WACSSO SUBMISSION

Response to Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

June 2025

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations pay our respect to Traditional Custodians of the land throughout Australia, recognising their connection to land, water, and sky.

We acknowledge Elders, parents, and families as first educators, sharers of culture, and knowledge. We recognise the significant educational value of cultural knowledge systems for children and young people.

Partnering with Parents since 1921

WACSSO acknowledges parents as the first educators in their child's life. We celebrate and value the diversity of families, recognising the vital role they play in supporting children and young people throughout their learning journeys. In this submission WACSSO uses the word parent to represent the different people who are a child's primary caregiver.

About WACSSO

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school students in Western Australia. For over 100 years, WACSSO has provided services and representation at State and National levels, and our current membership includes more than 660 P&Cs. WACSSO is primarily a volunteer organisation made up of a President and State Councillors (representatives) from geographically based electorates. As such, the organisation has a wide representative reach across the State. WACSSO uses our strong networks with parents, carers and stakeholders in public education to inform our advocacy efforts.

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Introduction

Physical, cultural and emotional safety are key to the WACSSO vision for Western Australian schools to provide world-leading education to every student. Included in the need for safety is the expectation that students will be emotionally and physically safe and secure in their school environment, free from abuse, bullying, harassment, and undue risks, and that the school's duty of care guidelines include programs and strategies for controlling bullying and assault.

For parents, knowing that you are sending your child to a school that provides a safe and welcoming environment is critical. All parents understand that issues relating to bullying can arise at school, no matter where the school is located. The important factor for parents is how schools respond when bullying occurs. Prompt, appropriate, effective and trusted processes must be in place to respond to bullying if and when it occurs. When these systems are established, clearly communicated and understood by students, families, teachers, and the broader school community, our schools will be safer learning and workplace environments for all.

This submission was informed by the experiences of Western Australian parents of children attending public schools, Parents and Citizen Associations (P&Cs) and school communities. In preparation for this submission, WACSSO has surveyed members and made use of our extensive network of State Councillors, located across Western Australia, who provide grassroots feedback on the experience of public school parents.

The effectiveness of bullying and behaviour management policies in schools hinges significantly on a shared understanding of what bullying is, the impact it can have to victims, and the short and long-term effects in school communities. Importantly, addressing bullying requires a comprehensive approach which will only be effective if it is resourced appropriately.

WACSSO hopes this inquiry will critically examine the language used to describe bullying and provide clear guidelines that encompass the full spectrum of behaviours—ranging from low to medium and high-level incidents. We emphasise that many behaviours classified as medium to high-level bullying in schools—such as assault, stalking, abuse, intimidation, and vandalism— would carry significantly stronger consequences in adult settings. These actions can cause serious physical and psychological harm to both child and adult victims and should be recognised and addressed with the seriousness they warrant.

WACSSO acknowledges the additional complexities that arise when working with children and young people in response to medium and high-level bullying behaviours in school environments. Addressing such behaviours requires tailored, sustained support not only for victims, but also for the students displaying these behaviours, with a focus on intervention, education, and behavioural change. Schools and families must be provided with appropriate resources and expert support to ensure successful outcomes.

WACSSO is pleased to participate in this Review and will be providing feedback to the Federal Department of Education regarding a national standard for responding to bullying.

Policies that are effective and student participation in policy development

The overwhelming factor that determines the success of bullying and behaviour management policies in schools is a shared understanding of what constitutes as bullying - its forms, its impact on victims, and the consequences of such behaviour. This includes recognising the short- and long-term effects on school communities and ensuring adequate resources are in place to support a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to prevention and response. It also includes the recognition that bullying happens both in real life and online during the school day, and policies need to be responsive to all contexts in which bullying can occur.

Clear communication of bullying policies to all members of the school community – parents, students and staff is critical. Alongside communication, parents report that consistent application of policies is also essential to success. Addressing issues early was also raised as a crucial factor by parents surveyed – when behaviour is permitted to continue or is not identified and responded to swiftly, the negative effects of bullying behaviour are compounded. A zero-tolerance approach is best. Some parents added that success depends on an accepted standard of behaviour that extends beyond the school gates, with the community embracing and reinforcing positive behaviour in all its members. The consistent feedback from parents regarding success factors for bullying processes and policies in schools was that a well-resourced, clearly understood, whole-of-community approach is needed.

