

Education Sector Adaptation to Climate Change
Submission to
Western Australian Government, Education and Health Standing Committee
Inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change

Who we are

The Education Sector Adaptation to Climate Change is a research network led by Professor Lauren Rickards and Professor Jeff Brooks of RMIT University, Dr. Blanche Verlie of the University of Sydney and Professor Lisa Kensler of Auburn University.

Our research is concerned with the diverse, pervasive, profound, compounding and cascading impacts climate change is already having and will increasingly have on the education sector, and ways that education policy makers, institutions and communities can proactively prevent and adapt to these impacts.

Our research expertise is in climate change impacts and adaptation, climate change education, and sustainability leadership in schools.

Our submission***General comments***

We want to first congratulate the Committee and WA Government for examining this vital issue, as it is one that is badly neglected the world over.

Our research indicates that most consideration of climate change and education to date are extremely narrow. In particular, most position education as a means to instigate climate change mitigation (emissions reductions) and, to a lesser extent, adaptation in other sectors of society, rather than turning the lens in on the education sector itself.

It is critical that education policy and institutional practice begin to recognise that in addition to climate change being an important topic for students to learn about in the curriculum, that it poses critical threats to the social, physiological, psychological and infrastructural foundations of the education sector. For example, school campuses are already being burned down in bushfires, or flooded, creating both risks to the students and staff during these emergencies, and ongoing challenges and barriers to the provision of effective education. In addition, the increasing rates of climate anxiety among young people around the world, combined with the potential for post-traumatic stress disorder among school communities who have experienced climate related disasters, threaten the emotional capacities of teachers and students to engage in basic educational practice.

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

We focus our responses on the fourth TOR. In particular we would like to emphasise the following points:

- It is vital that schools are considered holistically as more than a sharply defined group of people. In particular, families and communities need to be supported to adapt well in order to support the functioning of the school. To point out the obvious, if parents are impacted, for example, so are school children.

- Similarly, rather than a focus on physical assets, it is important to focus adaptation on the services that schools provide.
- The risks climate change poses are not only climatic hazards and not limited to the specific spatial footprint of a school. In particular, the whole socio-ecological and socio-technical context of education is going to dramatically change in the coming decades. It is important to consider these risks, including impacts to schools that are perpetuated via impacts on supply chains, water, electricity, transport and ITC networks, insurance and other financial systems, and other enablers of school functioning.
- Adaptation requires a long-term view and open-ended scenario planning. This includes considering risks such as to the future training of teachers and school principals.
- Although the dominant approach to adaptation is one of risk management, it is important to complement that with approaches that reduce non-climatic vulnerabilities (e.g. poverty, poorly functioning systems), and build socioecological resilience.
- Adaptation is an opportunity to enact positive transformational changes. Work by Briony Towers on bushfire adaptation in Victorian schools (2018, 2020) indicates that a fundamental shift is possible and needed towards more child-centred approaches.
- To ensure that adaptation is well-informed, we encourage The Education and Health Standing Committee to implement a sector-wide and state-wide climate change impacts and adaptation study informed by the systems perspective outlined above.

We would be pleased to speak with you more if that would be beneficial. Please don't hesitate to contact us at _____ and/or _____

References:

Towers, B. and Ronan, K., 2018. *Evaluation of Survive and Thrive: Final Report to the Victorian Country Fire Authority, Bushfire & Natural Hazards CRC*. RMIT University.

<https://researchrepository.rmit.edu.au/esploro/outputs/report/Evaluation-of-Survive-and-Thrive-Final-Report-to-the-Victorian-Country-Fire-Authority-Bushfire--Natural-Hazards-CRC/9921860861901341>

Towers, B., 2020. Children, bushfire and climate change. *Advocate: Journal of the National Tertiary Education Union*, 27(1), pp.26-27.

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