



WAESPAA POSITION BRIEF: May 2026

Thriving Kids Initiative

The Western Australian Education Support Principals Association (WAESPAA) is the peak professional association for education support school leaders across Western Australia. We advocate for those who support students with disability across the WA education system. Members are based in education support schools and centres and endorsed programs.

This brief summarises WAESPAA's position in relation to the Thriving Kids initiative, part of the broader Foundational Supports reform agenda, and outlines key considerations for implementation within the Western Australian education context.

We have drawn on the expertise of Professor Andrew Whitehouse, alongside input from our national body ASEPA—where we hold representation on the consultation working party—to ensure our position reflects a broad, credible and well-informed range of perspectives.

WAESPAA recognises that children with permanent and significant disability, as well as children aged 8 and under experiencing developmental delay and/or autism with substantially reduced functional capacity, will continue to be eligible for support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

At its core:

Thriving Kids is a new, \$4-billion Australian government initiative designed to provide early, community-based support for children aged 8 and under with developmental delays or autism who have low-to-moderate support needs.

It serves as an alternative pathway to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), aiming to catch developmental concerns early in the environments where children already live, learn, and play. The program begins its rolling implementation on 1 October 2026 and will be fully active by 1 January 2028.

Core Features:

- **No Diagnosis Required:** Families can access help based on their child's functional needs without waiting for an official medical diagnosis.
- **Community Delivery:** Instead of individualised NDIS plans, services are integrated directly into **local schools**, childcare centres, health services, and community hubs.
- **Time-Limited Focus:** Supports are designed to target specific early goals rather than acting as a lifelong funding package.

According to the [Thriving Kids](#) information page the program focuses on three main areas:

- Information, advice and navigation supports—through phone, digital and local services—will help parents recognise developmental delays early and access help, while parenting programs such as supported playgroups, peer networks and evidence-based training equip families with practical strategies.



- Targeted Clinical Supports: Access to short-term, goal-focused therapies with trained allied health professionals (like speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and psychologists) and low-cost assistive technology.

Thriving Kids vs. The NDIS

- Thriving Kids is intended for children under 9 with mild-to-moderate needs. It operates on a capped, fixed budget managed by state and federal governments.
- The NDIS will remain the primary pathway for children with permanent, significant, or high-support disabilities.

Key Considerations

1. Clarity of roles and responsibilities

- There is currently limited clarity regarding the delineation of responsibility between education, health and disability systems.
- Without clear guidance, there is a risk that schools may assume unfunded therapeutic roles/locations as stated in the core features above.
- The reform has the potential to significantly influence how schools engage with students, families and external providers in the early years of schooling.
- The Department of Education needs to plan for additional specialist education support settings in both primary and secondary schools to ensure appropriate pathways remain available as demand grows.

2. Workforce capability

The initiative will increase expectations on educators in relation to:

- early identification of developmental needs
- collaboration with allied health professionals

However, these responsibilities sit well beyond the current skillset of most teachers, who already enter the profession with limited preparation in disability practice. Adding further layers of health-aligned responsibilities risks placing teachers in roles they are not trained for.

- In line with the School Education Act review findings, sustained investment in professional learning and specialist capability will be required by Department of Education.

3. Data sharing and administrative Impact

If the use of observation-based and functional assessments are used in this 0-8 year old window, then strengthened interdisciplinary collaboration between early childhood services, health and education is required. Systems must be in place from Department of Health, Disability and Aging, so the burden doesn't land in schools.

4. Equity of access geographically

- There are significant challenges in ensuring equitable access to allied health services, early childhood supports, specialist educators already in our regional, rural and remote communities in WA. Targeted strategies will be required to ensure equity across the state.

The Department of Education must ensure schools are supported to work alongside health and community services to ensure children with emerging or complex needs are identified early and can access clear, timely and navigable pathways into appropriate supports.

Culturally responsive approaches are essential, particularly for Aboriginal families. The model must support navigation through trusted relationships, culturally capable practice and community-informed engagement to ensure equitable access and meaningful participation.

5. Safety, Wellbeing and Complexity

Schools are increasingly supporting students with complex behavioural and regulation needs already.

- School leaders require appropriate support to maintain **safe work environments**.

6. System Alignment and Reform Coherence

- Thriving Kids intersects with broader reforms including:

Disability Royal Commission recommendations, inclusive education priorities through the Disability Reform initiative, building capacity of the school-based workforce as identified by Professor Whitehouse in his recommendations to the SEA review.



Recommendations

What WAESPAA has asked for from ASEPA to pass up to Federal Ministers:

1. Clearly define the **roles and responsibilities** of schools, health services and disability systems within the Thriving Kids initiative.
2. Ensure implementation does not result in **unfunded expectations** for schools to deliver therapeutic services.
3. Establish ongoing **consultation mechanisms with sector representatives**, including ASPEA, to inform implementation.
4. Ensure Thriving Kids includes **culturally responsive** with validated service models accessible across diverse and geographically dispersed communities across Australia.

What WAESPAA will be requesting to our Minister Winton and Minister Beazley:

It is important to explicitly acknowledge that the 2026 transition phase of the Thriving Kids initiative represents the period of highest system-level risk, with the potential to place substantial and immediate pressure on WA schools—pressure that will ultimately be felt most acutely in classrooms. A coordinated approach is essential to prevent this becoming common and acceptable practice.

- A) We request a targeted communications strategy to provide principals with consistent, timely information about expectations, processes, and available supports throughout 2026. Maintain clear control of the public narrative by proactively communicating verified information and minimising the influence of misinformation.
- B) Schools need access to personnel with significantly higher expertise—people with advanced training, broader experience and a system-wide lens. Statewide Services must build this next tier of capability, have it ready for RFA, and deploy it strategically to schools to ensure genuine value-add and quality assurance.
- C) Given the scale of Western Australia, it is essential to re-establish strong, on-the-ground engagement and supports with regional and remote schools and communities.



Final Statement

We ask for acknowledgement from all levels of government and the Disability Reform Team within the Department of Education:

Foundational supports cannot succeed without strong system-level roles and responsibilities and coordinated capacity building. Without reform within Statewide Services—and a well-planned, transition into the Thriving Kids initiative—schools will face significant pressure as demand for early-detection and specialist support increases.

WAESPAA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to ongoing consultation regarding this initiative.