Regarding specific programs, in the experience of parents, programs that are embedded into all aspects of the school culture (rather than being reactively applied) are effective in addressing bullying. Examples include the BeYou program, the Positive Behaviour Support model and the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program, the latter highlighted by parents as successful due to its focus on early intervention. Others surveyed highlighted the effectiveness of external guest speakers who cover the topic of bullying. Programs that clearly address the actions of the bullying behaviour and the impact this behaviour has on the victim/s are the most effective (these programs are typically simple and structured in addressing accountability and consequences, are consistently applied and easy for students and families to understand).

While schools in Western Australia have access to a wide range of anti-bullying programs, there remains a critical need for greater oversight and consistency in how these programs are assessed for quality, evidence-based practice, and overall effectiveness. The availability of choice is important, but without a robust framework that allows Principals to evaluate whether a program is suitable for their school community, and best placed to achieve meaningful outcomes, there is a risk of investing in expensive initiatives that lack rigour or long-term impact. Parents express frustration when schools constantly introduce new programs that feel more like events, than clear and consistent bullying prevention strategies.

WACSSO also understands that the implementation of Good Standing Policies that support Behaviour Management Policies and Codes of Conduct are useful. Most schools have a Student Code of Conduct; the introduction and communication of a Parent Code of Conduct and a Staff Code of Conduct have also been positive in some school communities.

Regarding student participation in policy review, implementation or development, our affiliates report that this does occur (particularly in high schools) with student councillors being able to take an active role, and some schools issuing surveys to students on the topic of bullying. Providing the feedback of students is taken seriously and informs the development of policies and procedures, engaging students in the development of school responses to bullying can be a positive experience.

Policies that are not working

In our survey and in feedback received from our network of State Councillors, affiliates highlighted that restorative justice processes often don't align with needs of neurodiverse students, and students or parents who have experienced trauma. In these cases, the victims of bullying behaviour do not know or understand how they will be kept safe. Parents also report that processes such as encouraging friendships or relationship-building between students involved in bullying (the bully and the victim) still occur in schools, and are largely ineffective. Parents further describe to WACSSO the importance of whole-school and whole-community approaches to bullying; solutions and supports that are left solely up to the teacher to implement and manage are not effective. Managing bullying only at the local (classroom) level is extremely hard to do well whilst teaching an entire class, and ignores the fact that students spend time outside of the classroom (for example, in specialist classes and in recreation areas while on breaks). Parents continue to disclose that children who report bullying are not immediately believed, or their concerns responded to, or that victim blaming occurs in their school, all of which compounds the issue and is damaging to the children involved.

Consistently, parents reported that whatever program or policy is introduced, longevity needs to be ascribed – frequent changes to the school's response to bullying behaviour is confusing and ineffective. Parents also reported that bundling contributing factors together (for example, absenteeism, trauma, mental health and wellbeing) and dealing with them all under a behaviour management policy or process is not effective; there are different contributing factors to, and outcomes of, each of these behaviours and they should be addressed separately, according to the parents WACSSO surveyed.

What changes are needed to improve bullying prevention and response?

WACSSO advocates for funding at the State Department of Education level to establish appropriate inter-disciplinary teams in all schools (within student services or student support hubs). These teams need to employ evidence-based approaches and practices that are trauma-informed and clearly communicated and understood by the whole school community (staff, students and parents). The benefit of an inter-disciplinary team is that it frees up the time of school psychologists, who may not be needed for the implementation of bullying policies; intervention can be successfully done by youth and social workers. WACSSO understands that State Departments want to minimise 'accidental counselling' by teachers who are often not trained in this practice – this means an inter-disciplinary team located within a student hub or services office is even more important.

From an education system approach, WACSSO asserts that schools sit at the heart of communities, but they are not the only touchpoint for young people and families. Violence, disruption and negative forces to wellbeing that occur outside of school also influence the actions and behaviours of bullies. To overcome these challenges, broader societal reform and interventions are needed, with funding made available to invest in families facing these challenges. This will likely require cross-sector approaches, for example greater collaboration between State Departments of Health and Education. Additionally, parents do not always feel empowered to be able to support their child if they are bullied or equipped help their child learn protective skills like resilience. Greater access to parenting programs and/or interventions could help in this area.

Visible displays of expected behaviour, and repercussions for bullying (such as posters around the school and in classrooms) was one suggestion from one affiliate. Others reinforced the need for consistent application of processes and policies, transparent and clear explanations of expectations to all stakeholders and more funding invested in early intervention programs. A safe space for children to speak up, and reassurance that they will be heard and their concerns acted on was a common theme in the feedback we received from parents, and parents reinforced the need for a partnership approach; the school and parents need to work in tandem to achieve positive outcomes and change in this area. As well as a safe space for those experiencing bullying, normalising talking about why a child might be feeling angry or are drawn to bullying behaviour would be helpful – a safe space for children who are feeling anger and rage to come and talk through their feelings before they escalate. Naturally, rapid access to school psychologists and wellbeing officers is essential, and a point raised by WACSSO in a number of other submissions.

