



**Carers WA**



# **Carers WA Policy Submission Review of the School Education Act 1999 (WA)**

**October 2024**

## About Carers WA

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Carers WA is the peak body representing the needs and interests of carers in Western Australia and is part of a national network of Carers Associations. Carers provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends with disability, mental health challenges, long term health conditions (including a chronic condition or terminal illness), have an alcohol or drug dependency, or who are frail aged. The person they care for may be a parent, partner, sibling, child, relative, friend or neighbour.

Caring is a significant form of unpaid work in the community and is integral to the maintenance of our aged, disability, health, mental health, and palliative care systems.

Some important facts about carers include:

- There are currently 3.04 million unpaid carers in Australia.
- There are more than 320,000 families and friends in a caring role in Western Australia.
- The replacement value of unpaid care, according to a report undertaken by Deloitte, Access Economics, "The economic value of unpaid care in Australia in 2020" is estimated at \$77.9 billion per annum.

### Acknowledgement of Country

Carers WA acknowledges the Wadjuk Noongar Nation's lands, water, customs, and culture of which the Carers WA Head Office is located. Carers WA recognises our services reach beyond the Perth (Boorlo) region, and so we also acknowledge the cultural diversity of First Nation Peoples across our state and throughout Australia.



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# Contents

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Acknowledgement of Country .....	1
Enquiries .....	1
1.0 Recommendations .....	3
2.0 Introduction .....	4
3.0 General Feedback .....	5
3.1 Context.....	5
3.2 Recognition and Inclusion.....	8
3.3 Inclusion of carers within the School Education Act 1999 .....	12
4.0 Conclusion.....	13
References .....	14

# 1.0 Recommendations

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1. The WA Department of Education develop and implement a policy for support and identification of young carers and carers in WA, which includes:
  - That when young carers are identified, it is recorded on their school administration system, support offered to the young person, and reasonable adjustments are made to support student learning.
  - That referral pathways are established to supports for when a parent or guardian is identified as a carer.
  - Hosting on the WA Department of Education website.
2. Inclusion of a definition of carer and young carer within the School Education Act 1999, consistent with the definition of carer within the *Carer Recognition Act 2004 (WA)*; as well as use of these terms within the Act where appropriate.
3. The objects, principles, and definition of disability within the School Education Act 1999 (WA) be changed to improve access and inclusion for students with disability, as well as bespoke changes to also support carers and young carers:
  - Object: to acknowledge the importance of the involvement and participation of a child's parents, guardians and carers in the child's education.
  - Object: to provide for government schools that meet the educational needs of all children, and are inclusive of their culture, religion, language, ability, location, family composition and caring responsibilities (young carers).
  - Definition: a broad social definition of disability similar to the one within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). We also recommend accompanying guidelines on how to apply this definition, to ensure consistency of application in practice of this definition.
4. The School Education Act 1999 be changed to provide a clear right for students with disability to enroll at their local public school.
5. The School Education Act 1999 be changed to provide greater flexibility in how students engage in education, including for young carers.
6. Changes be made to the School Education Act 1999 to allow adjustments for students with disability, and for young carers.
7. Changes be made to the School Education Act 1999 to ensure Disability Advisory Panels and Discipline Advisory Panels include a minimum of one member with lived experience of disability or caring for someone with disability.

## 2.0 Introduction

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Carers WA (CAWA) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the WA Department of Education, in response to its discussion paper on the *Review of the School Education Act 1999*. This submission has been informed by ongoing feedback from WA carers.

CAWA endorses the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), of which Australia is a signatory, and believe that families and informal carers play an important role in supporting the rights of people with disability in line with the CRPD, where they have been nominated to do so.

CAWA is pleased to see the increased government focus on better supporting children with disability and their families within WA's education system. However, CAWA is concerned that the scope of the review of the Act does not specifically include better supporting young carers and carers within the education sector, in addition to children with disability and their families.

For the purposes of this submission, the term 'carer' is defined as per the meaning under the *Carer Recognition Act 2004* (WA), this being an individual who provides care and assistance to another person/s who has disability, chronic illness, mental illness, or who because of frailty requires assistance with carrying out everyday tasks<sup>1</sup>. A carer does not include someone who provides care or assistance as part of a contract for services or community work. A carer may include a friend, family member, neighbour or other contact<sup>2</sup>. Carers can be aged under 25 (young carers) or be older carers.

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<sup>1</sup> (Government of Western Australia, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> (Government of Western Australia, 2004)

## 3.0 General Feedback

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### 3.1 Context

There are 3.04 million carers in Australia<sup>3</sup>, and 340,000 carers in Western Australia<sup>4</sup>.

