

Education and Health Standing Committee inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change

Submission by Angela Rossen
Artist and Biodiversity Educator

INTRODUCTION

I am an artist and biodiversity educator with forty years studio and field practice painting and documenting nature throughout Western Australia. Since 2009 I have worked with scientists to bring the biological sciences and climate science out of the universities and into school and community contexts.

I design and deliver a suite of Art and Science Sustainability and Biodiversity workshops and field events with schools that I have delivered workshops field events and biodiversity festivals throughout Western Australia since 2009. These workshops are structured to build resilience and community connection around action to mitigate against climate change as individuals and together. <https://vimeo.com/127569580>

I hold honorary positions with the following research institutions:

- The Oceans Institute UWA,
- The School of the Biological Sciences UWA
- The Australian Institute of Marine Science - AIMS.

What professional development is offered with the Angela Rossen programs/projects?

Teacher professional learning sessions are offered as part of a suite of environmental science activations and learning experiences. The sessions are custom designed to fit the client school and employ art and science methodologies to up skill teachers in exciting ways to engage with biodiversity, sustainability, conservation understanding and climate change action.

What resources do the Biodiversity Art Science programs/projects provide?

The Environmental Science Art Workshop is a learning journey of discovery to observe and document the living things in an environment that is relevant to or in close proximity to the client school. A major biodiversity artwork (2700mm x 1200mm) representing all the plant and animal biota is created collaboratively during the workshop. These biodiversity artworks are a biology lesson with and without words. They are a valuable learning tool for the school a learning resource for generations of students as well as a legacy piece of great pride to the school community. In other workshops students create videos and puppet shows,

interpretive signage and other messaging with biodiversity conservation and sustainability messages. These artworks, performances and signage become digital resources for students sharing their new knowledge with the rest of the school community. My biodiversity workshops including out of school hours were regular events with schools throughout metropolitan, regional and remote WA.

Angela Rossen comments for the Standing Committee inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change

The co benefits for climate action in schools cannot be underestimated. Climate change poses an existential threat to all living things on our planet. We are living the effects of climate change here in WA with marine heat events, acidification of the ocean, increasingly intense weather events, loss of rainfall, wildfires of previously unknown ferocity and the prospect of the temperature continuing to rise with all that entails.

It is established beyond any shadow of a doubt that burning fossil fuels causes climate change. For incomprehensible reasons our government at both state and federal levels have refused to act with resolution to follow the advice of scientists to transition to renewable energy and stop all exploration, extraction and burning of fossil fuels. The COP26 meeting recently showed Australia to be one of the few developed nations to be making any real changes reducing emissions. A matter of national shame.

Australians who understand the consequence of inaction on climate change mitigation are living a life of cognitive dissonance. The so called gas led recovery, the subsiding of fossil fuel entities and the illusory carbon capture technology that doesn't exist yet are reasons for despair. The student climate change protest movement have grown out of this context. Disenfranchised and unable to influence decisions that are going to make or break their future lives they have come out to the streets to demand action on climate change.

There is little or no context within state schools for students to engage with these important issues.

The politicization of the public discussion around climate change has polarized this important topic into those who want action on mitigation on climate change and those who "Don't believe in climate change".

Schools seeking to be apolitical, in my experience, have actively discouraged climate change discussion and action.

It is my experience that in Department of Education in WA have discouraged State school teachers from teaching and discussing climate change and mitigation because the subject is perceived as being politically charged. For many years now with my state school incursions and excursions I have been instructed many times by teachers not to mention climate change and its causes. Also I have been cautioned not to refer to the findings of the IPCC in discussions with students. This is an untenable situation.

Terms of reference Education and Health Standing Committee inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change.

Mental health outcomes for students and teachers

The departmental refusal to engage and act on climate change mitigation in schools has made light of this serious problem and pushed students well founded concerns to the fringe. This and the knowledge that time is running out for effective action has had a strongly demoralizing effect on the students and teachers who are concerned.

It is well recognised in the literature that students struggling with this disconnect are facing negative mental health consequences. It is also well documented that individuals engaged with their communities on action for positive shared goals become more resilient, have better health outcomes and are more productive, creative and happy. It is vital at this time that we empower youth with the skills and knowledge to become part of the solution with action, innovation, and strong sense that they can personally and collectively make a difference for the better.

Summary – the failure of the WA Education Department policy to address climate change with adequate funding for climate change education programs, teacher upskilling and green infrastructure and programs has and will continue to create increasing adverse mental health outcomes for students, teachers and the wider community by growing a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness in the face of such huge and compelling problems.

Physical health outcomes for students and teachers

Mitigation action for climate change involves transitioning to renewable energy, implementing energy saving design into new buildings, increased canopy cover and efficient use and management of water and waste to name a few. All these lead to more comfortable physical learning environments.

Summary - Mitigation action for climate change should be policy across the board and not discretionary add ons as they are now.

