



11 November 2021

Mr Chris Tallentire MLA
Chair
Education and Health Standing Committee
Parliament House

By email: laehsc@parliament/wa/gov.au



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Dear Mr Tallentire

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

Thank you for your letter of 16 September inviting the Institute to make a written submission to the above inquiry by the Committee.

I am pleased to provide the Institute's formal submission attached. As requested, the submission is in the form of responses to the specific questions posed in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. Should you require any further clarification of information, please contact our Senior Advisor, Government Relations, Fiona Roche, on 0405 420 052.

Yours sincerely

Professor Jonathan Carapetis
Executive Director

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Telethon Kids Institute – Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee Inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change

Responses under the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference

a. The co-benefits of climate action in schools

- There is a large body of evidence that climate change is an issue of enormous importance to children and young people, with the Institute growing its research interest in the intersection between climate change and child health.
- Climate change science should be embedded in the school curriculum from an early age in a way that is age and ability appropriate.
- Engaging with students at the start of schooling (kindergarten and pre-primary) builds understanding that caring for the natural environment is something we can all do as individuals, and empowers young people to take action for adaptation and mitigation.
- One of the key recommendations of the 2021 Save the Children Report – Born into the Climate Crisis is to ‘recognise children as equal stakeholders and key agents of change in addressing the climate and environmental crisis, including by establishing child-friendly mechanisms and platforms to facilitate children’s formal engagement in climate policy making.
- There is increasing evidence that actively involving children at the school level in discussions and awareness of climate change has the potential to improve their mental health by giving them a sense of collective agency/empowerment in being part of the solution to address climate issues:
 - Article in Press (2021) Climate change, activism, and supporting the mental health of children and young people: perspectives from Western Australia. Authors: Naomi Joy Godden, Brad M Farrant, Jaime Yallup Farrant, Emma Heyink, Eva Carot Collins, Bella Burgemeister, Mena Tabeshfar, Jason Barrow, Mara West, Jasmine Kieft, Mason Rothwell, Zoe Leviston, Susan Bailey, Mindy Blaise, Trudi Cooper
- Climate-friendly school-based activities and/or climate-friendly school infrastructure are tangible ways to help children understand the science and involve them in developing and actioning solutions that can have positive impacts on their morale/psychological wellbeing, as well as environmental benefits. This can include simple activities such as reusing, recycling, composting, waste minimization, reduction of energy use, awareness of unnecessary chemical use and CO2 production, and other climate-friendly behaviors.
- There is also a growing understanding of the significant benefit in children (and school staff) learning about indigenous practices and connections to the land, and in involving local indigenous leaders in school activities (eg. explaining how indigenous environmental management techniques protect the land, sea, rivers and waterways, and air).

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

- The Institute is aware that many schools have active programs in place to address sustainability and supports resources, such as the Sustainable Schools Toolkit WA and the Green Impact program, that have been developed to assist schools in this regard.
- We are also aware, through programs such as the Governor’s School STEM Awards, that many schools in the private and government sector have, through embedding STEM across the curriculum, introduced innovative and impressive programs and partnerships to increase student understanding of climate change and involve students in activities that improve and restore our environment.
- The Institute notes the inclusion in the Australian Curriculum of “sustainability” as one of three [cross-curriculum priorities](#), and encourages its implementation at the school level in order to build understanding of the need to take action to address the ongoing capacity of our planet to maintain all life and sustainable patterns of living to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

