



Inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change.

“Education is empowerment so the more educated students are about it, the more we can do about it.” Emma, 15yrs old.

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Acknowledgement of Country

Ngalla kaaditj Wadjuk Noongar moort, nidja boodja koora koora wer kalyakoorl Wadjuk Noongar Boodja.

Ngalla kaaditj baalabiny moort djiraly-ak wer koongal-ak wer boyal-ak. Ngalla kaaditj djinaniny kep, boodja-k wer worl.

Ngalla kaaditj ngaalang nedigar wer boordiya koora koora wer yeyi.

Ngalla ni wer djinaniny wer kaartidjin.

We acknowledge the Wadjuk Noongar people and we acknowledge this Country always has and forever will be Wadjuk Noongar Country. We acknowledge their families to the North, the East and the South and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and sky. We pay our respects to their/our ancestors and Elders past and present.

We are listening, observing and learning.

We acknowledge the Wadjuk people and their kin in other Nations and Country across these lands and waters, who have always cared for this place and all who lived here. They have maintained, despite incredible barriers and disruption, their culture and languages which are now being revitalised and celebrated.

We acknowledge that we begin our work as The Climate Justice Union on the Boodja (land) of the Wadjuk people of the Noongar Nation. We honour the Wadjuk people and their kin in other Nations and Country across these lands and waters, who have always cared for this place and all who lived here.

We acknowledge First Nations Elders past and present, and acknowledge that those of us living here, who came from across the seas, live on land that was taken, stolen. We acknowledge the responsibility that comes with this understanding and that we personally and collectively benefit from this theft. As such, we all have a responsibility to decolonise ourselves, our lives and work, and to heal the harm these oppressive systems have inflicted.

We are deeply grateful that First Nations peoples continue to generously share their knowledge with community, gifting those of us from elsewhere with protection and hospitality. Those of us (from non-Aboriginal backgrounds) within the Climate Justice Union, in our personal and professional lives, will live and work in ways that are just, and that centre First Nations authority and power. We take our responsibility seriously and seek to further understand our obligations to country, culture and community.

We acknowledge the wisdom of country, that the seasons teach us, and that the impacts of climate disruption are another form of colonialism. We understand the settler story is but a footnote to the oldest continuous living culture and appreciate we have much to learn. We are listening, seeing and learning. We understand our collective responsibility for all people, for country and for our relations in the animal world.

Read our acknowledgements: climatejusticeunion.org/acknowledgements

Who are the Climate Justice Union

The Climate Justice Union is based in Western Australia and is ordinary people working together and pooling resources to accelerate the fair and just transition to net zero emissions, and prepare for and adapt to climate change impacts while taking care of people and place.

We are community members, mothers, fathers, children and young people, doctors, farmers, fire-fighters, hairdressers, labourers, librarians, office workers, waitstaff and everyone else.

Our primary aim is for Western Australia to rapidly transition to net-zero emissions, including exports, while taking care of people and place.

To achieve this, we take a community organising based approach to working in communities across Western Australia and in key local industries to build community-led action on climate change and inequality.

The Climate Justice Union works for the human rights of all people affected by the climate crisis. We acknowledge that the people who are most vulnerable to climate change are those who already experience disadvantage, marginalisation and discrimination.

This includes but is not limited to First Nations people, people of colour, women and non-binary folks, queer folks, people living in poverty, people experiencing homelessness, people on a low income, people in insecure work and at risk industries, people with disabilities, people of non-English speaking backgrounds, newly arrived migrants and refugees, children, young people and older persons, people with health problems, people living in rural and remote areas, farmers, people living in climate risk areas, and emergency responders.

The Climate Justice Union acknowledges the diverse and compounding impacts of climate change on people with multiple and intersecting experiences of disadvantage. We also acknowledge the resilience, strengths and capacities of people in all of their diversities to contribute to confronting the climate crisis.

CJU works across sectors and communities by identifying local community leaders and supporting them effectively to collaboratively plan and implement just transitions within their community/sphere of influence. We listen to and amplify the needs and voices of people with lived experience, including First Nations peoples, children and young people.

We provide: relationship and knowledge brokering across and within sectors; infrastructure, policy development, strategic planning, conflict resolution training and mentorship for members and partners. While we have a relatively small staff team, we amplify our impact through collaboration with our individual members (who are often leaders within their field and people with diverse lived experience) grassroots community groups and a wide range of government and non-government organisations.

This submission is the result of consultation and discussion with CJU members over an extended period of time. Input has been provided by parents of young children in primary schools, high school students, health professionals and educators. We wish to acknowledge the specific contributions of Emma Heyink (15 year old School Student in Year 9 and member of student council), Katherine Hobbs (WA registered Primary Teacher) and Jaime Yallup Farrant (parent of a 6 year old and convenor of the Climate Justice Union).