Financial savings in the education system

The transition to green energy which can be generated on school campuses in most instances and other sustainable practices will bring enormous financial savings over time after an initial investment. When schools are resourced to implement sustainable management, they can be held accountable for their carbon footprint. It is possible for all schools to become carbon neutral and in time carbon negative. Financial modeling supports this.

Schools should be resourced be part of programs like but not limited to:

- Climate Clever Program. <https://www.climateclever.org/schools>
- Waterwise schools <https://www.watercorporation.com.au/Education>
- Wastewise <https://www.wasteauthority.wa.gov.au/wws>
- Sustainable Schools WA
<http://det.wa.edu.au/curriculumsupport/sustainableschools/detcms/portal/>
- Your Move Transport Program <https://www.yourmove.org.au>

- Biodiversity Art/ Science Workshops and Field events <https://vimeo.com/264601501>
- Student led learning programs
- Nature based learning programs
- Kitchen garden programs

Co-benefits of climate action in schools for the community

Strong sustainability school programs influence the wider community. Children bring home this new learning and implement it into home life. The *Stop Smoking WA* Department of Health program in the late 1990s was a game changer for smoking in WA. Education modules were designed and implemented at all levels of the school system and the success of the program demonstrated the investment was well made.

School action for climate change mitigation should be a model for families which could involve them directly and indirectly.

Are the co benefits promoted?

It would be good for the Education Department of WA to resource and implement the changes before promoting them. There has been too much double dipping with the Department taking the credit for initiatives taken by individual teachers and principals of their own volition and in their own time to transition to climate friendly infrastructure and learning without any structural departmental budgetary support.

Is there an opportunity to cross-promote existing environmental and health activities being undertaken in schools as climate action?

Lets just fund it first and then use existing structures like Sustainable Schools WA to network with teachers throughout metropolitan regional and remote WA as they have been doing unsupported for years.

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

There are many climate change mitigation programs that are especially designed for schools. Some are listed with links above.

How and why have these actions been initiated within schools

Sustainability and climate change programs have been run by individual teachers and schools despite very little support from the department and usually in their own time. This is not sustainable.

Examples of climate action in schools which are low or zero cost

This is exactly the attitude that has stood in the way of real investment in sustainability and climate change mitigation action by the department of education. If you are going to do the job you need to invest. I have been asked time and time again to run my projects, field events and workshops for nothing or a reduced cost. You wouldn't ask your orthodontist or

electrician that and expect a discount. Why should children's education, in this important sector, depend on impoverishing the suppliers of really good educational products. Or worse still passing over the best suppliers in search of low or zero cost products. Our government can find the money to subsidise the very industries that are destroying the biosphere but their own standing committee asks what low or zero cost products are out there for education. Western Australia needs to invest in its children and their future.

Examples of climate action in schools have been locally developed that involve community partnerships and are Aboriginal-led and recognise indigenous knowledge.

There are plenty and they all need to be properly resourced. Some are listed above.

Sustainable Schools WA is part of the WA Department of Education. For years it has been underfunded with short contracts and no certainty. This organisation should be properly funded to coordinate the climate change mitigation action and education in schools throughout WA. SSWA has already created a teacher network throughout metropolitan, regional and remote WA and has a comprehensive database of sustainable education providers. I am an alliance member and am proud to have supported the program for over ten years now under the leadership of Howard Flinders. You will find him an invaluable resource.

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

- **Politicization of the climate change discussion**

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It is my experience that the Department of Education in WA have discouraged State school teachers from teaching and discussing climate change and mitigation because the subject is seen as being politically charged. With my state school incursions and excursions, I have been instructed many times by teachers not to mention climate change and its causes. Also I have been cautioned not to refer to the findings of the IPCC in discussions with students. This is an untenable situation.

- **Lack of will to implement climate change action by the WA Department of Education is enshrined in departmental policy and attitudes.**

This has to change. Climate change mitigation is not a political action, it is a necessity.

- **Lack of money**

The Department of Education should be provided with a budget that can adequately resource real climate change adaptation and education programs in all schools throughout WA. This will change attitudes.

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

The Department of Education should be provided with a budget that can adequately resource real climate change mitigation adaption and education programs in all schools throughout WA. This must include management of water, energy, transport, healthy and ecologically sustainable diet, biodiversity and green spaces, purchasing and waste and the built environment.

It must also include teacher professional development, development of outdoor learning, investment in excellent programs like Waterwise, Wastewise, Climate Clever and others as core education, not as add-ons or unnecessary extras. These programs must not depend on teachers volunteering their own time. Teachers have enough of a job teaching. They need to be supported by a sustainability officer, a stand-alone position without classroom teaching duties, in each school who can coordinate the various programs and assist teachers with implementation.

The WA Department of Education School Curriculum and Assessment Authority SCAA must recognise the importance of sustainability and cross curricular learning and prioritise climate change education. This would ensure that climate change education could become the vehicle for learning throughout all subject areas and not just an optional add on.

This is my submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change. I hope these comments are useful and that adequate funding for effective change in the areas of climate change mitigation and education in the West Australian school sector come from your deliberations and recommendations.

Angela Rossen
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