Submission to the Tasmanian Government Parliamentary Inquiry on Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools

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Introduction

The Tasmanian Principals Association (TPA) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the parliamentary inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. This submission represents the collective insights and experiences of government school principals across Tasmania, addressing the inquiry's terms of reference.

Scope of the Problem

Discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools are pervasive issues that affect both students and staff. These issues manifest in various forms, including but not limited to race, gender, sexuality, disability, and socio-economic status. The impacts are extensive, affecting learning outcomes, mental health, workplace safety, and the overall school environment.

The TPA have used the accepted national definition of bullying outlined by the Federal Government. Bullying is an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power, or perceived power, over one or more persons who feel unable to stop it from happening.

Direct and Indirect Discrimination, Prohibited Conduct, Unequal and Disadvantageous Treatment, Bullying, and Harassment

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Factors Contributing to Bullying

In light of the national definition that details examples of, and the intent of bullying behaviour, TPA members were asked to identify factors that contribute to bullying among students with the three most common themes below:

1. **Social Media Influence**: The pervasive use of social media, particularly outside school hours, exacerbates bullying by providing a platform for continuous and often anonymous harassment. Social media misuse outside of school can intrude into the school environment, making it difficult for schools to manage.

2. **Family Dynamics and Home Life**: Family feuds, parental pressure, and a lack of family or community pro-social skills contribute significantly to bullying behaviors. A student's home life and personal disposition can impact their interactions with peers.

3. **Cultural and Value Differences**: A lack of understanding of diversity and differences in values between students and societal values can lead to conflicts. Misalignments between student values and school values, as well as parental attitudes, can contribute to bullying.

Degree (frequency/intensity) of Bullying Experienced by Students

As detailed by *Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group (2015)* 'There is no single 'student population' prevalence rate for bullying that can be used across contexts with confidence. All research on this topic includes cautions and limitations about the use of prevalence figures.'

TPA members reported low levels of bullying of students in their schools/colleges with an average of 2.5 on a 1- low to 10-high scale. This indicates that from the perspectives of principals that bullying, as interpreted by the definition, is experienced by a small percentage of students at levels relative to or less than the general population. It's important to acknowledge that every public education school leader is committed to positively supporting the wellbeing of young people in their care.

It should be acknowledged that DECYP's annual Student Wellbeing & Engagement Survey captures the perspectives of students from years 4-12. Responses to an absence of bullying (physical, verbal, social, cyber) showed that 13% of students reported low wellbeing averaged across these areas. We would encourage student perspectives to be explored further by the Parliamentary Inquiry with a deeper understanding of these datasets from a Tasmanian context, particularly in investigating longitudinal trends and the age and demographics where higher or lower rates are reported by students.

Measures to Prevent and Remedy Discrimination and Bullying

1. **Whole-School Approach**: Engaging all stakeholders—students, staff, parents, and the community—in creating a positive, inclusive school culture.

2. **Policy Implementation**: Ensuring all schools rigorously implement the Department of Education's policies on anti-bullying and anti-discrimination.

3. **Professional Development**: Regular, comprehensive training for all staff on recognizing, preventing, and addressing discrimination and bullying.

4. **Support Services**: Enhancing access to counselors, psychologists, and support staff trained to handle incidents of bullying and discrimination.

5. **Restorative Practices**: Integrating restorative practices to resolve conflicts and repair harm, emphasizing accountability and reconciliation over punitive measures.

Effective Suggestions and Strategies to Prevent and Remedy Bullying

Based on the responses from Tasmanian school principals, the following strategies have been identified as effective in preventing and remedying bullying among students:

1. **Relationship Education and Social Skills Training**: Implementing programs that teach relationship education and social skills, along with resources to support restorative practices.

2. **School Values and Celebrations**: Conducting weekly whole-school assemblies that focus on school values, complemented by lessons that demonstrate these values in action. Opportunities that embed this language and understanding in to the wider community.

3. **Promoting Positive Behaviors**: Actively promoting positive and expected behaviors while reinforcing these behaviors as integral to student wellbeing and learning. This includes tight behavior management processes and direct parental engagement.

4. **Respectful Relationships and Restorative Practices**: Focusing on respectful relationships and utilizing restorative practices to address conflicts. Encouraging problem-solving conversations and open communication with parents.