Context:

Before answering the specific questions of the inquiry we wish to note the Education Goals of The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration.

Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity

Goal 2: All young Australians become:

- confident and creative individuals
- successful lifelong learners
- active and informed members of the community.

We also note the Values of K-12

The **Western Australian Values of Schooling** articulate what educators in Western Australia believe all students should value as a result of the programs they undertake.

Respect and concern for others and their rights - sensitivity to and concern for the wellbeing of other people and respect for life and property. Each student is encouraged to be caring and compassionate, to be respectful of the rights of others and to find constructive ways of managing conflict. This includes the right to learn in a friendly and non-coercive environment.

Pursuit of knowledge and commitment to achievement of potential - the lifelong disposition toward the quest for knowledge as each student strives to understand the social and natural worlds and how best to make a contribution to these worlds. Each student is encouraged to achieve his or her potential in all respects and, through critical and creative thinking, to develop a broad understanding of his or her own values and world views.

Self-acceptance and respect of self - the acceptance and respect of self, resulting in attitudes and actions that develop each student's unique potential - physical, emotional, aesthetic, spiritual, intellectual, moral and social. Encouragement is given to developing initiative, responsibility, ethical discernment, openness to learning and a sense of personal meaning and identity.

Social and civic responsibility - the commitment to exploring and promoting the common good and meeting individual needs without infringing the basic rights of others. This includes encouraging each student to participate in democratic processes, to value diversity of cultural expression, to respect legitimate authority, to promote social justice and to support the use of research for the improvement of the quality of life.

Environmental responsibility - the commitment to developing an appreciative awareness of the interdependence of all elements of the environment, including humans and human systems, encouraging a respect and concern for Australia's natural and cultural heritage and for forms of resource use that are regenerative and sustainable.

We hold that an effective response of Western Australian schools to climate change fulfills these goals and demonstrates these values. By failing to respond effectively the Education Department is failing in its commitment both to uphold the values of the curriculum and the educational goals of the Mparntwe declaration.

We also draw the committee's attention to an article to be published this month (November 2021). We wish to include this article as a part of our submission and will forward it to the committee upon publication.

Godden, N. J., B. M. Farrant, J. Yallup Farrant, E. Heyink, E. Carot Collins, B. Burgemeister, M. Tabeshfar, J. Barrow, M. West, J. Kieft, M. Rothwell, Z. Leviston, S. Bailey, M. Blaise and T. Cooper (in press). "Climate change, activism, and supporting the mental health of children and young people: Perspectives from Western Australia." *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*

a. The co-benefits of climate action in schools

Young people's response:

What does "climate action" look like in a school?

- Renewable energy
- Reducing waste
- Revegetation and trees
- Making the buildings better, smarter, more efficient
- Educating kids and whole families about climate change
- Educating kids and whole families about climate solutions
- Strong mental health supports and recognition of climate anxiety and grief
- Active education around democracy, policy development, activism and creating change
- Validation of a desire to act, to create change and support to do so
- Integration of climate change across the whole curriculum in age appropriate ways

The benefits for school and community:

Power bills go down for the school

Students would feel happy and proud that the school is taking action

Students would be less worried about their daily lives contributing to climate change

Good publicity for the school community 'we're solar powered'

Empowered children and young people

A sense that although we live in challenging times, the adults around them and the broader society are supporting them, and doing what is needed to address these challenges

Teaching opportunities:

- Around climate change what it is, why it matters, what solutions look like
- Climate Justice,
- How climate interconnects with other inequalities and what we can do to address this
- STE(A)M
 - Students can learn about new technology
 - Opportunities to learn about regeneration and circular economies
 - Connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures
 - Opportunities to explore communication and how to communicate to people who are different
 - Leadership
 - Adaptation
- Taking responsibility for our actions

Setting a good example for families and the general public:

- If this public school can do it, so can you!
- Being a leader in change
- Validation and greater momentum in the community
- Understanding that it's serious and important and climate action matters

"It would be great to see the government stepping up in this to show that they support kids, because I've received some really negative responses from the education department about striking for climate. I know they can't actively support a strike but they can support us in other ways!"