The question of duty of care after the school siren rings, but before the child arrives home has been raised to WACSSO on numerous occasions. For example, if bullying is occurring on busses, or at bus stops, online, or while children are waiting to be collected by parents at the end of the day. The protective and reporting actions children can take if they experience bullying during this period need to be considered by any future national standard.

What do you think the underlying causes of bullying in schools are?

Our children and young people today are navigating an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. Many face significant challenges in their home and personal lives that can deeply affect their emotional wellbeing and behaviour. While these factors never excuse bullying, they often contribute to poor decision-making and the emergence of inappropriate behaviours in the school environment. Students experiencing instability require more than disciplinary action—they need targeted interventions, early support, and access to wraparound services that address the root causes of their behaviour. Importantly, schools cannot and should not be expected to manage these challenges alone. A coordinated, multi-agency approach is essential to ensure that children and their families are supported.

Parents responding to our survey expressed deep concern about the increasingly complex and unregulated environments in which children are growing up—environments that can contribute directly to bullying behaviours. Increased unsupervised time online, time-poor parenting, inconsistent boundaries, and heightened exposure to complex and sometimes violent behaviours in classrooms are all factors that can lead children to be both victims and perpetrators of bullying.

Children are being raised in a digital world where, without adequate guidance, they are frequently exposed to inappropriate, harmful, and highly desensitising content at a young age—through social media platforms, gaming environments, and internet use more broadly. It is in this environment, too, that bullying experienced at school can be extended in the form of cyberbullying, with significantly negative impacts for the young people targeted. The repeated exposure to harmful content can distort a young person's understanding of what is acceptable and respectful behaviour, blurring the lines between online and real-world conduct. The eSafety Commissioner has repeatedly highlighted these risks, including the growing normalisation of online abuse and the significant increase in cyberbullying incidents, a high proportion of which affects children.

Parents, schools, and broader support networks must be equipped and resourced to help children and young people navigate this digital landscape. The current lack of digital supervision, combined with easy access to violent or harmful content, is contributing to desensitisation, reduced empathy, and a significant rise in antisocial and bullying behaviour among school-aged children.

Crucially, children do not learn in isolation. They watch the behaviour of adults around them—online and offline—and model what they see. When adults engage in toxic online behaviour, share violent content, or fail to model respectful communication, children absorb and replicate these norms. This underscores the need for a whole-of-community approach to fostering respectful, safe environments both in and outside of school.

Parents also report that, in their experience, students who bully are often compensating or deflecting the attention from themselves. This could be a nod to the 'tall poppy syndrome' that continues to feature in Australian society. For example, a child who may be struggling with literacy will bully those around them who they perceive to have strength in areas of their own deficit, seeking to highlight or create a weakness. An education system sufficiently resourced to enable each student to achieve their full potential would help address this issue. This is an area WACSSO has advocated on strongly, over many years, and in a number of submissions and election position papers.

Those responding to the survey again highlighted a lack of consistent application of responses to bullying (in some cases, it was perceived there were no consequences in place for bullies in the school) and a lack of clarity on how and where to report bullying incidents led to an increase simply because bullying events were not being responded to and therefore children felt the behaviour was acceptable or they could 'get away with it.'

What resources are available for school staff to support action on bullying? What else would help build capability to support staff to prevent and manage bullying?

Staff Development Days should include keynote speakers who cover this topic. These speakers could include experts in evidence-based responses to bullying, or people with lived experience who cover the impact of bullying on young people. Staff could also be provided with the opportunity to visit "buddy schools" for the purpose of learning what works in their context, and to swap ideas.

What resources are available for school staff to support action on bullying? What else would help build capability to support staff to prevent and manage bullying?

A national standard needs to introduce equality in each school regarding policies; policies aligned across the public school system would ensure that every school is on the same page. Aligned policies would also reduce confusion for those staff, students and parents who attend more than one school, or transfer to different schools across the period of their education.

What reporting is in place to support action on bullying?