Informal care provided by carers offers substantial benefits to Australia's health, disability, aged care and other industries – supporting Australia's health system and taking the place of services when systems fail. Indeed, the cost to replace this informal care around Australia was estimated in 2020 to be \$77.9 billion per year<sup>5</sup>. While the demand for carers is projected to increase by 23% by 2030, the number of carers is only projected to increase by 16% over this timeframe<sup>6</sup>. Without improvements to practical recognition and support for carers, this shortfall will result in additional pressure to Australia's already strained health system and formal care.

Being in a caring role comes at a significant cost to a carer's wellbeing, and economic and financial security. Carers have significantly higher rates of psychological distress than the average Australian. Over half of carers have poor wellbeing, compared to 25.4% of adult Australians. Only 17.1% of carers reported having good health, compared to 47.9% for the average Australian<sup>7</sup>. Preventative measures are needed to prevent carer burnout and further pressure on the health system.

Further, by age 67 primary carers will lose \$175,000 in superannuation and \$392,500 in lifetime earnings. For every year someone is a primary carer they will lose on average \$17,700 in superannuation and \$39,600 in lifetime earnings<sup>8</sup>. The most impacted 10% of primary carers lose an average of \$444,500 in superannuation and \$940,000 in lifetime earnings by age 67<sup>9</sup>. Many of these most impacted 10% of carers will be young carers who have been or will be in a caring role for thirty years or longer.

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<sup>3</sup> Invalid source specified.

<sup>4</sup> (Government of Western Australia, Department of Communities, 2021)

<sup>5</sup> Invalid source specified.

<sup>6</sup> Invalid source specified.

<sup>7</sup> (Schirmer, Mylek, & Miranti, 2022)

<sup>8</sup> (Furnival & Cullen, 2022)

<sup>9</sup> (Furnival & Cullen, 2022)

### 3.1.1 Young Carers

*'My other two children (young carers) have the responsibility of making sure their sibling with a disability is cared for when my husband and I pass away. This is a huge responsibility to take on, especially as we age as parents.'* – response from a carer

A young carer is a person aged under 25 who supports, or helps to support a family member, friend or partner who is experiencing a mental health challenge, disability, long term health condition (including a chronic condition or terminal illness), a substance dependency or who is frail aged.

There are more than 392,900 young carers in Australia<sup>10</sup>, and a conservatively estimated 40,000 young carers in Western Australia (2-3 young carers in every WA classroom). Over 60% of these young carers are the primary carer to an adult in their life, and over 62% of young carers have heavy or very heavy caring responsibilities (20-50+ hours a week undertaking tasks related to caring). These tasks include things such as assistance with mobility, cooking, cleaning, looking after siblings, supporting with appointments and medicine administration, managing finances, personal care and providing emotional support.

In 2016 the Australian Child Wellbeing Project named young carers as one of the four most at-risk groups of young people in Australia<sup>11</sup>. Young carers are at greater risk of high psychological distress, are at higher risk of financial distress, are more susceptible to social isolation, financial & educational disadvantage, unemployment, and poor physical & mental health. Between 2022 and 2023, young carers aged 15-24 years saw a much higher than average decline in wellbeing. Indeed, 50% of young carers live in households that are close to or below the poverty line.

Being a young carer can have an impact on their engagement with education. Due to caring responsibilities, young carers are more likely to:

- Have school absenteeism and miss deadlines for important assignments.
- Experience a lack of resources [i.e. for uniform, school supplies, or additional excursions and activities] needed to successfully participate in school.
- Have difficulty concentrating when they are at school due to stress or fatigue.
- Display 'disruptive' behaviours such as being off-task [it may be the only opportunity the young person has to have social connection] or being on their phone due to concern about their care recipient.
- Be socially isolated from their peers.
- Experience bullying more than non-young carers.
- Be disengaged from school or leave school early (before legal school leaving age).

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<sup>10</sup> (Department of Social Services, 2024)

<sup>11</sup> (Redmond and Skattebot et al, 2016)

The follow-on effect is lower income earning capacity, lack of social engagement and poorer health and wellbeing outcomes for those in a caring role. For government, this economically represents a cost of \$592,000 per person (projected average lifetime cost for people on the Carer Payment<sup>12</sup>). This is the prospective saving to government for every carer who returns or enters the workforce and who is no longer on the carer payment. Add to this other savings such as this person's reduced need for the age pension due to having built up superannuation; the increase to their mental and physical wellbeing that participation in paid work brings carers; etc. Early intervention and support for young carers in education settings, as well as transitional support to further education or employment after high school, returns many benefits in the long run.

