

Easy Read: WAESPAA Position on the Thriving Kids Initiative

Who we are

WAESPAA represents leaders of education support schools and programs across Western Australia. We advocate for students with disability and the staff who support them. We have used advice from Professor Andrew Whitehouse and our national body ASEPA to make sure our views are informed and credible.

What is Thriving Kids?

Thriving Kids is a new Australian Government program for children aged 0–8 with developmental delay or autism who have low to moderate needs.

It aims to:

- give help early
- provide support in places children already learn and play
- reduce the need for NDIS plans for children with mild needs

The program starts 1 October 2026 and will be fully in place by 1 January 2028.

Key Features

1. No diagnosis needed

Families can get help based on what their child needs, not on a medical label.

2. Support in the community

Help will be provided in:

- schools
- childcare
- health services
- community hubs

3. Short-term support

Therapies will be goal-focused and time-limited.

4. Information and parenting support

Families can access:

- phone and online advice
- local navigation help
- supported playgroups
- peer networks
- evidence-based parenting programs

5. Targeted therapies

Short-term support from:

- speech pathologists
- occupational therapists
- psychologists
- low-cost assistive technology

How it differs from the NDIS

- Thriving Kids is for children under 9 with mild to moderate needs.
- The NDIS remains for children with permanent or high-support disabilities.

Key Issues WAESPAA is Highlighting

1. Roles and responsibilities are unclear

- It is not clear who is responsible for what: education, health, or disability services.
- Without clarity, schools may be expected to take on unfunded therapy roles.
- The Department must plan for more specialist education support settings as demand grows.

2. Workforce capability

Teachers will be expected to:
identify developmental needs early and work closely with allied health professionals

But most teachers are not trained for this. Many leave university with limited disability preparation. More investment in specialist training is essential.

3. Data and administration

If new assessments are used, systems must be built across Health, Disability and Education so the administrative burden does not fall on schools.

4. Equity across WA

Regional and remote communities already struggle to access:

- allied health
- early childhood supports
- specialist educators

Thriving Kids must work for all families, including Aboriginal communities, through culturally safe and trusted approaches.

5. Safety and complexity

Schools are already supporting students with complex behavioural and regulation needs. Leaders need strong support to maintain safe environments.

6. Alignment with other reforms

Thriving Kids must connect with:

- Disability Royal Commission recommendations
- Inclusive education reforms
- Workforce capability recommendations from Professor Whitehouse

WAESPAA Recommendations

To Federal Ministers (via ASEPA)

1. Clearly define responsibilities across education, health and disability.
 2. Ensure schools are not expected to deliver unfunded therapy.
 3. Maintain ongoing consultation with sector representatives.
 4. Ensure Thriving Kids works for all communities, including remote and culturally diverse areas.
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To Minister Winton and Minister Beazley

Acknowledge the risk

The 2026 transition year is the highest-risk period. Schools — and especially classrooms — will feel the pressure first. A coordinated approach is essential.

A. Communication

Principals need:

- clear, consistent information
- timely updates
- strong public messaging to prevent misinformation

B. Workforce

Schools need staff with higher expertise than currently available. Statewide Services must:

- build this next tier of capability
- have it ready for RFA
- deploy it strategically to schools

C. Regional and remote support

WA must rebuild strong, on-the-ground support for regional and remote communities.

Final Statement

Foundational Supports (Thriving Kids) will not impact classrooms if:

- roles and responsibilities between Education and Health are clear
- Statewide Services is strengthened
- the transition to Thriving Kids is well planned

Without this, schools will face growing pressure as demand for early identification and specialist support increases.

WAESPAA is ready to continue working with government on this important reform.