Most parents who responded to our survey indicated that the reporting process for those who experience bullying is unclear – they did not know where to go to report incidents. For those who did have a process, it was first and foremost via the classroom teacher, which naturally places additional strain on staff who are already under-resourced. Only a small number of parents responded that the reporting process includes escalation to school administration or leadership, and of those who did there was a general sense that resultant activity was very limited. In summary, the reporting process needs considerable review and investment according to parents. Regarding support for those bullied, this appears to be the purview of school psychologists, councillors and student services staff. Again, parents who reported these avenues of support highlighted how under-funded these services are at Western Australian schools, and that the load they are expected to handle is unsustainable.

Some parents report the positive influence of the Good Standing Policy in schools. Good Standing is granted and assumed for all students at the start of the year, and it can be removed if negative behaviour occurs. Removal of good standing results in certain outcomes, such as the child not being able to attend camps and excursions. When lost for severe behaviour, such as bullying, good standing can only be reinstated following consultation with parents and the development and implementation of an effective Behaviour Management Plan.

In previous submissions, and in our State and Federal Position Papers, WACSSO highlighted the essential nature of student wellbeing when it comes to student success; enabling positive wellbeing has a favourable impact on learning outcomes and sets students up for success as young adults. The significant rise in mental health concerns for young people has been raised by our affiliates time and again when calling for feedback on what concerns the modern parent. These concerns are backed by research and an understanding that young people today need access to a range of services and resources at school to assist with positive wellbeing, including how to recover following an incident of bullying and how to get support and access education if you have been found to have bullied.

What guiding principles or other elements could be helpful in developing a consistent national standard for responding to bullying?

WACSSO asserts that the values of respect, inclusion, collaboration, and accountability are essential to this work and should underpin the national standard. Additionally, when national approaches to bullying are selected for implementation, parents are calling for these to be evidence-based and consistently applied. Along with the values of respect, inclusion, collaboration and accountability, WACSSO recommends strong family engagement be a guiding principle for this national standard. In our experience, schools that work to create strong family engagement cultures, where parents are informed of and contribute to the school's behaviour (and other) policies, create powerful partnerships. An outcome of this partnership approach is parents better supporting students to adhere to school policies and (in the example of behaviour management policies) take responsibility for their actions. Additionally, this partnership model leads to a shared understanding not only of expectations, but also terminology. Shared understanding of terminology related to behaviour leads to consistent messaging at home and at school, supporting the efforts of teachers to maintain a positive classroom climate.

WACSSO further asserts that feeling safe at school is essential to student success. The effects of high and medium-level aggression and violence negatively impact students, staff and families. It is unreasonable to expect that a student can learn well when they feel anxious or unsafe at school. Equally, it is unreasonable to expect a teacher to perform well when they feel anxious or unsafe in their work environment. Feeling safe at school, therefore, must be a guiding principle that informs any standards that respond to bullying.

While it was not mentioned directly in our survey, WACSSO recommends that a national response should address bullying across the various levels of the school environment, that is, not be limited to bullying between students. A clear approach and escalation process for parents to raise concerns if they are being bullied by school staff, or observe bullying within staff or parent groups should be established at schools. Children will learn and mirror behaviour of adults, so addressing and responding to bullying wherever it occurs on school grounds is important for a whole-of-community approach to be successful.

Finally, throughout the process of considering, selecting and implementing a national standard in response to bullying, parents assert that clear communication must be an underlying principle. Clear communication with the full school community (staff, students and parents) will generate awareness and buy-in. Communication as an underpinning principle for this standard must extend to respect for when students speak up about bullying; priority must be given to hearing and responding to the reports from children who speak up.

WACSSO commends the Review Panel on the collaborative process used to solicit feedback on both the current state in schools, and recommendations for a future state, with regards to the experience of bullying by parents, staff and students. WACSSO and our affiliates encourage those developing the national standard to seek input from individuals (parents, students, education staff) who have first-hand knowledge and experience of the impact of bullying throughout the process (review, standards design, implementation and any future reviews).

In closing, WACSSO reinforces that any standard seeking to address bullying should not be limited in scope by defining bullying as a school-only problem. When other government departments fail to deliver essential social services, whether in housing, health, child protection, or law enforcement, the consequences are felt most acutely in our schools. These service gaps do not disappear; they are absorbed by school communities, placing an unsustainable burden on educators and significantly reducing schools' capacity to focus on their core purpose: delivering quality education. WACSSO strongly reiterates that addressing bullying and violence in our school, and in society more broadly, requires a coordinated, multi-agency approach underpinned by a culture of genuine partnership. This must include meaningful family engagement and comprehensive support systems that ensure no school is left to carry these complex social challenges alone.

WACSSO