5. **Monitoring and Educating About Social Media**: Monitoring students' social media usage and educating both students and parents about responsible online behavior and the potential impacts of social media misuse.

6. **Create Time & Space for Teaching of Social Skills**: Providing additional resources to support the understanding and acceptance of diversity, reducing the crowded curriculum to allow for targeted teaching of social skills, and offering alternatives during recess and lunch such as support rooms, clubs, and activities.

7. **Building a Safe and Inclusive Culture**: Teaching positive pro-social skills, emphasizing school and Department values, fostering openness in communication with families, and building a culture where every child feels valued and safe to talk to caring adults.

Obligations and Duties Under Relevant Statutes and Policies

1. **Anti-Discrimination Act 1998**: Schools must adhere to the requirements of this Act, ensuring that all forms of discrimination and harassment are prohibited and addressed.

2. **Disability Discrimination Act 1992**: makes it unlawful for school leaders to discriminate against a person, in many areas of public life, including employment, education, getting or using services because of their disability.

3. **Other Relevant Statutes and Policies**: Including the Education Act, Workplace Health and Safety Act, and the DECYP's policies on student and staff welfare.

School leaders in public education are proud of and celebrate the fact that our public schools reflect the diversity of broader society. This is the essence and point of difference of public education in our state, and the understanding and implementation of the relevant Acts is central to the values of the Department.

TPA members reported high levels of their ability to meet legislative requirements for our workforce regarding Disability and Antidiscrimation Acts with an average of 7.8 on a 1- low to 10-high scale. This indicates that from the perspectives of principals that the policies and legislation that we are required to follow are understood and underpin our ability to lead an inclusive workforce.

Interesting to note, responses varied from 1 through to 10, indicating significant variability in experiences from principals. It may be worthwhile for this to be explored further by the Parliamentary Inquiry.

Upholding and Adhering to Legislation: Illustrative Examples

Further to the legislated approaches to support and enhance diversity and acceptance that underpins public education in our state, school leaders provided some of the following examples:

1. **Affirming and Acceptance**: Students that have changed school systems have described a sense of genuine respect from staff and their new peer group when formally navigating through gender identity changes that they hadn't experienced in a previous school system. They identified that whilst pride and inclusion groups are one step, the values and daily behaviours that the school is willing to uphold were more significant than any particular event.

2. **Student Agency**: A group of primary students working with the teacher for the deaf initiated a conversation with the principal and communicated what they needed to feel included during school gatherings and in having access to the same levels of information as their peers. They led whole school changes with advice on how staff communicated with large groups, assisted with the use of technology and T-switches to improve the quality of audio to their cochlear and hearing aides, whole school signing greetings for assemblies, a 'signing' choir and generally greater awareness of their communication needs.

3. **Current K-12 Public School Structure:** Students and families had articulated the opportunity to have some choice and agency about school choice as important enablers for their wellbeing. This was particularly pronounced with school transition points (grades 6-7 and 10-11) where geographical location allowed. The change to a high school or college was described by students as particularly enhancing their sense of acceptance and community, with college wellbeing data being a data point that could correlate with this.

4. **Messaging Matches Actions** – Public education is for all. Every written and spoken interaction with our community is be befitting of this in-line with legislation. As shared by a principal in a welcome message in a school newsletter: *'A key value for our community is inclusion; this means Everyone Belongs - what a wonderful sentiment! This is a value that we demonstrate every day at our school. We are proud to run a school where the values of acceptance and equity are so embedded in our culture and we are looking forward to celebrating our diversity throughout the year.' This schools student wellbeing, staff and family satisfaction data validates the value that is placed on upholding these expectations.*

We'd strongly encourage the Parliamentary Inquiry to explore further points of reference that celebrate how public education in Tasmania upholds and adheres to legislated requirements under relevant statutes and policies.

Impact on Principals: Illustrative Examples

In addition to the impact on students, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant toll that bullying and harassment can have on school principals. The Australian Catholic University's (ACU) *Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey* has been

conducted annually for more than 12 years and is completed by government and non-government school leaders nationally each year.

