



WACSSO

Western Australian Council of State School Organisations

Submission to:

Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Committee

**Inquiry into the Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment
(Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008.**

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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 775 government schools throughout the State with 653 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.

Equality is dependent on such premises as: recognition that all children have a capacity to learn; learning is the construction of meaning from experience; school practices must acknowledge and build on the culture and experiences children bring to school; and children have a right to develop their skills, knowledge and aptitudes in challenging but personally successful and fulfilling ways.

The principle of excellence implies that the public school system must provide for all students the highest quality education, which will enable them to learn how to learn throughout their lives and to apply that knowledge for the benefit both of themselves and of others.

Public education must be geared to develop among all students, a sense of justice as well as respect and concern for others.

The principles of participatory democracy hold that the provision of an education system must address the needs of all. This is most likely to be achieved when those involved in the system, students, parents, and teachers, are enabled and empowered to be partners, through representation in all decision-making processes of the system.

Accordingly, 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 tenets 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 the WACSSO submission on the Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008 will be on the responsibility of parents and schools in particular, because 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.

There are a number of issues that WACSSO considers must be taken into consideration when further development and research is undertaken in relation to the Bill. They are:

Relevant Issues:

1. Research

Research must be undertaken into the reasons for non-attendance must be determined prior to any impact on income support payments. It appears that an assumption of 'irresponsible' parenting is the reason for non-attendance. However, this is not the only factor and should not be considered to be that.

2. Responsibilities

Whilst parents should be educated in their responsibilities, the responsibility of attendance should also lay with the students, the school and the government.

WACSSO policy empowers parents to be involved in their children's education including the ability to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. This, therefore, implies that parents should be responsible for allowing their children to receive an education that is appropriate to the child's needs. WACSSO believes that parents are responsible for (but not limited to) talking with children, teachers and other members of the community to facilitate their child's learning, providing the kind of home life and support which will be conducive to good education and undertaking to resolve any conflict relating to their child's education using a line management structure of local school, district office, central office and when all else fails, the Minister's office.

Parents have the right to negotiate with relevant authorities, a settlement of disputed areas in the best interests of the child and children, recognising that neither the school, nor parents, nor government agencies have absolute rights in the determination of the content and processes of schooling. WACSSO believes that all students and their parents should receive relevant information to enable them to make informed educational decisions and choices.

Students are responsible for cooperating in their own physical, intellectual and social development. School age children should be responsible for their own contributions to the development of a happy and effective learning environment whilst treating all persons with respect and recognising the rights of others.

3. Communication

All parents affected by the proposed legislation must be notified and kept informed of any and all changes that affect their income support payments. Parents have the right to make knowledgeable decisions regarding the education of their children including any penalties that may apply if they do not meet their responsibilities.

An intensive campaign must be undertaken to ensure all potentially affected parents and care givers are aware of and fully comprehend their responsibilities in relation to their child's education. This is not only the responsibility of Centrelink (in relation to their income support payments), but also the Department of Education, the individual school and the school community as a whole.

4. Resources

Parents must have access to adequate resources and services to enable them to comply with the proposed legislation. Not only parents who receive income support payments should receive this type of support, but also all parents who are struggling to ensure their child receives appropriate and high quality education.

5. Decision Making

Parents must be required, and given adequate opportunity, to provide a reasonable excuse or communicate the steps taken to comply with the requirements. To date, there appears to be no finite list of what is considered to be reasonable or to be 'the best efforts' of the parents. This cannot be discretionary for the person responsible for suspending or cancelling payments.

Careful consideration must be given when investigating non-compliance for attendance when the child is of an age where they may be considered responsible for their own actions in relation to attending school. Parents should not be disadvantaged where it is considered they have reluctant students. Should a parent be required to transport their children to and from school? Could this have the potential to disadvantage the parent by requiring them to only undertake work or study or mutual obligation requirements during school hours?

6. Process

Issues of non-attendance should, in the first instance, be directed at the parent or caregiver, not the government. Many issues could be resolved by utilizing this process. At no time should the first point of contact be Centrelink. There may be instances where the school is the cause of non-attendance and not the parent. This needs to be considered by Centrelink when a referral is made to them.

There is currently processes and legislation in place for the individual states and territories to manage truancy. How will this be affected with the introduction of the new legislation?

Summary

In summarising, WACSSO believes that every child is entitled to a quality education. If those who are considered responsible for ensuring children have every opportunity to receive this education are not taking responsibility for this, then they should be held accountable (irrespective of whether or not they receive income support payments).

All parents and carers must be given every opportunity to ensure their children receive an education including support and encouragement from all stakeholders.

Schools should not be burdened with additional responsibility of reporting non-compliance. Where possible, a data-sharing arrangement should be undertaken with the consideration of privacy and confidentiality issues.

Other Questions to consider

The purpose of this Bill needs to be carefully considered. The main focus appears to be the level of attendance of school age children in approved education or training programs. If this is the case, then consideration must be given to introducing legislation targeting the attendance of ALL school aged children, not only those where their parents receive income support payments. Certainly particular focus should be placed to encourage those children in disadvantaged circumstances to attend school on a regular basis, however, this group should not be the only focus.

If a parent is receiving income support payments and has two or more children of compulsory school age, however does not meet the requirements in relation to one child, are their income support payments suspended or cancelled in total?

What is considered to be 'non-attendance'? To date, there does not appear to be any guidelines as to what is considered satisfactory or not in relation to attendance. Will this attendance rate be determined by each State/Territory? Is there going to be a 'national' rate? Is it going to take into consideration other factors such as geographical location, seasonal changes (for example, the wet season in the northern parts of Australia where roads are blocked due to flooding) or even type of school (TAFEs, High Schools, District High Schools, Primary Schools etc)