Teacher response:

"While teaching STEM in a large government primary school in the NT, I attempted to cover climate change in as many ways as possible that fit with the Australian curriculum. ACARA has its first climate change topic covered in Year 1 within the science curriculum stating:

"Living things live in different places where their needs are met (ACSSU211 - Scootle) Elaboration: exploring what happens when habitats change and some living things can no longer have their needs met". For my Year 2 classes, we followed the life cycle of green tree frogs as they are tadpoles through to when they were frogs during term 1 in Darwin. Exploring the things that these frogs needed for survival was an invaluable experience for these students. They learnt empathy as they explored and learnt about the need for rain to ensure the frogs would have puddles to lay their eggs in. We were able to discuss the way that things that humans are doing are changing the way that rainfall is happening around their home because the Earth is heating up. These Year 2s were able to understand that our impacts as humans have an impact on other animals in their local area. These students loved being part of this class as they could watch the frogs grow and were able to feel part of their survival and understand that as humans we have a responsibility to be stewards of the land.

For the year 4-6s we were able to learn about the climate action movement. Students learnt about famous people who had changed the course of history. People like Jane Goodall, Marie Curie and Greta Thunberg. They learnt that science is important for making real world change.

STEM was split into two topics at this school the year after I left. One was technology, the other was Environmental science. This subject was taught by my good friend Kristin. She created units of work that integrated science into the garden. She helped the students grow a beautiful vegetable garden throughout the year among many other Environment focused projects. Learning about local produce and food security."

Parent response:

"I often feel overwhelmed by the challenge of climate change and worry deeply for my child's future. I do all I can at home to support them in growing up as a responsible citizen and to work to address climate change. I am shocked that the school they attend does not seem to deal with climate change at all. They come home and tell me about the importance of recycling and nothing about the importance of democracy and being a part of a community committed to taking care of our communities and our shared home.

I shared about some local climate action that families could take part in and I was told it was political and inappropriate. And yet my friend's school had Woodside deliver a workshop about exploring for oil and gas. Schools need to be a part of actively depoliticising climate change and climate action. It is a matter of science that we need to address courageously. I feel like I can't talk to the school about these concerns, when I do I am told it's not the place - and yet my child is being educated for a future and a world that may not be as stable and safe as the one many of us experience now. I am upset that fossil

fuel companies get to sponsor kids activities and science week, that they get to run programs in schools. We wouldn't let cigarette companies provide health programs. Why are we allowing fossil fuel companies to pretend they are taking care of people when they continue to act in harmful ways? We kicked the cigarette companies out - we need to do the same for the fossil fuel companies.

I know we are supposed to partner with the school to provide the best education for our children. I have so little trust in the education department or my child's school. How can I effectively partner with them when they refuse to deal with reality and prepare our kids for the future they are growing into. There are so many opportunities for climate action to be empowering. For our kids to be learning about how we can reduce our impact on the environment. For them to learn about the challenges we all face, so they can actively be a part of creating a better world.

I would also love for the school to be a resource for myself and others about how we deal with the mental health challenges. We have seen some things shared by the school about parenting through a pandemic, what about parenting through the climate crisis. This is hard, and many of us are scared. We need schools to be actively involved in working through this - like they did with Covid."

b. Climate change mitigation and adaptation actions currently being undertaken in schools, and the benefits they are achieving

Young people:

“My school and my principal don’t seem to be doing anything. We did have a whole bunch of new buildings built, I think they were designed to be more energy efficient.”

Only thing I can really think of is Year 12 tree planting day, which Year 12’s do seem to enjoy but most of us don’t get to take part in.

Student council would like to see solar panels put on the school.

“The best thing I’ve experience around climate action at school was:

Visits with school to the local council to work with them around developing the council's climate policy. We visited the council about 3 times. Members of the student council and other students were able to come along.

Started off with them asking what issues were important to us, we chose climate change. We wrote some priorities around native forest logging and emissions. They wrote a climate plan and we went back to review it when they were having discussions, we gave feedback and asked questions, etc.

Everyone was pretty happy with it, it’s good and ambitious but might be hard to achieve without the state and federal government support.

- Learned about how local government laws are made
- It can be easy to pass acts at government
- There’s a lot of debating
- Learned about the reviewing
- Learned local government thinks our opinions are important
- Learned more about waste management, food waste, recycling
- Learned more about transport and challenges with transport
- Learned a lot about emissions and how to reduce them

“We learned about how important it is to make sure fossil fuel workers and people on the frontline like farmers are given the resources they need to continue with their life and make their work more sustainable.”

“It was really empowering to take part in something like that, and also it made me hopeful that the local government is doing something even while the state and federal governments are still being really bad”.

Teacher responses:

“We had limited things being done to mitigate climate change at the school. I started an after school “Environment Club” and we took part in “Plant a Tree” day where we planted about 15 trees around the

school. The students loved seeing their trees in the playground and enjoyed the responsibility of looking after them as they grew.