The 2023 results were released in March of this year and highlight that

- An alarming 42.6 per cent of school principals triggered a "red flag" email in 2023, signalling risk of self-harm, occupational health problems, or serious impact on their quality of life with Tasmania the only state to see an increase in 'red flags'
- More than half of school leaders (53.9 per cent) reported threats of violence
- Nearly half (48.2 per cent) reported physical violence, up from 44.0 per cent
- Of those reporting physical violence, 96.3 per cent was at the hands of students.
- Threats of violence from parents/caregivers is still high in 2023 at 65.6 per cent

When responding to the TPA survey question asking experiences of bullying from the following groups; students, parents, community members, staff in my team/school/site, or management/leadership, the results highlighted

- All respondents had experienced bullying by parents at some stage in their career
- The highest levels of frequency/intensity of bullying were by parents
- The lowest levels of frequency/intensity of bullying were by students
- The most prevalent frequency was with staff in my team/school/site

Below are summarized examples shared by principals regarding their personal experiences with bullying and harassment in their professional roles:

1. **Parental Harassment Over Policy Decisions**: A principal in consultation with their whole-staff made a decision to cancel camps, which led to months of harassment by a group of unhappy parents. The situation escalated to involve the Legal Services and was discussed at the ministerial level, causing significant stress for the principal.

2. **Threats and Serious Claims**: A principal was subjected to a violent and aggressive parent's threat to get them sacked, followed by a serious code of conduct claim. The principal's mental health was severely impacted, leading to two suicidal episodes. Principals have received verbal, text and social media messages with death threats, threats of violence to approach them in their home or in public.

3. **Media Misrepresentation and Defamation**: A principal was defamed by inappropriate comments on social media and misreported information by media outlets. Despite being offered a facilitated conversation with the parent responsible, this wasn't accepted by the parent.

4. **Destabilising Harassment**: A group of staff and representatives engaged in sustained harassment, including spreading false information, stalking, and encouraging a boycott of the school. This extended ordeal left the principal feeling unsafe, caused significant mental health issues, and undermined the school's culture.

5. **Verbal Abuse and Legal Threats**: A principal was verbally abused by a parent in front of others, threatened with media exposure and legal action, and subjected to defamatory statements on social media.

6. **Physical Assault**: A principal was physically assaulted by a parent, leading to a legal process and causing significant stress for both the principal and their staff.

Proposed Changes to DECYP Practices

(e) Recommendations for Reforms

Based on the experiences and feedback from Tasmanian school principals, the following changes to the Department for Education, Children, and Young People (DECYP) practices are proposed:

1. **Strengthening Confidentiality and Consequences**: Enhance confidentiality in handling complaints and implement stronger consequences for staff who do not fulfill their primary duties, particularly those involved in behaviours not in-line with the Professional Standards or State Services Code of Conduct.

2. **Support for Handling Vexatious Complaints**: Address the issue of vexatious parents by calling out and pushing back against repeated behaviours that demonstrate an imbalance of power. DECYP should consistently back school staff when handling student behaviour issues.

3. **Managing Underperforming Staff**: Implement more robust mechanisms to manage underperforming and poorly behaved staff, allowing principals to maintain a positive and productive work environment and workforce.

4. **Clarifying Roles and Improving Support for Challenging Student Cases**: Clarify the roles within the department to ensure that support is provided at the point of need. Increase allocations of Student Support Leaders in each region to provide leadership support for schools, particularly for managing challenging students and their families. The allocation isn't commensurate with the increased system level accountabilities across the past ten years eg Compulsory Conciliation Conferences, Concern Notices, and the expectation to respond to greater levels of data that we have on student wellbeing and safety.

5. **Reforming the Complaints Process**: Revise the complaints process to provide real support for principals, especially in isolated or rural areas. When a complaint is found to be malicious, there should be a clear process to address its impact, including ongoing support for the affected principal. When it is found that there is no case to answer for the principal and they have acted in line with DECYP expectations, the power remains with the complainant as they can continue to use other means eg ministers, media or Right to Information to pursue and validate their complaint

6. **Timely Response and Education for Parents**: Ensure timely responses from DECYP to requests for support from school staff to prevent escalation of issues. Intensify efforts to educate parents that bullying or threatening staff is unacceptable. Provide more support for senior staff members when they experience internal bullying.

7. **Maintain and Build on Current Practices**: Some principals believe that the current values, policies, and support structures in place provide sufficient direction and should be maintained as they are.

Conclusion

The Tasmanian Principals Association (TPA) encourages the committee to consider these insights and recommendations carefully. The TPA remains committed to working collaboratively with the Tasmanian Government and other stakeholders to create a safer, more inclusive, and supportive educational environment for all.

Signed:

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