



Department of  
Education

GOVERNMENT OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA



# Building on strength

Future directions for the Western  
Australian public school system

# Message from the Director General

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This statement explains the thinking and rationale behind the commitments made in our 2020–2024 strategic directions. It does not foreshadow a radical departure from the direction and strategies staff will already be familiar with and which have been successfully implemented in recent years. Rather, it describes how we can build on the strong position already established by the excellent work of school staff across the State.

The *Classroom First* strategy released over a decade ago has quite rightly kept the focus where it needs to be: on the teacher and students in a classroom. We will maintain the momentum for improvement and the spirit of *Classroom First* by taking further action to strengthen support for teaching and learning excellence. This statement re-affirms the need for students and teachers to be at the centre of our efforts over coming years.

This statement also emphasises the need to balance increased school autonomy with retaining a strong sense of connectedness to the public school system. I am committed to ensuring that future decision-making about roles, structures and supports, continues to strengthen local school autonomy while recognising the collective strength that our public school system brings to all Western Australian students.

I am confident that the dedication and skill of staff, that has put the public school system in such a strong position, will continue to propel the system forward.

I know that our actions in the years ahead will continue to be inspired by our commitment to the children and young people of Western Australia; that no matter where they live and no matter what their abilities, we will provide them with a quality education that will be a stepping stone to a full life – a life where they maximise their potential as individuals and as contributing citizens.

Lisa Rodgers  
**Director General**

# Where we are now

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Based on all the available evidence Western Australia is one of the best performing school systems in the country and for several years has taken great strides forward, year after year. This is to the credit of our school staff. It is because of their efforts that our students are getting a better deal than ever before.

We are unquestionably a good system. However, just like our most successful schools, we are always striving to be better - continually looking for ways to improve so that our students will leave school prepared for a successful future.

This is why we need to ask ourselves hard questions and set ourselves system achievement challenges. Through a focused approach and knowing the numbers, the names and the needs of every student we will continue to go from strength to strength.

We have comprehensive data to monitor student progress and achievement each year. These data currently tell a story and this story will become our system achievement target.

We know that our students have a solid start to school and their learning through the early years is providing young Western Australians with a solid foundation for success. As students enter the middle years of primary school we begin to see some students disengage from learning. It is critical that we focus on these students and ensure that they are on track for success as they enter secondary school.

Typically, as students move from primary to secondary school environments we see attendance and behavioural data that indicates that not all students transition smoothly. Although some will say this is an age old trend, the reality is that for every student who leaves school prior to the completion of Year 12, their life choices and chances are likely to be reduced.

We want to keep children and young people engaged in purposeful learning where they feel safe, valued and confident to tackle academic and personal challenges. The cumulative impact of year-on-year excellence in teaching is the key that will unlock success for students' futures. Our aim is year-on-year progress for every child and support for students and schools when we need to accelerate their progress.

In addressing these and other important issues our intention is to build on the strength of our system. There has been a strong improvement strategy in place over recent years and this statement describes the logical next steps to continue that improvement trajectory.

The following six drivers for improvement will take the public school system to the next level.

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in appropriate alternative formats.

# Provide every student with a pathway to a successful future

## The early years

Putting every student on a pathway to success begins with providing high quality development and learning experiences for students in their first years of school. The evidence is clear that we will gain a greater long term impact from our efforts and resources if we focus on the early years of a student's schooling, particularly those children who are at risk of not succeeding.

Reviewing our strategies for improving the wellbeing and educational achievement of students in the early years must therefore be a priority. For school staff that means taking a close look at what is happening for children in the first years of school and seeing where improvements can be made. The Western Australian Curriculum, the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard are important documents to inform school practice. It is time to embed the use of these tools in our practice and create cultures of sharing how we identify and understand our impact.

For staff at a central level it means re-thinking the system requirements and supports that are currently in place. In particular, using the Australian Early Development Census to shape policy and drive interagency collaboration.