We also took part in the School Strike in Sept 2019. Throughout the term we had focused on Climate change and the students were able to make posters about what needed to be done to fix climate change. They were then able to bring their posters to the whole school action. 900 students filed onto the oval and spelt out "NT KIDS 4 CLIMATE". Our principal had organised a drone to take a photo of us from the sky. The school then shared the post on their facebook page for the school community to see. Greta Thunburg also shared our photo on her facebook story which was very exciting for the students and teachers. It was an amazing community feel as everyone took part together. The students felt very excited and accomplished, knowing that they had stood with so many people around the world to make a difference in their future."

Parent response:

"Our school has a sustainability group - but it is a bit ineffective and focuses on individual actions. Some students I know have shared about how disempowering they find that kind of response because it makes them feel the problems are theirs to fix, and that it's too big. They get overwhelmed. I haven't seen anything I would say is effective."

C. Barriers that schools encounter in undertaking climate action and how these can be addressed

Young people:

The education department gets in the way of school students taking action in our own way (strikes).

“We get sent a nasty stock standard email saying that students are engaging in potentially criminal activity and could be harmed, especially when we know that we’ve got public liability insurance and marshalls and all of the planning to make sure it will be OK even if someone does.

It makes me feel really grumpy, I know that it’s something they feel they have to do, but they could be a little less harsh about it.

My sister’s school is an independent private primary school and sends out an email saying skipping school isn’t advised, but we advise our students to get informed about their futures and the risks they’re facing. Pointing to their school values around making sure their students are informed and aware.

I’m glad that her school is able to support it a bit more. Makes me happy to know that other people are also getting that email. It supports them in wanting to take action and do something.”

The other big one I think is funding.

At my school we just spent a lot of money on new buildings and stuff so we might not have the money for solar panels etc. I know that some rural schools don’t have air conditioning so they probably can’t afford it either. And I know that this is probably worse in First Nations communities which is unfair.

In our school the principle comes across as very unsupportive and may not even think climate change is real or is maybe not really a threat or urgent. So I think that means he will be less inclined to spend school budgets on things like this. And my school is definitely not the only school with a principal like that.”

Educating kids and families about climate:

“I think lots of kids have heard about climate change and think “yeah this is climate change and I’ve heard about it before”, but they don’t really understand the threat.

These kids could really benefit from learning more about climate, depending how it’s taught - it needs to be taught in an engaging way.

We need to talk about what will happen if we don’t mitigate climate change, and about what the solutions are and what they mean. We also need to talk about climate justice and how working on climate justice can solve a lot of other social justice issues that affect teenagers more than climate does right now I think.

I know mental health is a really big thing that affects people at my school and seeing how improving support for that intersects with climate justice could be good.”

Teacher responses:

“I think there are many things that stand in the way of good climate education:

1. Standardised testing. At the school I was at, the focus was on literacy and numeracy.
2. If I had not been the STEM teacher there at the time I don't believe that climate change would have been covered very much. I think it is hugely dependent on the staff that are employed at the time. The curriculum does cover it, but it isn't mandated that teachers have to teach it. It is up to the individual which parts are taught.
3. There is limited resources for teachers who do not understand climate change themselves and limited incentive to learn/they have come straight from university where they are taught how to teach the basics of maths & science
4. Funding - our school applied for a grant for solar panels but was unsuccessful
5. Building expansion - as schools grow, they cut more and more trees down to make space for demountables which really limits the green space students have available to them. “

A previous teacher shared with us their experience of teaching about climate change in a high school school. They were belittled, invalidated and critiqued for being 'political' and a 'lefty'. The teacher had been teaching science and sustainability. They were critiqued about the books they were using as resources, and had their work checked up on. This teacher had the experience of being bullied because they were covering climate change and climate action and eventually left the profession.

Other teachers have shared that they don't know how to cover these subjects and how to integrate climate action and climate change into their work. They need more training and support and are not aware of where they can go for support.

We have also been informed of young teachers wanting to do more in this area but feeling unsupported by older staff within the schools administration. They have indicated a culture of judgement where they do not want to risk their employment contract and therefore feel they need to 'toe the line'.

Parent responses:

“At my kids' school the teachers don't understand the climate crisis, or it's relevance for education.”

“The Education Department seems to be quite a barrier to schools taking action. By sending out emails that are attempting to scare families from taking part in school strikes it's pretty clear they are not supportive of students or schools taking effective action. A few years ago when school strike for climate first started up, the Education Department blocked all of the school strike website access. Kids could find out about guns and various other harmful behaviours but advocacy groups and advocacy websites seemed to be a step too far. And then they teach about some of the great moments in history where societal change has happened, and they applaud the actions of people like Nelson Mandela.”

