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend in the majority of this work revolving around student with complex needs. Primarily, a lack of available support and resources, to help school leaders cater for the increasing number of students with imputed disability, mental health issues, behavioural concerns and learning delays. When combined with funding inequities in the primary school setting, the role of WA Child Development Services is critical in supporting the needs of thousands of primary aged students across the state.

WAPPA has long maintained the position that equitable resourcing in children's early years of development, produces greater academic, social and economic benefits in future years.

David Gonski's 'Through Growth to Achievement' Report states

Early childhood education makes a significant contribution to school outcomes. The transition between preschool and school education should be seamless. Ongoing reforms that lay the foundations in the early years for future learning, and close the learning differential between advantaged and disadvantaged students, are essential to ensure all children have the best start in life. (1)

The role of schools to work with external support agencies such as Child Development Services, is critical to this outcome, given the discrepancy of funding between primary and secondary schools in Australia. The current School Resourcing Standard in 2022 sees every secondary student funded at \$15,736 per student, whilst every primary student is funded at \$12,522 (2) This difference in funding very quickly adds up, to cost an average sized primary school of 350 students over 1 million dollars. WAPPA has long argued that the allocation of these funds into primary schools would result in the employment of thousands of allied professionals such as school psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and counsellors, whose presence in schools would significantly improve student outcomes and better support the role of Child Development Services across the state, ensuring that the most needy are able to access these services.

Given the combination of inequitable funding and increasing complexity, WAPPA has seen a significant increase in members feeling frustrated and overwhelmed at their inability to access the necessary support services needed for their students. Their concerns consistently fall into the categories of wait times, access in regional areas, lack of staffing, poor co-ordination of services and insufficient length of support. As would be expected, the services provided in regional, remote and lower ICSEA areas, are at the greatest need and therefore, under the greatest strain.

Given the terms of reference of this inquiry and the role of school principals in supporting students, WAPPA's responses and recommendations fall predominantly into two areas of inquiry;

The role of child development services on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing

1. The ultimate role of CDS should be to ensure every child in WA has the ability to be assessed for a range of medical, physical and cognitive needs, with ongoing support

- and service to be made available and reviewed periodically, based on need.
2. Providing a greater level of service within schools, is possibly the only way some students will receive the support and services they need. This is particularly true in regional, remote and low ICSEA schools.
 3. Children should be tracked and reviewed as they progress into middle childhood and early teen years, to determine whether additional support or referrals are warranted.
 4. There is a need to provide regular and appropriate adult education, as there is child therapy and support. Services in isolation will not make a great difference and parents often do not have the necessary knowledge to continue support at home.
 5. CDS staff could be made available to schools to support staff training in key areas of children's development, speech therapy techniques and tips, milestones to observe and record and so on.
 6. There is a need for greater liaison between CDS officers, school staff and parents, to ensure a genuine case management approach can be employed

The delivery of child development services in both metropolitan and regional Western Australia, including paediatric and allied health services

1. There is a disconnect with the referral process. Schools are often the main referrers yet are not consulted again after the paperwork is submitted. This is a significant issue when parents either do not respond to communication, don't provide enough information, or do not support the details outlined in the referral, and the child is subsequently discharged.
2. The referral process itself can be very time consuming and often requires the input of between 3 to 4 staff members.
3. Waitlists of 18-24 months are commonplace, all whilst the students fall further behind in all areas of their development.
4. Students are quite often discharged within half a dozen sessions of service, usually with little improvement shown. More often than not, parents are unsure as to the reason why students have been discharged and aren't sure how to seek a continuation of the support required.
5. There is no communication between the CDS and the school post intervention, so quite often the school is unsure as to what has occurred. This is usually reliant on parents providing written reports and verbal updates.
6. Staff increases are essential to ongoing quality of service, particularly in the area of paediatricians and paediatric psychiatrists.
7. Consistency of staff is needed to ensure support services are adequately built upon in

each session and both parents and students develop a level of trust and familiarity with the service provider.

8. There is a need to consider a more holistic approach to services being provided, rather than the compartmentalising of support by profession eg. only speech, or only occupational therapy. Quite often there may be a combination of mental and medical services needed.
9. Consider ways to screen children prior to entering the school system. Many screenings are done in Kindergarten due to ease of accessing the larger population, however depending on availability and timelines, many students are well into the school year before any sorts of screens are conducted.
10. Strategies are required to attract staff to regional towns.
11. Strategies are required to increase the number of Aboriginal staff, to ensure a culturally responsive approach to service delivery and support is implemented.

WAPPA acknowledges that the majority of recommendations and feedback provided require significant increases in funding to CDS, much like we see a desperate need to increase funding to primary schools. Whilst the funding to both CDS and primary schools continues to be overlooked, it is an obvious outcome that academic levels will continue to fall, whilst mental health issues continue to rise. It is WAPPA's hope that the issue of health funding to support early intervention and ongoing intervention strategies, can be addressed through this inquiry.

We thank you for providing us the opportunity to make a submission on behalf of our members.

Kind regards,



Niel Smith

President

WA Primary Principals' Association

- 1) *Through Growth to Achievement – Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools. David Gonski 2018*
- 2) *What is the School Resourcing Standard and how does it work? – Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2022*