## Contemporary and emerging work capabilities

We also need to ensure that all students are achieving the building blocks on which their future success will be built. We know that foundational competencies in literacy and numeracy will continue to be vital. All students need to have mastery of the basic tools for learning as the ability to learn and re-learn throughout their lives will be a necessary ingredient for success.

Of course, preparing students for a successful future involves more than literacy and numeracy competence. The identified 'new work capabilities' of being able to work well in teams, think critically and creatively, innovate and be entrepreneurial, are becoming increasingly important in modern workplaces. It is predicted that by 2030 two-thirds of all jobs will be 'new work capabilities' intensive.

We also know that in terms of future careers STEM skills will be increasingly useful to students. That presents us with the challenge of supporting school staff to deliver the STEM skills across the curriculum rather than viewing them simply as separate subjects.

## Student mental health and emotional wellbeing

Social emotional learning has also long been an important part of school efforts to provide a well-rounded education that attends to the development of the whole child, beyond the academic dimension.

This includes the promotion of resilience, optimism, confidence and self-efficacy. These outcomes are rated as highly important by parents who know that positive mental health and emotional wellbeing are critical to their children's future life outcomes. If we can have a positive impact on the personal and social development of children in the early years of their schooling, many behavioural challenges that surface in later years may be prevented.

School staff are faced with growing and complex challenges. Particularly, balancing expectations and responsibilities in the management of student behaviour and mental health. While schools can most certainly make a strong positive contribution, it is recognised that principals and teachers are not mental health professionals.

Arguably the most powerful impact school staff can and should make in supporting students' emotional wellbeing is to ensure every student feels a strong sense of connection and belonging where they are valued and acknowledged for their contribution to the school community.

## Aboriginal students

We will increase our focus on creating culturally responsive classrooms that build on the strength of Aboriginal students, engage them in learning and enable them to thrive academically and socially. It is important that the educational opportunities we provide match the aspirations of families and communities.

## Strengthen support for teaching and learning excellence in every classroom

To raise the standard of teaching and impact on learning, with the challenges that the changing context presents, support for school staff needs to be strengthened. The most significant source of support for school staff is at their school. In-school support is strongest when school leaders create a culture where staff are valued, treated with respect, trusted, have opportunities to collaborate, and grow their professional capabilities.

Every school community deserves to be led by an outstanding leader who is student-centred, establishes goals and high expectations, resources strategically, develops high quality teaching, ensures a safe and orderly environment, and partners with their community.

That is why the Leadership Strategy, to be implemented in the years ahead, places a priority on supporting school leaders to build such a culture in their school.

There is also a clear responsibility on those who work outside of schools to play a role in supporting school staff to deal with the challenges they face in their particular context. This means working to create the conditions that enable school leaders and their staff to be successful; removing impediments to teachers getting on with teaching and principals getting on with leading instructional practice; and putting in place as much support for school staff as our resources allow. It also means shifting resources into those areas where data tells us schools are most in need of support.

In coming years, we will enhance support for schools in several ways. Firstly, we will maximise the terrific expertise already in the system by spreading the influence of our exceptional educators beyond their school. One way we will do this is by introducing a new model of collegiate support for principals.

These collegiate principals will be in a support role, not a line management role. They will be available to provide a sounding board, a trusted source of feedback, a problem solving partner, and a linkage to other expertise that a principal may wish to access.

Secondly, we will strengthen the support to schools to be culturally responsive to Aboriginal students and to build strong partnerships between families and the school.

