

From: Launceston College Student Representative Council
To: House of Assembly- GAA
Subject: Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination in Tasmanian Schools
Date: 30.08.2024

Dear Committee Secretary,

As student representatives of Launceston College, the largest Year 11-12 college in Tasmania, we engage with our peers from a wide range of backgrounds, from public, Catholic and other independent schools, who have raised a number of issues and possible solutions around bullying and discrimination with us.

Firstly, in some schools there is “an assumption that behaviour is okay,” because students are not made adequately aware of reporting and support measures put in place to address their concerns and experiences. Students have reported raising concerns around bullying with their teachers, who either did not have the time or resources to follow up the concerns. This problem is particularly pronounced in public schools, which continue to be under-resourced.

There are several issues that arise from the lack of processes to address bullying in schools. One student reported that “at my high school, there were some people picking on me and stabbed me in the yard. To sweep it under the rug, the teachers deleted the camera footage [of the incident].” We are deeply concerned that teachers may be dodging accountability for student bullying getting out of hand.

We further note that many teachers do not receive comprehensive behaviour management training or conflict resolution training to handle violent or discriminatory situations in the classroom.

Additionally, we note that we have students at Launceston College who left Catholic schools due to discrimination and a lack of support for their gender and sexual identities.

LGBTQIA+ discrimination has also been an issue within our own schools. In two separate instances, on days organised to celebrate LGBTQIA+ inclusion and awareness, the displayed Pride flags were torn down. On one occasion, it was defiled and shoved into a toilet by a student overtly motivated by transphobia.

Instances such as these send a message that LGBTQIA+ students are not welcome or respected by their peers. It makes students feel less safe to express themselves or want to be at school at all.

We believe that bullying and harassment is one of the driving factors behind a lack of attendance at schools.

We note that a lack of safe spaces in some schools is having an impact on LGBTQIA+ students, as well as other students experiencing bullying and discrimination.

We further note that a safe, supportive and inclusive environment is a requisite for engagement in learning and of academic performance. Therefore, improving the culture and processes around bullying and discrimination is essential if the Year 12 attainment rate is to be raised, or if our schools’ literacy and numeracy standards are to be raised.

From this body of experience, the Launceston College Student Representative Council would like to propose a number of solutions to support our peers across all schools in Tasmania, into the future.

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Firstly, we would encourage the need for security camera evidence to be accessible to staff members to verify misconduct by students. This would ensure that students are able to be held accountable for bullying and victims of this behaviour will not have their experiences “swept under the rug” or invalidated.

Secondly, we acknowledge that there is a lack of desire and resources to punish students with internal suspensions, as it can detract from their educational experience, or because sufficient resources to facilitate these measures are not available. We stress the need to make sure schools are well-resourced with teacher aides, senior-staff and spaces where internal suspensions can be facilitated. When the perpetrators of severe bullying and discrimination cannot be removed from classrooms, it is the victims of bullying and discrimination who bear the consequences of continuing to feel unsafe, and commonly, reducing their attendance in order to avoid further harassment.

In relation to this, we commend the widespread implementation of restorative practices around the state. However, we note that they are often applied in inappropriate circumstances that further put the victim at risk. There are many cases of restorative practices where the perpetrator of bullying or harassment is unwilling to learn from the impact on their victim. There are also cases where the victim finds it unfair to participate in a restorative practice after they have experienced significant distress already. This is particularly the case for racist and other discriminatory abuse. We do not think it is appropriate for victims of this behaviour to have to continuously engage with or empathise with its perpetrators. In order to protect victims, we stress the need for other disciplinary measures that adequately protect victims.

Teachers also need far more support in order to competently facilitate this process. Brooks High School, for example, has on-call support available to teachers to assist with deescalating bullying and harassment in classrooms, and quickly and effectively dealing with it.

Furthermore, ensuring teachers are given consistent, ongoing professional development about managing and responding to bullying and discrimination is also vital, and we firmly believe that teachers do not currently have enough support in this area.

Another crucial measure to combat bullying and discrimination is the increased employment of dedicated support officers, to address the underlying causes of bullying, which is often neglect and trauma in the home. Supporting vulnerable students with their mental health and coping strategies in schools is a vital step to preventing bullying before it happens.

Some public high schools have a dedicated safe space for students to go during breaktimes and classes when they feel unsafe, need learning support, would like to speak to a nurse, chaplain or social worker or to connect with peers with similar experiences. Riverside High School’s Care Centre is an excellent example, with support staff supervising the room, and resources including fidget toys, games and books, all of which promote healthy coping strategies to prevent bullying behaviour as well as support victims of bullying with a safe space.

Another of our students noted that school staff must be aware of the scope of responsibility they have when ensuring their students are safe. For example, schools have jurisdiction when bullying happens online and out of hours, but seem to be reluctant to follow up on instances of this misconduct. Ensuring that students are also made aware of the scope of situations that their schools can help with would also make students more safe.

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An ongoing solution to bullying and harassment is education. For example, delivering programs about resilience and mental health is a positive step in high schools. However, in Year 11/12 colleges, much of this pastoral focus is lost. Continuing the delivery of these support programs in students' home group time could be a positive step.

Additionally, many students would benefit from ongoing education about the consequences of behaviour if dealt with outside school. Facilitating positive interactions between students and members of the police force would encourage students to take responsibility for their actions in a legal context, as well as ensuring that students view law enforcement members in a positive light, as people available to support them and the community.

On behalf of all Launceston College students, we hope that these experiences and proposed solutions will assist in the review and development of consistent and effective programs to prevent and manage bullying, discrimination and harassment in schools.

Sincerely,

Launceston College Student Representatives