

Significant issues impacting the Department

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Early childhood education

In response to strong evidence identifying the importance of early childhood education in building a successful foundation for schooling and later life, a number of initiatives has been established:

- Under the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care Partnership Agreement, from 2012, childcare and Kindergarten will be regulated using one set of standards. Implementation of the agreement has implications for accountability arrangements across the schooling and childcare sectors.
- Through the National Partnership for Early Childhood Education, all four-year-olds will have access to 15 hours of a quality program by 2013. In 2011, approximately half of all Western Australian schools with Kindergarten programs are providing 15 hours of Kindergarten instruction.
- Under the National Partnership for Indigenous Early Childhood Development, Western Australia has committed to building five Children and Family Centres. The centres will provide a range of services including child care, playgroups, early learning programs, maternal and child health and parent support on or near school sites in Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Kununurra, Roebourne, and the Swan Region in Perth.
- In partnership with the Commonwealth Government, Western Australia is also building four Early Learning and Care Centres. They provide long day care for children from birth to five years, located on school sites in Karratha, Hedland, Darch and Mirrabooka.

In December 2010, the Premier announced that a range of children's and family services would be established on school sites. These services could include early learning programs for three-year-olds, playgroups, childcare services, child and maternal health services and parenting services. The centres will initially be located in vulnerable communities. Integrating these services provides an opportunity to strengthen the existing public pre-school system and consolidate program quality. It will also allow schools greater autonomy and flexibility to tailor local approaches to innovative and effective ways to optimise outcomes for children in their communities.

Independent Public Schools

Given the diversity of school communities, it is recognised that one model of delivering services to schools does not suit them all. The Independent Public Schools initiative has become a key driver of reform of public education in Western Australia. The initiative provides schools with increased autonomy and flexibility to make decisions that meet the specific needs of their students, including recruitment and selection of teachers, education programs and management of their own budgets. In 2011, 98 schools/school clusters operate as Independent Public Schools and further expansion is underway for 2012.

Processes are in place, or being developed, to monitor the effectiveness of the Independent Public Schools initiative and to inform further implementation. These include:

- systematic feedback from the principals of Independent Public Schools;
- ongoing monitoring of school performance using the Department's School Performance Monitoring System;
- the introduction of an independent review of the performance of each Independent Public School to occur in the final year of their Delivery and Performance Agreement; and
- an independent evaluation of the initiative to determine its impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of participating schools and on the broader public school system.

Literacy and numeracy

High community expectations continue to play a pivotal role in driving the ongoing development of initiatives to improve student achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy. The Department implements a range of programs and initiatives to improve the literacy and numeracy achievement of all students.

Practical support to schools to improve literacy and numeracy performance includes: the development of materials to support the implementation of whole-school approaches; materials to support planning for students not achieving their potential; resources to assist preparation for the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN); the training of literacy and numeracy specialist teachers; and literacy and numeracy workshops for secondary school curriculum leaders, specific to their learning area.

Support is provided to school staff to enable them to analyse student performance data so that strategies to improve performance can be better matched to need, particularly for students 'at risk' of falling below agreed benchmarks, including national minimum standards. Through the National Partnership for Literacy and Numeracy, 83 public schools use additional resources to implement reforms to deliver measurable and sustained improvements in literacy and numeracy for all students, especially for those identified as falling behind.

To further support improved standards of student achievement, funds are directly allocated to schools with the expectation that all students achieve at least minimum standards of literacy and numeracy despite family background, location or circumstance. Schools make decisions using the funds for literacy and numeracy interventions most appropriate to their local context.

Aboriginal education

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal students remains a challenge. Disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal students do not meet minimum standards in literacy and numeracy; have poor attendance rates, particularly those in remote communities and some regional locations; and finish school without the skills and qualifications to enable them to access further education, training or employment.

To address these issues, new and innovative strategies are being implemented. Under the *Aboriginal Education Plan for WA Public Schools 2011–2014*, two major initiatives will support schools with high proportions of Aboriginal students in greatest need:

- Focus Schools will implement whole-of-school approaches to the teaching of literacy and numeracy and will introduce evidence-based attendance strategies to help close the performance gap for Aboriginal students.
- Aboriginal Network Schools will be able to work outside regular operating parameters and have more autonomy to encourage innovative ways to continually challenge, change and improve the way they provide for Aboriginal students and their families.

As part of the *Better attendance: Brighter futures* strategy, resources have been allocated to targeted schools to enable them to work in partnership with their local community to develop strategies to improve attendance and engagement with the school. Stronger engagement of Aboriginal families with their children's education reinforces the importance of education and its role in providing real post-school options for Aboriginal young people.

All public schools are responsible for setting targets, monitoring performance and implementing initiatives that will close the academic gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Through strong leadership, quality teaching and workforce development, schools will foster high expectations for their Aboriginal students to bring about improved attendance, achievement and retention.

