



## Regional Education Strategy

The Western Australian Education Support Principals and Administrators Association (WAESPAA) is pleased to acknowledge the release of the consultation draft for the Regional Education Strategy. We recognise the four pillars of the strategy as being the areas required to drive the essential changes needed in schools. WAESPAA appreciates the opportunity to respond to the consultation draft.

WAESPAA represents education support settings across the state, including primary and secondary education support schools, education support centres, endorsed education support programs, inclusive learning programs, and Specialised Learning Programs. We understand the critical importance of providing programs and pathways that meet all students' needs and help them become successful adults. Unfortunately, in regional settings, there is often a lack of specialist support. Where specialist settings exist, they are frequently overwhelmed by the sheer number of students wishing to enrol. Students with disabilities, imputed disabilities, or neurodiversity are often overlooked and lack access to the necessary supports to ensure a successful pathway through school and into the workplace.

This situation arises due to several factors:

- Limited access to allied health professionals, such as Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.
- Difficulty in obtaining diagnoses due to the unavailability of Paediatricians.
- Schools with staff who lack specialist training in inclusion and in supporting students with disabilities, imputed disabilities, or neurodiversity.
- Insufficient infrastructure to allow for equitable access for students with a disability.
- Shortage of available staff.

The current strategy does not address these issues. WAESPAA is concerned that this lack of focus and detail within this strategy, may divert potential opportunities away from what is really needed to supporting our students.

Please note that when we refer to students with disabilities in this response, this includes students with neurodiversity and imputed disabilities under the National Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD). When combined with their regional or remote location or low socio-economic environment, the impact of disadvantage is multiplied. For example, a student with a disability living in regional Western Australia is more likely to experience significant disadvantage than one living in the South or North Metropolitan area.

## Summary of the response

After reviewing the draft Regional Strategy, WAESPAA supports the aspirations and vision that every student should have equitable educational opportunities to achieve their potential.

Western Australian Education Support Principals  
& Administrators' Association Inc.

C/- Disability and Inclusion, Statewide Services  
33 Giles Avenue, Padbury 6020

P: 0411822326 | E: Deborah.Taylor2@education.wa.edu.au





We fully support the vision for regional education to be built on teaching and support staff who possess the skills and attitudes necessary to connect with their students, families, and the local community. However, WAESPAA believes that the strategy and the identification of initiatives do not go far enough to make a significant difference for students with disabilities and neurodiversity.

The four pillars provide a framework for the strategy and the direction that the Department of Education will need to take. However, the strategy fails to address how these initiatives will be delivered or even in some instances sufficient detail to really identify what the initiatives would be.

WAESPAA would also like to see a greater emphasis on student voice and the ability of students to make their own choices about how their education should be structured and delivered. This would ensure that the direction and imperatives are guided by the students themselves. In today's world, where various methods of accessing education are available, it is crucial that we allow students to guide us.

### **Pillar 1: Building the capacity of our regional workforce**

WAESPAA supports all the current initiatives.

Within the new initiatives we would like to see:

**Focus on Inclusive Practices** - A focus on developing our existing workforce's ability to support students with disabilities and inclusive practices. This could be achieved through professional development, particularly face-to-face delivery, which would allow the professional development to be contextualised.

**New Incentive payments** - Directing some of the new incentives to support staffing in specialist settings. The current situation, where there are insufficient staff on any given day to maintain regular classes, is unsustainable and is leading to leadership burnout.

**Accountability** - Implementing accountability mechanisms to prevent schools from gatekeeping and choosing not to enrol students with disabilities when there is a specialist setting within the region. This practice is putting immense pressure on specialist schools.

**Developing equitable availability of specialist support** - Currently, regions have inequitable access, with some having secondary specialist settings but no primary, or primary settings but no secondary. In the WA Government's position on the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability, it is stated: "The WA Government is committed to providing inclusive education settings, policies, and practices and acknowledges that students with disabilities thrive when they are in a welcoming environment and provided with the same educational and social opportunities as students without disabilities."





Since 2007, WA-endorsed education support programs have been built on mainstream school sites, rather than stand-alone, segregated schools or centres.”

WAESPAA would like to see endorsed education support programs developed in all regions to ensure equitable support for students with disabilities.

Accommodation – many staffing issues in regional or remote schools can be directly attributed to the lack of houses and in some cases the quality of the housing available. WAESPAA would advocate for the WA Government to put in significant funding for improvement in Government Regional Officers’ Housing (GROH).

## **Pillar 2: Expand Curriculum Delivery**

WAESPAA supports all the current initiatives. However, there seems to be very little substance in this pillar. While WAESPAA supports the new opportunity of increasing funding to drive real improvements for students with disabilities through the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, the strategy is missing the “how” and the “what.” We would like to see:

**Disability Resourcing System** - Improved access to funding for students that is not reliant on a medical diagnosis, especially in regional and remote schools. Although the Functional Needs Assessment Tool will address this in the long term, immediate action is needed for students who require support but are unable to obtain a diagnosis due to location, accessibility, parental capacity, etc.

