

Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee, Parliament of WA, Inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change

Dr. Tarun Weeramanthri, 8<sup>th</sup> November, 2021

I make this submission in my capacity as an independent public health consultant and as the person who conducted the [Climate Health WA Inquiry](#) (2019-2020).

For noting, I am also currently President of the Public Health Association of Australia, and Deputy Chair of the PathWest Board. I am currently working part-time for the WA Government as a consultant on COVID-19 matters.

I very much welcome the decision of the Education and Health Standing Committee (EHSC) to conduct this inquiry, which I believe will be critical to maintaining momentum on climate action in WA over the next decade.

The children of today will directly experience the impacts of climate change during their lifetimes.

In the Climate Health WA Inquiry [Final Report](#), we laid out the physical and mental health impacts of climate change in WA, both direct and indirect.

Though we did not address the role of the education sector specifically, a number of written submissions (including from [Millenium Kids](#)) made important points about the vulnerability of youth to the impacts of climate change, in particular the mental health impacts. I would also direct your Inquiry to the transcripts of the formal hearings held with the [Commissioner for Children and Young People](#), and [Child and Adolescent Health Service](#).

In the Climate Health WA Inquiry Final Report (page 41), we described the mental health impacts of extreme weather events, but also the increased level of anxiety and stress associated with climate change more broadly. A sense of loss and despair in relation to the environmental impacts of climate change was described to us in various terms, including eco-anxiety, ecological grief and solastalgia.

Given the prevalence of such concern and anxiety in youth today, and the contribution of education to building resilience, schools in our education system must have a role to play. I look forward to the Education and Health Standing Committee outlining what that role might be, but taking action on climate change (personally, collectively, in families and communities, through schools and in wider society) might be the best antidote to anxiety for children and youth.

It was a privilege to speak on the record recently with members of the Education and Health Standing Committee. During that [hearing on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2021](#), we discussed the power of a statutory inquiry process, the importance of a state-based approach, and the power of particular examples of action within a broader narrative of change.

One key question raised by the Committee was about how to balance fear and hope when raising awareness of the science and the links between environmental and health issues. I do not have a definitive answer except to say that the guiding theme for the Climate Health WA Inquiry was to 'make hope practical, not despair convincing' (page 131 of Final Report).

In that spirit, I welcome the Education and Health Standing Committee's emphasis on the *co-benefits* of climate action in schools, in the terms of reference for this inquiry. We discussed co-benefits in section 6.3 of the Final Report, as it is critical to the understanding of the public health benefits of climate action.

For example, encouraging active transport options (such as walking or cycling to school) helps to decrease vehicle use and associated emissions, but also has clear benefits for children's physical health as exercise helps maintain a healthy weight. Healthy food options for children are also designed to improve physical health, but may also contribute to overall decreased carbon emissions, as such dietary options are generally more plant-based than the default options.

It will be interesting to see what submissions people make to this Inquiry about the school curriculum in WA. Though this is not an area in which I have any specific expertise, I would venture that there are existing curriculum areas which deal with the environment and ecosystems, human health and wellbeing, Indigenous worldviews, food production, conservation and sustainability. It may be that specific links to climate science and climate change could be introduced into these existing areas, whilst new curriculum areas specific to climate are developed.

I am hopeful that submissions to the EHSC Inquiry will outline the values that underpin the school curriculum, the relevance of those values to climate action, and the approach of government schools, independent schools and schools run by religious organisations in WA.

Teachers are the critical resource for schools and there should also be consideration of the curriculum for teacher training, so that teachers feel equipped to teach students on these subjects. Again, because curriculum change usually takes some years to achieve, it would be important to commission and/or develop some short course training for current teachers to upskill in these areas.

Health and education are the two largest state government departments in WA with the largest workforces and budgets. As such, education must have a substantial environmental footprint with respect to both carbon emissions and waste, though I have not seen baseline data. Hopefully, this data will be forthcoming as part of the implementation of the [Western Australian Climate Policy](#) with action taken to reduce such emissions and waste, consistent with state government policy to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. I note that Education will lead on the Solar Schools Program, to increase solar installations on school rooftops. There may also be other whole of government initiatives introduced as part of the Western Australian Climate Policy (on procurement reform for example) that Education could join.

Schools are also places of community engagement, and given the level of community support for climate action, it is to be expected that school boards, parents groups, and the like, will take a strong interest in school performance against sustainability measures. Indeed, such performance measures may influence success in terms of competition for enrolments.

In summary, this EHSC Inquiry will be a landmark inquiry for WA, and has the potential to raise awareness of the impacts of climate change, and drive greater climate action, through a combination of measures. These include addressing mental health challenges for youth, curriculum change, reduction in emissions, sharing of success stories, and defining the role of the schools sector in whole of government initiatives.

I am confident that your Inquiry process will help build public confidence in the capacity of government to represent the short, medium and long-term interests of the electorate. It could also build capacity and momentum by identifying new partnerships and networks in education that could work with and alongside government, similarly to what is developing in the health sector. I would be happy to speak to the Inquiry about such partnerships in the health sector should that be useful to you.