Behaviour and attendance

Social issues such as family dysfunction, unemployment, mental health issues and generational poverty have increased the need for an emphasis in schools on improving student wellbeing, behaviour and attendance. The Department recognises the shared responsibility of schools, families, communities and other agencies to make a difference in these areas. Skilled practitioners and strong interagency partnerships are key elements in improving the educational outcomes of students with challenging behaviour and attendance issues.

The Department has implemented a range of strategies to address the complex issues that impact on student wellbeing, behaviour and attendance. They include an increase in the number of school psychologists, the operation of 15 behaviour centres to support primary and secondary students, the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies Program, the Positive Parenting Program and implementation of the *Better attendance: Brighter futures* strategy.

Services to students

The continued rollout of the Independent Public Schools initiative and the State Government commitment of providing all schools with greater autonomy and flexibility to make decisions at the local level have led to the need to reconsider the way services to schools and students are delivered.

There has been a realignment of district-level service delivery with the establishment of eight education regions, encompassing up to 75 networks of schools. Central to the creation of networks and regions is greater support for principals and teachers from trusted, credible and expert colleagues; and the movement of specialist school support services to schools or networks of schools. Schools and networks have greater flexibility to make decisions, respond to local circumstances and to collaborate with other agencies and service providers to best meet the individual needs of students.

The potential education benefits that flow from schools working together include greater curriculum choice for students; increased access to specialist teachers for students; a smoother transition between primary and secondary school; and a more consistent approach to behaviour management and discipline across schools.

The changes give principals more control over support services for their schools which can be better directed for the benefit of students. The changes also have the potential to protect and enhance services to country schools.

Pathways

Building flexible pathways between schools, vocational education and training (VET) providers, universities and employers that maximise learning opportunities for students remains a priority. Increasing the proportion of students achieving a Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE), attaining an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank and/or a VET Certificate II or higher is essential to meet community and employer expectations of secondary schooling.

The Department will continue to support schools to provide increased opportunities for students to leave school with outcomes that more directly articulate to higher education, further training or employment; and work towards a greater proportion of these students having higher levels of achievement. With approximately 40% of the VET certificates awarded to Year 12 school leavers achieved at the Certificate I level, opportunities exist to increase the proportion of students achieving qualifications at the Certificate II level or higher.

Of those Year 12 students who leave school without an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank or a VET qualification, many gain employment, enter a training course, or achieve entry to university through alternative pathways. However, entry to training courses after school is increasingly competitive with many requiring students to have studied more demanding stages of the English and Mathematics courses. Therefore schools may have to review their pathway offerings and ensure that students are provided with the information they need to choose pathways that maximise their post-school options.

A possible issue for the Department is that increasing student enrolment in courses leading to VET qualifications may place an additional funding burden on schools to support the upgrade of teacher qualifications to meet changed requirements for VET delivery.

Growth, student demographics and school planning

The combination of population growth, urban sprawl, changes in pedagogy, and the rapid introduction and development of new technologies for learning are causing increased pressure to build new schools and replace, refurbish and maintain existing schools. Education provision for a broadening student demographic requires more specialised programs and services to ensure students with particular needs are provided with the education opportunities to be successful.

School size continues to be a factor in providing access to curriculum and in optimising educational opportunities for every student. Compared with small schools, schools with higher enrolments have more resources and therefore a greater capacity to provide educational benefits. They typically have more viable classes and greater flexibility to offer a range of curriculum and student support programs. They also have the flexibility to be more creative and innovative in educational program delivery as they have more staff, more financial resources, and usually have lower per capita costs.

The size and population distribution of Western Australia creates challenges to providing a sustainable education system. A number of factors impact on the Department's capacity to meet its obligation to provide all potential students in WA with access to a quality education, particularly for students in regional and remote areas. These factors include a declining population in some areas, difficulty placing teachers in some specialist areas (particularly in regional and remote locations), an over-representation of disadvantaged students in public schools, the introduction of new courses in senior secondary schooling and the raised school leaving age. The Department continues to monitor the way it provides education across the State to ensure the most effective and efficient use of available resources.

Supply of teachers

Current trends in workforce planning reflect the ageing workforce, tightening of the labour market and the change in the structure of the student population. By 2014, Western Australia is likely to experience greater difficulties placing teachers in every school across the State, particularly in regional schools and some teaching specialities notably Physical Science, Mathematics, Design and Technology, English as a Second Language and special needs education.

To meet increased demand as it arises, strategies are being developed and implemented to attract people to teaching, including school leavers, university students not studying education and those considering a change of career:

- The Rural Teaching Program funds pre-service teachers and school psychologists to undertake a teaching practicum in a rural or remote public school. The program aims to increase interest in teaching opportunities in schools in these locations.
- Scholarships are offered to final year teaching students specialising in subjects or areas of learning need to attract them to work in public schools. All scholarship recipients must agree to statewide availability and are contractually bound to accept any teaching placement offered.
- Teacher advocates, who are qualified teachers, promote teaching as a career to secondary school and university students.

The Teacher Residency Training Schools Program is an attraction and retention strategy operating under the National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality. The program aims to improve pre-service teacher training through the establishment of training schools where final year teaching students undertake intensive practical learning in a school setting.