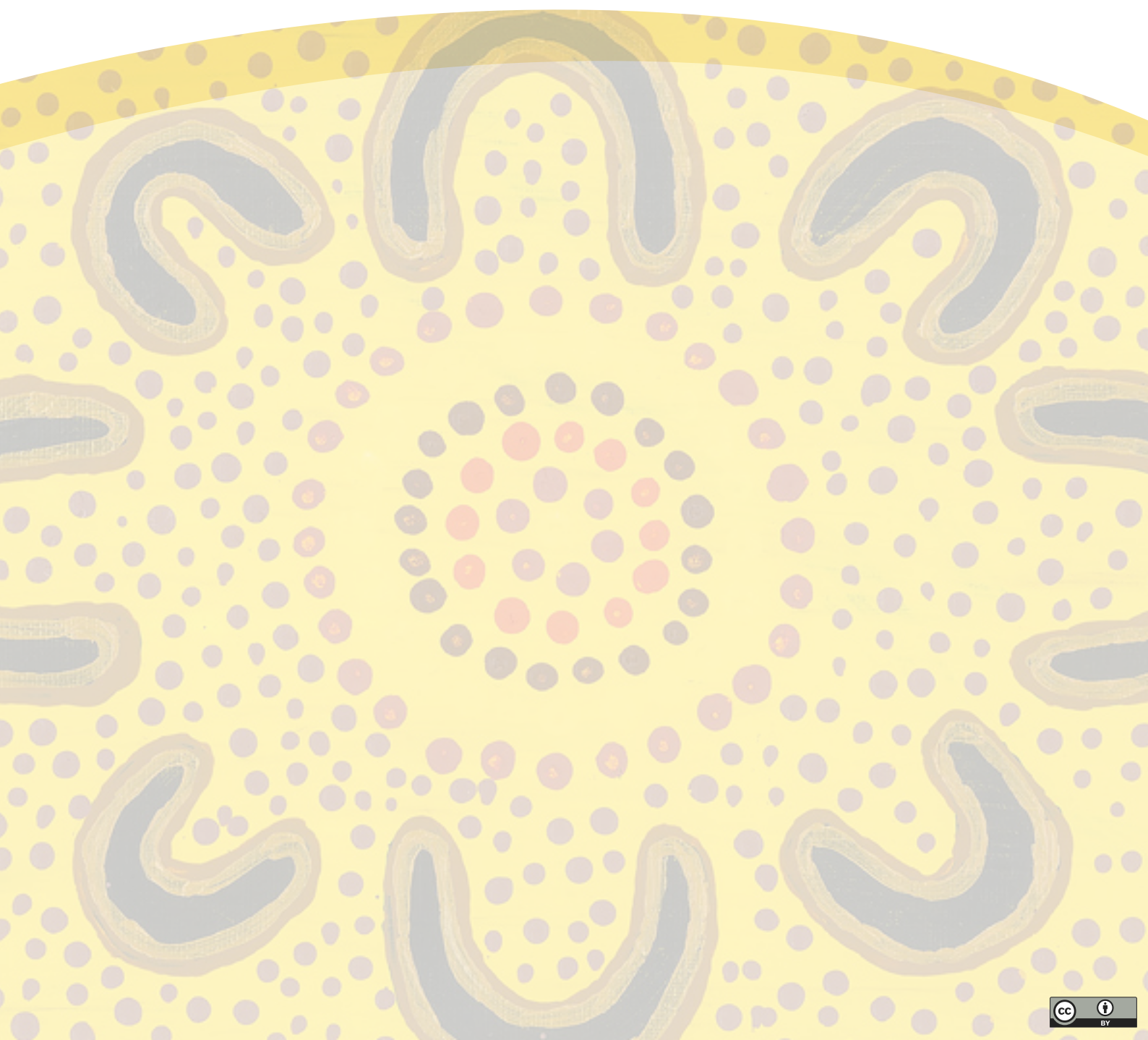
Thirdly, we will better align the school support that is dispersed across central, regional and statewide services, with the teaching and learning work of schools. This will make it easier for school staff to understand and access the support they need.

## Build the capability of our principals, our teachers and our allied professionals

Education is, at its heart, a people business. Our success in delivering a great education for every public school student depends on the motivation and capability of our staff. This includes staff at every level of our system.

We need dedicated and skilled teaching in every one of our classrooms; we need strong school leaders

who are capable of leading teaching to deliver the most impactful practice; we need the commitment of our allied professionals to contribute to school educational programs; and we need all of our staff who work at the central and regional levels to be capable of providing a supportive environment for our schools to deliver high quality student outcomes.