**To improve accessibility to specialists** - WAESPAA recommends that additional funding be used to develop teams of Allied Health Practitioners (Speech and Language Therapists, Paediatricians, Occupational Therapists, Psychologists) in each region to meet student needs. WAESPAA understands that this would require collaboration between the Department of Health and the Department of Education to meet the needs of our most vulnerable students.

**Increased funding** - Additional funding to the six District High Schools is fully supported, but this does not address the needs of specialist settings in regional and remote areas, such as Holland Street and College Row School. Both would benefit from funding to improve curriculum delivery and expand access to school-based traineeships and workplace learning.

**Pathways to Post School Success** - WAESPAA has submitted a response to the Pathways to Post School Success Draft Report. We feel that the recommendations in the report still perpetuate a two-tiered system, marginalising students in regional and remote areas. The WACE refresher also fails to address Recommendation 32 adequately. Although WAESPAA supports this recommendation in principle, we have concerns that if not applied holistically, it will widen the gap between students with disabilities and their neurotypical peers.

**WACE Refresher** - WAESPAA strongly advocates for a WACE that celebrates all students’ achievements and treats all students as equals. Given the WA Government’s position on the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of





People with Disability, WAESPAA believes it is imperative to have a system that does not separate students with disabilities but is inclusive of them. Naming conventions are very important in this context; having a WACE Pathway Certificate would not be seen as equivalent to a WACE. However, incorporating an additional level within the WACE to accommodate students with disabilities would ensure no differentiation between them and their neurotypical peers.

**Availability of Resources** - WAESPAA would like to see a more detailed approach to the development of resources that support disability and inclusion. This needs to go beyond IKON resources and be multi-faceted, allowing schools to develop their own school improvement pathways to become more inclusive and supportive of students with disabilities and neurodiversity

### **Pillar 3 – Strengthening support for student wellbeing**

WAESPAA fully supports the aspiration that every student feels supported and that their learning outcomes are maximised. Additionally, we endorse the aim that all students and staff in regional communities are empowered to address wellbeing needs through stronger connections to their communities.

**Specialised Support Services:** WAESPAA advocates for schools to have access to clinical psychologists and behavioural specialists. Furthermore, we support the availability of a team of allied health professionals who can work with students to identify the best ways to support their wellbeing. Often, the lack of access to these specialist services means that students are unable to receive the necessary support to meet their needs.

Consequently, staff struggle to understand the best strategies to use, leaving them without effective ways to respond to students. This is particularly true for students with disabilities, as without the correct therapy programs, they are unable to access the curriculum on the same basis as their neurotypical peers.

**Focus on Behaviour:** The focus within this pillar appears to be primarily on behaviour and understanding complex behaviour, recognising that all behaviour has a function. WAESPAA supports the availability of Complex Behaviour Support Coordinators within the regions. However, this training is often limited to one person per school, relying on their continued presence within the school to build the capacity of all staff. WAESPAA advocates for an incentive payment to be available to the Complex Behaviour Support Coordinators to encourage them to remain in their schools for several years.

We also recommend a review of the trial of Complex Behaviour Support Coordinators before the next allocation as part of EBA2023. Indications suggest that the network or regional approach has not been effective, and that the role needs to be based within the school to understand the context and student demographics.





**Comprehensive Wellbeing:** Wellbeing encompasses more than just behaviour. WAESPAA fully supports the new opportunity to strengthen cooperation with other government agencies to offer comprehensive services to students and their families.

**Student Wellbeing and Care Framework:** WAESPAA questions the placement of the Student Wellbeing and Care Framework within this pillar. The Framework clearly outlines our focus in education. We are concerned that the opportunities within this pillar may extend beyond our designated scope.

#### **Pillar 4: Develop Partnerships to Create Opportunities**

WAESPAA welcomes the new opportunities identified in this pillar. However, we would like to see student diversity recognised within each of these opportunities. Students with disabilities in regional schools have extremely limited access to workplace learning and vocational training. Often, securing placements for students with disabilities relies on the personal connections of staff within the school.

Unfortunately, when a school develops a transition-to-work plan with the student and their family, it often fails once the student leaves the education system, and the responsibility shifts to the family or their connection with the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). While this is beyond the scope of education, pathways need to be strengthened prior to the end of schooling to improve their success.

#### **In Conclusion:**

WAESPAA recognises that there are many opportunities within this strategy in its current form. However, we would like to see a stronger outline and more detail in each of the opportunities.

WAESPAA would welcome the chance to work with the Department of Education to build a strategy that truly recognises our students, celebrates their diversity, and acknowledges their achievements.

Let's develop a strategy that allows students in our regional and remote schools to thrive and achieve their full potential.