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

- Leadership and resourcing are two significant barriers that schools can encounter in undertaking climate change action.
- School principals and leadership teams need to be authorised and supported in ensuring climate change is recognised as a school priority, and to support teachers to become “school champions” in developing and delivering environmentally sustainable programs and activities, including those that provide students with the opportunity to work directly in the environment (eg helping to clean waterways, planting of trees, etc).
- As in all organisations, the development and support of such initiatives requires resourcing and person time, and is difficult to achieve where there is an over reliance on volunteers and teachers (who already have a heavy workload).
- Schools in vulnerable communities, in the most socio economically challenged local areas, need the greatest support.
- Schools need to be supported to create programs and opportunities to involve the whole school community - parents, local businesses, and local authorities – as they can be the most effective in helping children to adopt an attitude of everyone being part of the solution.
- The Institute supports greater coordination to build on initiatives and activities undertaken in some schools so that they can be introduced in all schools, particularly schools in low socio-economic areas that do not have the same resourcing and local engagement. The use of awards and other recognition initiatives can incentivise schools prioritizing these efforts.
- We would support additional resourcing being provided to the Department of Education to coordinate implementation of the [Sustainable Schools WA](#) planning framework called ‘Education for Sustainability’, particularly as the Institute notes that the current Schools WA Alliance strategic plan is out of date (2016 – 2020).

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

Research and evaluation

- Research is needed to better understand and recognise that climate change concerns are having an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people, and have the potential to exacerbate many other health conditions.
- There is the opportunity to undertake WA based research to determine if those schools who are taking a proactive stance toward addressing climate change, and have programs in place to help children feel a sense of control and engagement, exhibit better student mental health and wellbeing profiles than schools that do not.
- The partnership between Minderoo, the Institute and the State Government in the Early Years Initiative is providing a wealth of evidence around the importance of early intervention and prevention that can be applied in this field.
- The national [Early Years Learning Framework: Being, Becoming and Belonging](#) informs learning programs in centre-based childcare centres and kindergartens in all WA schools and is central to the [National Quality Standard](#) against which education and care services across Australia are assessed and regulated. These both attribute importance to environmental responsibility as follows:
 - Element 3.2.3 of the NQS requires that “The service cares for the environment and supports children to become environmentally responsible”
 - Outcome 2 of the EYLF is that “Children are connected with and contribute to their world” including that they “become socially responsible and show respect for their environment”
- The Institute’s work in developing a mobile application that raises children’s awareness of the damaging effects of the sun and the importance of physical exercise could be further adapted and expanded to be part of a climate change curriculum.
- There is considerable opportunity to learn from recent work undertaken in Tasmania (in 2020/21), where the Tasmanian Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Youth Network of Tasmania, the Mental Health Council of Tasmania, and Playgroup Tasmania drew directly on the voices of children and young people (to age 25 years) to present ‘Postcards to the Premier’ providing the following five clear messages on what children and young people wish for the environment:
 - a sense of belonging for themselves and for others;
 - places where they feel safe;
 - people who provide them with love and security;
 - the confidence and opportunity to have a voice; and
 - the environment protected and to know that everyone contributes to achieving that end.

Based on the above, the Tasmanian Government has released a wholistic Child/Youth Wellbeing Strategy. Source: Tasmanian Government: *Tasmania’s Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Consultation Report, June 2021*. https://hdp-au-prod-app-tas-shapewellbeing-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/7116/2496/6592/Child_and_Youth_Wellbeing_Strategy_Consultation_Report_FINAL_WCAG.pdf

Built environment

- It is critical that the design and planning of new school infrastructure and facilities meet strict standards for environmental rating and sustainability.
- Ideally students and the community should be involved in the design of schools to reduce their carbon footprint and adapt to changing needs due to climate effects.

Procurement guidelines

- School based procurement policies should promote and prioritise the awarding of contracts to local businesses with a commitment to addressing climate change, and a track record of demonstrating care for the environment and purchasing practices.

Resourcing and support to school and students

- The commitment shown by the Department of Education and individual schools to climate change is commendable. Further resourcing and support, together with strong signals to school leadership on the importance of incorporating constructive information for addressing climate change in the curriculum, will encourage and enable a greater level of engagement and activity.
- This is particularly critical in vulnerable communities and schools where children would not otherwise have such opportunities.
- There would be considerable value in the Department of Education showcasing what a “planetary healthy school” would look like (indigenous knowledge, water wise, sun aware, mental wellbeing, sustainable, etc) so that schools and their communities can aim to achieve these outcomes at the local level.

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