## Quality of teaching

There is unequivocal evidence that the quality of teaching is the critical school variable in raising student outcomes. We also know that teachers improve the effectiveness of their teaching if they work in a school where there is a culture that expects and supports improved teaching practices.

We have good evidence about the key aspects of such a school culture. We know that teachers grow their professional practice and generate improved student outcomes when they teach in a school where there are clear expectations of the teachers in terms of the quality of their practice; where teachers receive feedback about their classroom performance based on evidence; and where there is professional support available in those areas of teacher need.

Schools where teachers work collaboratively have also been shown to deliver improved student outcomes, provided they focus on understanding and using student achievement data and examining the impact of different teaching strategies on student progress.

Our strategies for improved teaching effectiveness in the future will therefore focus, not only on the individual teacher, but also on the school and how the school leaders can build a culture that supports the professional growth of teachers.

As well as maximising the teaching expertise that exists within schools, the system will also provide specialist support services to ensure that all teachers have the capability to deliver evidence based practices in their classroom.

Teachers are not the only part of our workforce who have an important role to play in the success of students. Students benefit from all of those who work in schools and across our State and we have employees who are changing the lives of students in classrooms each and every day. Throughout our strategic directions they are referred to as allied professionals, rather than support staff, as this more adequately reflects the value of their skillset and the contribution they make.

## School leadership

School leadership has always been an important factor in determining school effectiveness, but as schools have been given greater autonomy, the quality of leadership becomes even more critical.

That is why we are embarking on the implementation of the most comprehensive leadership strategy we have ever had. The strategy is the result of widespread consultation with school leaders and other stakeholders and has been designed to get our most capable people into leadership positions and to support them once they are there.

In the years ahead we will develop a new high potential leaders program, revamp our selection processes so that those appointed best match the personal and professional profile for leadership success, and implement new development programs that will enable each school leader to access the kind of professional learning they need to deliver improved student outcomes in their particular context.

## School improvement

Our approach is predicated on the understanding that real, sustained improvement cannot be imposed on schools. Driving people to do better through central prescription and demands for compliance is not the answer.

Instead, what is required is an approach that activates the professional commitment of staff – one that mobilises their energy and belief that they can make a real difference to their students' lives, and creates a climate where they feel supported and valued as capable professionals.

Improvements within any school happen because the principal and staff are persuaded of the need to make changes and have the initiative, capability and support to do it.

## Support increased school autonomy within a connected and unified public school system

A significant aspect of the improvement strategy in recent years has been the move to shift more decisions to the local level and to empower principals and their staff to act with greater authority and responsibility for the success of their school. This policy of greater school autonomy has been widely supported and will continue to be an important part of the system improvement agenda.

### A unified public school system

As with most successful reforms, the benefits also come with some challenges. In the case of increased school autonomy, our challenge is to ensure that schools do not operate in isolation or in competition with each other. There is a risk that, as schools become more autonomous, school staff can feel separated and disconnected from the collective purpose of the public school system and the responsibilities schools have to each other.

School staff need to feel that they belong not only to their school, but also to the public school system. All staff need to be confident that the public school system stands for something fundamentally important and that individual schools are supported by the system. We are a single public school system and while each school must have the flexibility to respond to its unique context, all schools should operate within the same governance, accountability and support structures.

The glue that makes public schooling one system rather than simply a collection of individual schools is not central policies, it is not having common procedures that everyone must follow, it is that the staff in every public school are engaged in the common pursuit of delivering a great education to every Western Australian child enrolled in one of our schools.

### Principals' performance and development

One of the practical ways of reinforcing the notion of a unified school system is to have the same line management structure for all principals. In the future, all principals will have an agreement between them, the school council/board chair and the Director General. As a school performance accountability mechanism this has worked successfully with the current Independent Public School principals and will be extended to all principals.

Every principal also has a right to receive timely ongoing performance feedback and support for improvement. The new collegiate principal role will meet that need. Principals will be accountable to the Director General, but will receive ongoing face-to-face feedback and support from a highly credentialed colleague who will come to understand the context of the school, its challenges and the leadership support needs of the principal.