In addition, better supporting carers of children with disability and other health conditions, through early connection and referral to carer support services, can also reap similar economic and social benefits.

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<sup>12</sup> Invalid source specified.



## 3.2 Recognition and Inclusion

In surveys of WA carers, 77.45% of respondents said that increased recognition of carers in education settings was important or very important to them.

For young carers, the nature of their caring role means that adults around them are often not aware of their situation and are therefore not able to support them. Carers in general, but especially young carers do not tend to self-identify. This is due to many factors, some of which are:

- The caring role is something they have done for most of their life, and they do not initially realise it is different to what other young people's day to day life is like.
- There is still stigma and judgement surrounding disability, illness, mental ill-health and drug and alcohol dependence.
- The issue is often considered to be 'private'.
- There is often guilt, shame, and fear on the part of the parent, or adult care recipient about being seen as 'unfit' to parent and a worry of punitive interference or negative judgement from outside agencies.
- The term 'carer' may not translate in some cultures and the role may be seen as a natural extension of family responsibilities. This does not mean that the caring role does not still present barriers to a young person's capacity to fully engage in their education and so should still be recognised and offered support.
- There can still be a perception that young carers only exist in certain socio-economic areas or demographics, when young carers actually exist in all backgrounds and geographic localities.
- The term 'carer' for young people is usually associated with paid support work and so they do not think it applies to them or that they are worthy or eligible for additional services and support.

### 3.2.1 Carers within the School Education Act 1999

Presently, young carers are not mentioned in the WA Department of Education website or policies, or within the *School Education Act 1999* (WA). Indeed, carers are not included at all within this Act. The impact of this is that while schools can be proactive in identifying needs and supporting their students, the lack of explicit identification of carers and young carers by the Department of Education and related legislation, results in educational professionals often not considering that caring responsibilities may be the underlying cause of poor attendance, low engagement, lack of uniform or resources, persistent phone use despite bans, and low parent or guardian engagement.

Due to this lack of top-down approach to improving recognition and inclusion of young carers and carers in the education sector, Carers WA has identified significant inconsistencies in this area between different schools. Some public schools will address carers on their websites; actively make reasonable adjustments to support young carers; engage with external agencies to provide emotional and practical supports; include Carers WA in school and community events; and host Peer Support Groups for young carers to build skills, have respite and build peer connections. In comparison, other schools will say they do not have any students that meet the criteria for being a young carer, indicating a lack of understanding of who young carers are and their prevalence in education settings. It follows that there is also a lack of understanding of the barriers that young carers may face and how schools are uniquely positioned to support them and improve lifelong outcomes.

Indeed, even in schools who actively engage in supporting young carers, this often comes from individual 'champion' staff members in the school, rather than from a whole-school approach. This means that when these staff members leave the school, awareness of and support around young carers leaves with them. This is coupled with young carers often only seeking support when they reach crisis point. By acknowledging, addressing and supporting young carers and carers from a whole Department level, early awareness and intervention is much more likely to occur.

Carers WA supports the review of the *School Education Act 1999* (WA) to improve access and inclusion for children with disability and their families, and believes that improved disability supports would also alleviate pressure on some young carers. However, this would not support young carers providing care for someone who does not have a formal diagnosis. i.e. someone with mental ill health or alcohol or drug dependencies. In addition, ongoing barriers to support would remain with young carer and carer identification and recognition.

### 3.2.2 Young carer and carer recognition around Australia

Indeed, this support and recognition for young carers in education has already been adopted by many Australian States and Territories:

- The Victorian Department of Education has a [Young Carers – Identification and Support policy](#) which states that when young carers are identified, it is to be recorded on their school administration system, support will be offered to the young person, and reasonable adjustments are made to support student learning<sup>13</sup>.
- The [Department of Education, Children and Young People in Tasmania](#) define who a young carer is, outline the challenges a young carer may face and references the Carers Recognition Act 2023 (Tas) and the Tasmanian Carers Action Plan 2021-2024 and provides links to external resources for young carers and families as well as school staff<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> (Victorian Department of Education, 2020)

<sup>14</sup> (Tasmanian Department for Education, Children and Young People, 2024)

- The [ACT Education Directorate](#) states a commitment to “recognising and supporting carers, and responding to the needs of carers, their rights, choices and opportunities to participate fully in all areas of life... A whole school approach to supporting the needs of young carers will impact positively on their ability to learn and their learning into the future. It is important all school staff are aware of the challenges which young carers face and the possible impact on their learning and wellbeing”<sup>15</sup>.
- The [Queensland Department of Education](#) has a statement on young carers including definition of a young carer and resources for young carers and schools as well as promotional materials<sup>16</sup>.
- The NSW Department of Education is currently working with their Inclusion and Wellbeing Directorate and Carers NSW to update their young carer information and make it more accessible on the website.