“The fossil fuel companies seem to be quite a barrier to action in some of the schools I am aware of. When Woodside are running workshops, and Chevron are sponsoring the science awards, and gas

companies are providing nutritional programs focusing on health while ignoring the health impacts of climate change. And the schools then support these companies by providing them with promotional opportunities and great media opportunities. Where do the fossil fuel companies end and the schools begin? I wouldn't want tobacco companies teaching in school - I don't want fossil fuel companies teaching in class - or sponsoring an awards ceremony. It makes a mockery of the education system and the schools involved."

d. What more can be done to support schools to respond to climate change.

Young people:

I think funding, obviously money is always needed.

Funding for -

- Installing solar panels, batteries etc
- Making our older building better, more insulation, energy efficient, etc
- Revegetation and tree planting

Education about climate change included in the curriculum:

- I don't know if I'm going to learn about climate change in the future and I haven't heard about it yet and I'm in year 9. We watched 2040 in English and did an essay and that it.
- Should sit within HASS and start at a young age. Kids are pretty switched on and so many can already talk really well about it and are aware.
 - Learning about the impacts
 - Learning about what we can do to reduce emissions
 - Learning about climate justice and how climate intersects with social justice issues
 - Learning about First Nations issues, that we're living on stolen land, and that people who have been living on this country for thousands of generations know how to manage the land and have lots to teach us.

"Education is empowerment so the more educated students are about it, the more we can do about it."

Educating families and community members:

- Holding information nights for parents
- Giving kids projects around climate change that include parents
- Information about climate change in newsletters, etc
- Involving community members to come to the school and talk about climate and social justice related things

Waste management:

Having more bins, more recycling opportunities at school such redcycle for plastic, and 10c container returns, compost bins, and teaching students, parents and school staff about how to do it properly.

"It would be great to learn about alternative economic systems. Like the circular economy, and cradle to cradle. And we could spend some of the time we currently focus on recycling and reducing waste on writing letters to change legislation."

"If we got all of this support, it would make me feel really happy and hopeful. I think It would be great to see the whole community get involved in and see what can happen."

Teacher responses:

“We need many things to help get climate change on the table.

1. We need leadership like my principal to be willing to try new things and move from the typical subjects to things like “Environmental Science”.
2. We need climate change to be included in teacher training so that teachers understand the importance - and if not then, it needs to be part of compulsory PD like mandatory reporting
3. We need climate change to be a cross-curriculum priority the same as Sustainability is, but actually ensure this is taught, not just suggested.
4. Funding for all schools to move to solar
5. Waste management education & implementation
6. Having more competitions that rank schools by their emissions or by something like that to turn climate action into a desirable and inspiring movement.”

Parent responses:

“I think we need it to be very clear from the Education Minister that climate change is something schools must incorporate into their day to day activities. We can have all the solar panels we want, but while the fossil fuel industry continues to get access to classrooms of young kids (unlike the tobacco companies who were banned a long time ago because of the harm their products caused) schools, teachers, parents and students know the Education Department is not really serious about addressing climate change.”

“Climate change action, mitigation and preparation for climate impacts needs to be incorporated across the curriculum. And then we need to ensure that teachers are provided the training and resources they need to follow through on this. It’s a massive challenge and classrooms are challenging enough.”

“Let’s ensure we make it easier for teachers to upskill, for schools to find great programs and for resources to be appropriate for the place and community. Many of the early readers my kid has been using are from the UK. We need to ensure materials are appropriate to the community they are for. This needs to include the Aboriginal Culture from that area”.

“It would be fabulous if schools could provide support for parents and the local community of how we can address the mental health impacts of climate change. And if a disaster happens, like the big fires, we need to ensure spaces are created to share about this. Resources could be sent home about how to speak to your kids about the incident. At the moment many parents are overwhelmed themselves and don’t know how to deal with it, but the kids are accessing information via the media. Research suggests kids will hide their concerns if they think their parents can’t deal with it. They don’t want to worry them.”

“Each school needs to have a climate adaptation plan. They need to know what natural hazards they may face (including fire, flood, cyclones, heat waves etc) and how they can mitigate them. Each school needs to be aware of its emissions. There are so many tools to work this out. An audit that the kids can be included in. Then they need to set goals to reduce those emissions. These goals need to be inline with the science. The Education Department could provide support for schools to act together. And finally schools need to understand the justice issues relating to climate change and its relevance for their students and communities. This needs to include the health and mental health impacts.”

“It’s important that schools are a safe place for students to learn, explore and understand the world they live in. And right now and for the foreseeable future that is a world that is experiencing a climate crisis.”

End report.