A review of the principal's performance will be undertaken as part of the school review process. The outcome of the principal review will be made available to the Director General independently of the school review report.



### **School review**

While different school review models have been applied in the past, there will now be a single review process for all schools. The school review process will privilege school self-assessment as the basis for improvement recommendations, and differentiated support, and length of review cycles. When significant issues are identified there will be scope for commissioned reviews to be undertaken. These reviews will maintain the focus on school self-assessment, aligned to system level support they need to put them back on track to improved effectiveness. We will clarify for school staff the standards against which judgements are made. Reviews need to be robust and fair.

### **Regions**

Regions will continue to play an important school support role. Regional leaders will also continue to play a critical system leadership role. They will be pivotal players in leadership development, identification of those with leadership potential, and supporting principals and schools identified as in need of support.

As the Department senior officers they will be key in contributing to and shaping place-based initiatives with other government agencies and stakeholders. This is in addition to the traditional role they have played in incident management, management of grievances and complaints, and acting with the authority of the Director General when required.

By understanding the student achievement challenges of their region the regional leaders will be able to channel the system support resources to where they are most needed.

### **System leadership**

The school autonomy reforms of recent years have, as well as benefiting schools, had a significant impact on the culture of the organisation and the relationship between schools and central, regional and statewide services. Principals have not only accepted greater responsibility for their school's performance but are now also playing a leadership role in relation to the improvement of the whole system.

It has placed principals, as senior educational leaders in the system, in a position of influence over the implementation of major policies and programs and we will extend this further in future years.



## Partner with families, communities and agencies to support the educational engagement of every student

School staff have always engaged with families to better understand the interests, personalities and needs of their children. This is best started before children are old enough to enrol so that families can share the knowledge that they, and early years educators, have about child development and learning.

It is also true that throughout a child's schooling, issues that arise will always be more productively resolved if the family already has a strong connection to the school.

Some of the challenges school staff face originate outside the school gate and, despite their best efforts, cannot be solved by educators alone. Schools face the challenge of more and more students at younger and younger ages coming to school with a range of learning, social adjustment and mental health issues.

Part of the solution is to bring a range of other services to bear to assist the children and their families that need specialist support services that schools cannot provide. Working in partnership with other government agencies and support services remains an important goal for school staff at the local level, for regionally based staff and for central service leaders.

When we have developed an integrated approach across agencies it has delivered real benefits for our students, and this should encourage us to strengthen these relationships in the future. There is no doubt that this has been one of our most pressing challenges. However, our work as educators will be facilitated if we can find better strategies to engage outside agencies to work alongside us to better meet the needs of the children and families we serve. It is important work for the future.

Culturally responsive schools draw on the diversity and strengths of local communities to create opportunities to work collaboratively with them to set directions for students. Building mutually respectful relationships with each local community is fundamental to this.

## Use evidence to drive decision-making at all levels of the system

Large amounts of data are currently gathered by teachers, principals and by staff across the various central service business areas. The important consideration for the future is not so much what further data should be collected, but rather how the currently collected data is analysed and used to pinpoint issues, understand challenges, assess impact and re-direct effort.

Teachers have become more proficient in recent years at using data about student achievement to identify those students in their classes who are struggling to meet the standards expected and to identify more effective teaching strategies to ensure that they make progress.

In future we will provide more support to assist school leaders to build collaborative cultures in their school where teachers work together in teams using evidence to examine the impact of their teaching strategies and to share strategies that have the most impact on student achievement. In the schools where this currently happens, teachers hold each other accountable and take collective responsibility for student progress.

NAPLAN results will remain an important measure of success at the class, school and system level, but schools should not be judged on one set of test results alone. Schools have broader purposes than a single set of tests can measure, so we will continue to value teacher judgments and work to develop other measures that better capture the range of outcomes that schools achieve, especially in the areas of student wellbeing and new work skills.

An important system responsibility is to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and policies to ensure they are having the intended impact and, if not, to make whatever adjustments are required. In the future the capacity of the system to undertake evaluations and reviews will be enhanced.