In ‘No Space in My Brain To Learn’: Young Carers and Their Engagement with Education’ analysis of applications to the Carers Australia Bursary Program 2017-2018, it is stated that:

*“Young carers identified by school and welfare staff have had mixed responses. Some studies have suggested that young carers have been dis-believed, misunderstood or silenced (Cree 2003, Eley 2004, Martin 2006, Bolas, Wersch et al. 2007, Earley, Cushway et al. 2007, Moore and McArthur 2007), while others have presented the appreciation that young carers assign to the support that they have received by staff who are empathetic, supportive and respectful and schools that have been flexible in their expectations about assessment, creative in the ways that curriculum is delivered and responsive to the child or young person’s physical, emotional and social needs.”*

This highlights the impact that a formal policy acknowledging the existence and experiences of young carers could have.

**Carers WA recommends:**

- 1. The WA Department of Education develop and implement a policy for support and identification of young carers and carers in WA, which includes:**
  - That when young carers are identified, it is recorded on their school administration system, support offered to the young person, and reasonable adjustments are made to support student learning.
  - That referral pathways are established to supports for when a parent or guardian is identified as a carer.
  - Hosting on the WA Department of Education website.

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<sup>15</sup> (ACT Education Directorate, 2024)

<sup>16</sup> (Queensland Department of Education, 2024)

### 3.2.3 Expected outcomes and benefits

Defining, acknowledging and offering support to young carers and families reduces stigma and increases the probability of families being forthcoming regarding health and disability situations at home that may be impacting on the capacity of a young person to fully engage in their education.

An overarching policy within the WA Department of Education including and supporting young carers will also expand the perspectives of educational professionals and allow them to consider other reasons behind student disengagement, concerning behaviour or little contact with parents/guardians.

Officially acknowledging and being supportive of the large variety of caring situations that exist can lead to:

- Acknowledgment and compliance with *The Carers Recognition Act 2004 (WA)*.
- Improved communication from families regarding barriers they are facing.
- An increase in trust as the existence and experiences of carers and care recipients is acknowledged and supported.
- Increased capacity of school staff to support students.
- An increase in willingness of young people to seek support if a young person's home situation is acknowledged and validated.
- Reduced stigma regarding disability and illness, including mental illness.
- Improved attendance and engagement of young carers.
- Higher rates of school completion for young carers.
- Increase in empathy of students who are not in caring roles and an understanding of situations that are different from their own.

### 3.3 Inclusion of carers within the School Education Act 1999

As previously mentioned, Carers WA supports the review of the *School Education Act 1999* (WA) to improve access and inclusion for children with disability and their families, and believes that improved disability supports would also alleviate pressure on some young carers.

Carers WA supports a social model of disability, as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and believes the School Education Act 1999 should reflect the UN CRPD and uphold Australia's commitment to it as a signatory.

As such, Carers WA recommends that:

2. **Inclusion of a definition of carer and young carer within the School Education Act 1999, consistent with the definition of carer within the *Carer Recognition Act 2004* (WA); as well as use of these terms within the Act where appropriate.**
3. **The objects, principles, and definition of disability within the School Education Act 1999 (WA) be changed to improve access and inclusion for students with disability, as well as bespoke changes to also support carers and young carers:**
  - **Object: to acknowledge the importance of the involvement and participation of a child's parents, guardians and carers in the child's education.**
  - **Object: to provide for government schools that meet the educational needs of all children, and are inclusive of their culture, religion, language, ability, location, family composition and caring responsibilities (young carers).**
  - **Definition: a broad social definition of disability similar to the one within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). We also recommend accompanying guidelines on how to apply this definition, to ensure consistency of application in practice of this definition.**
4. **The School Education Act 1999 be changed to provide a clear right for students with disability to enroll at their local public school.**
5. **The School Education Act 1999 be changed to provide greater flexibility in how students engage in education, including for young carers.**
6. **Changes be made to the School Education Act 1999 to allow adjustments for students with disability, and for young carers.**
7. **Changes be made to the School Education Act 1999 to ensure Disability Advisory Panels and Discipline Advisory Panels include a minimum of one member with lived experience of disability or caring for someone with disability.**

## 4.0 Conclusion

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Should the Department require any further information regarding the comments included within this submission, or assistance from the perspective of WA carers, Carers WA would be delighted to assist. Please contact the Carers WA Policy Team at [policy@carerswa.asn.au](mailto:policy@carerswa.asn.au).

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