

## Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee for the Inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change

November 2021

Personal background and contextual information:

My name is Jennifer Griffiths. I am an experienced educator, having worked in secondary, tertiary and adult education for decades, including 10 years in WA secondary schools in regional, outer suburban and inner suburban contexts as both an English teacher and Head of Learning Area. I am committed to working towards solutions both in and out of schools that address the impact climate change will have on the health, education and communities of our students.

When I look at the students in my classes, I cannot imagine what their future could be like. My twin response to this is firstly, what can I do specifically in class to prepare them for their future and secondly, what can I do in my life and way I work that would improve their future. I don't believe it is possible to address climate change with 'siloes' thinking, although I will attempt to limit my responses here to the inquiry's terms of reference.

I have been learning a lot about how indigenous ways of thinking and indigenous knowledge may help us to approach this huge issue. In my (very limited) understanding, I would like to suggest beginning this thinking with



For schools, who have a duty of care for our students and staff, our 'heart' role is especially vital. I would suggest that it is not enough to have solutions, we need to seek to understand the ways taking climate action is about love for our world and each other and the future. Without this, we will not succeed in this mammoth task. This also means schools will need to be able to provide 'heart' solutions for the individuals in their care; to, in fact, **care** for them. There is much I have seen in schools that at surface level appears to be about care, but care is put aside as soon as it comes up against the barriers created by the systems, processes, funding and values (both implicit and explicit) in our institutions. This submission, while head and hands focused, comes very much from my heart.

I have included two suggestions that I believe would begin to work towards the final term of reference – **What more can be done to support schools to respond to climate change**. In brief these are:

1. That the Education Department fund a climate action teacher-trained staff member for every school site; and
2. That the Education Department fund research to explore the decentralisation of school operations to support positive climate action.

### The co-benefits of climate action in schools.

Besides the obvious co-benefits of saving lives, livelihoods, our ecosystems and the planet, the co-benefits of climate action in schools are many. Some examples I see as a teacher in a school are:

- Students engaging with real-world issues and problems to understand they are the ones who create the ways we live in the world and have the power to change things that do not contribute to a just life for all.
- Students being able to travel to and from school especially if they are walking or riding, students able to learn effectively in a physical environment that is not too hot or cold, students able to participate in outdoor sports and other activities outside without being limited by weather factors, students not being impacted by weather events that impede access to school (eg. bushfires, floods, storms).
- Staff being able to teach effectively in a physical environment that is not too hot or too cold, to be able to provide outside supervision to students during breaktime without endangering their health, to be able to lead students in participation in sport and other outdoor activities without being limited by weather factors, to mitigate the absenteeism due to serious weather events.
- Students and staff being able to access food, health services and housing that support the ability to effectively deliver teaching and engage in learning
- Students and staff believing there is something that can be done about the future as an antidote to climate induced anxiety and grief.
- General mental wellbeing of students and staff mitigated by limiting trauma events such as bushfires, floods, storms and/or loss of family and friends to these events, destruction of ecosystems, family livelihoods, cultural and social experiences and connections and more.

The co-benefits of climate action are to some degree recognised and promoted but they tend to stop at the school gate. Schools do not generally work effectively in the spaces of health, housing and food, and yet all of these are undeniably necessary to create the environment for effective learning by students and teaching and support by staff. These areas will also be intimately impacted by climate change and currently the ability for schools to adapt to the ways people's lives may change in the future is limited.

### **Suggestion 1:**

That the Education Department fund climate action focused teacher-trained staff at every school site to investigate the unique climate issues facing their community, seek assistance to develop strategies to mitigate or address these issues and enact, lead, and promote solutions. Given this is the central risk to our students' health, wellbeing and futures, we have a duty of care to engage in this space. The ways schools function at present makes this work difficult, perhaps impossible as staff time is constrained by student numbers. Linking the work of school-based climate action to student outcomes (measured by student wellbeing, feelings of safety and belonging and improved future outlook) would create a clear connection between this work and the community of the school. Funding for at least one position at each school site would allow schools to make enormous inroads towards solutions that work for their community (rather than centralised and dictated to by external stakeholders or private industry) and support teachers to deliver programs to students that promotes their inclusion in these solutions.

This is an audacious suggestion, I know! But I imagine an army of teachers with intimate knowledge of how schools work, trained to seek solutions and working together to make our schools places of the future. What a statement to the world about how much we care about our students' futures!

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

The main barrier to schools undertaking climate action is the embedded belief that schools operate alongside the 'real world'. Schools will say to students 'when you get into the real world...' as though the school is not part of this place. There are allowances given for 'educational purposes' that excuse wasteful use of time and resources thus perpetuating the idea that the process of education is valued over anything else, even the destruction of the planet (for example the tradition of taking high school students on planes around the world for 'educational experiences' without mitigating the enormous cost to the planet or the inequity of that experience). Staff have little ability to access flexible working conditions (especially in secondary schools and leadership roles) and students have no control over how they access their learning, both of which, if encouraged, would promote climate action (such as when and how students get to school or reduced work/study fractions to volunteer, or participate in community resilience-building activities such as growing food or sharing knowledge or supporting those who need it). The complexity of these solutions, which are individual, localised and require schools to respond to the community, rather than ask the community to conform to a centralised model, would require a massive shift of the beliefs, values and ways of operating schools. This does not mean it is not worth doing!

### **Suggestion 2:**

That research be undertaken to explore the decentralisation of school operations to support positive climate action, particularly around water, energy, transport, food, biodiversity, waste and their built environment. It would also be useful to explore approaches to teaching and learning as it is unlikely that in order to create students who are ready for a changing world, we would continue to operate in the ways that are currently resulting in vast inequities and massive under achievement (I have a lot more to say on this but will limit my comments. I am, however, keen to provide more detail should that be necessary). This would include lifting First Nation community voices into this space in order to learn from their millennia-old understanding of teaching, learning and community and how to live in and respect place. It would also include investigation into the ways centralised current models create barriers that schools, staff and students feel helpless about changing. This research should be shared with schools in ways that would support them to make changes in tangible, achievable and measurable ways (using the suggested climate action staff, perhaps!).

Finally, I would like to congratulate the Standing Committee and the WA State Government for exploring this enormous and important issue. It is encouraging and validating of my own personal climate actions that people with the power to drive change are both asking for input and seeking solutions. Thank you.

Jennifer Griffiths