A further system use of evidence will be the gathering of data about staff perceptions through a periodic staff survey. It is important that those in leadership positions understand the concerns of staff so they can act to address issues that are hindering them from giving their best.



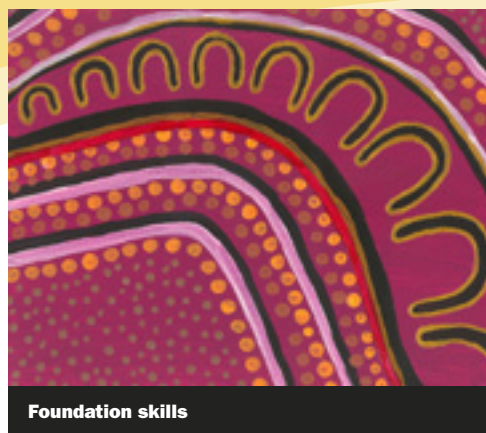
## Conclusion

The Western Australian public school system is in a strong position to address the challenges and opportunities before us. We can build on our success by increasing the system support for teaching and learning excellence in every classroom, acting in ways that build the motivation and capability of our staff, using evidence to inform our improvement efforts, strengthening the connectedness of all schools to the public school system, and enlisting the support of families and key players outside the school to support its work.

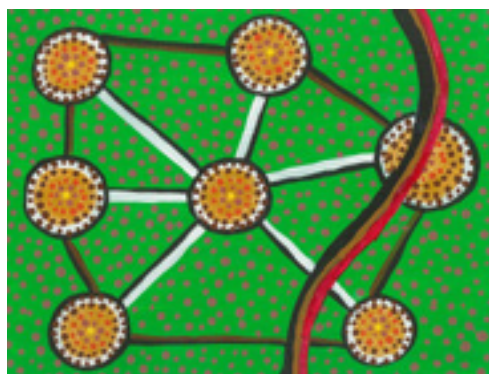
Implementing these strategies in the years ahead will enable us to achieve our objective of providing every student who attends one of our schools with a pathway to a successful future.



Early learning and intervention



Foundation skills



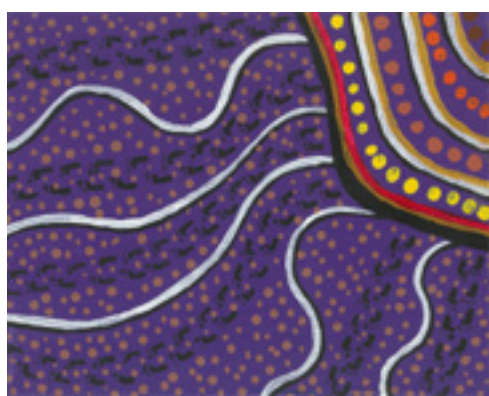
Facilitate connectedness



Students at the centre



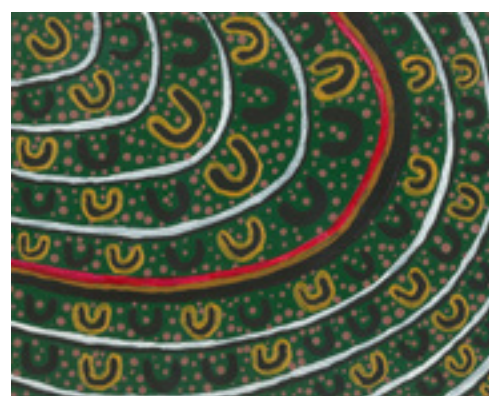
Cultural responsiveness



Meaningful pathways



Enhance capability



Improve conditions for learning

**About the Artist:**

My name is Rosie Paine and I am a Yilka woman from Cosmo Newberry, an Aboriginal community in the north eastern Goldfields of Western Australia. Through my mother I am a proud Noongar/Yamatji woman and through my father I am a proud Wongutha/Ngaanyatjarra woman. I currently work as Principal Consultant with Aboriginal Education Teaching and Learning at Statewide Services.

Explore the story behind the artwork at [education.wa.edu.au/artwork](http://education.wa.edu.au/artwork).