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Submission in response to the Tasmanian Government's Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools



Our Watch

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Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is a whole of community issue. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Aboriginal people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch, including the Tasmanian Government.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the culture, behaviours, attitudes, institutions, systems and social structures that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national evidenced-based frameworks, *Change the story* (2nd ed 2021)¹, *Changing the picture* (2018)² and *Changing the landscape* (2022),³ we work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work, and socialise.

Since establishment, one of Our Watch's key focus areas has been developing the evidence base for respectful relationships education. Our Watch has led pilots in secondary and primary schools, worked alongside policy makers, educators, students, school leadership and experts in designing, implementing, and evaluating respectful relationships education across Australia. Through its leadership role in both convening the first National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Group (2017–2020) and chairing the current National Respectful Relationship Expert Working Group (2023-present), Our Watch supports national information sharing, practice coordination and policy development. We provide ongoing advice to the education sector, including state and territory Departments of Education, on what is needed to design and deliver best practice respectful relationships education to stop gender-based violence before it starts.

The Tasmanian Government is a member of Our Watch. In addition, Our Watch and the Tasmanian Government have a specific partnership focused on support for primary prevention in Tasmania. Our Watch has provided the Tasmanian Government support and advice in relation to respectful relationships education, including working with the Department for Education, Children and Young People.

Executive Summary

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to support the Parliament of Tasmania Government Administration Committee's Inquiry Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmania Schools.

This submission highlights the gendered-power dynamics that underpin bullying, discrimination and other forms of gender-based violence in schools for both staff and students. It also details the evidence base for best practice respectful relationships education as an effective measure for preventing bullying and discrimination in Tasmanian schools.

Respectful relationships education (RRE) uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces. It is one of the most promising strategies to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence, including gendered discrimination and bullying, and create a future free from such violence in school settings. RRE supports children and young people to establish equitable attitudes towards gender, enabling them to avoid or challenge limiting or harmful stereotypes, and develop positive personal identities and interpersonal relationship skills, which supports their overall wellbeing. RRE takes a whole school approach that works with leadership, systems and practices to support positive school cultures, age-appropriate curriculum delivery, policy development and community engagement.

Understanding bullying and discrimination within Tasmanian schools through a gendered and intersectional lens is essential if the underlying drivers of this behaviour are to be addressed. An evidence-based approach to RRE provides the mechanism required to address gender violence, including bullying and harassment.

Governments have a crucial role in developing a long-term vision and approach for RRE and supporting an evidence-based whole of school approach. This has been recognised through the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022 – 2032*, Recommendation 10 of the *Respect@Work Sexual Harassment National Enquiry Report* and Recommendation 59 of the *Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence*.

In response to this national commitment to age-appropriate RRE, the Australian Government is providing \$77.6 million to states and territories and non-government school sectors over a five-year period through the Consent and Respectful Relationships Education measure. This aims to ensure Australian students receive high quality, age-appropriate, evidence-based consent and respectful relationships education to help prevent gender-based violence by promoting healthy and respectful relationships between young people.

Implementation of the measure is being delivered in partnership with states, territories, and non-government school sectors and informed and guided by the National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Working Group (NRREEWG). As noted above, Our Watch has been supporting the Tasmanian Government through provision of advice in relation to the most effective use of this funding for RRE in Tasmania. The Tasmanian Government is

well positioned to build upon its current approach to ensure it is aligned to the evidence based for best practice implementation of RRE across Tasmania

RRE has the potential to increase student and staff understanding and attitudes towards gender equality, respectful relationships and gender-based violence. It is a key tool for the Tasmanian Government in helping to prevent discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools.

In the context of RRE, and in line with our expertise and relevance to this Inquiry, Our Watch's submission focusses on the following Terms of Reference:

- (a) inquire into and report upon direct and indirect discrimination, prohibited conduct, unequal and disadvantageous treatment, bullying and harassment in Tasmanian schools in regard to students and staff;
- (b) inquire into and report upon the measures necessary to prevent and remedy discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools in regard to students and staff.

Key Recommendations

In addition to suggestions and recommendations made throughout this submission, Our Watch recommends:

1. The Tasmanian Government commit to and invest in evidence-based respectful relationships education (RRE) that incorporates all seven components of best practice RRE, as a mechanism for addressing gendered bullying and discrimination in Tasmanian Government schools.
2. The Tasmanian Government develop a phased plan for the implementation of a whole school approach to respectful relationships education supported by a dedicated roles within the Department for Education, Children and Young People.
3. The Tasmanian Government mandate the teaching of evidenced base respectful relationships education curriculum, in age-appropriate ways across all year levels.
4. The Tasmania Government recognise the gendered nature of bullying and discrimination in schools and review and update relevant policies and processes to reflect this understanding.

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide further advice or assistance in relation to the issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director of Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, Amanda Alford at amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au or Senior Advisor, Tasmania, Government Relations, Kristen Carrol at kristen.carroll@ourwatch.org.au

Responses to the Terms of Reference

(a) Inquire into and report upon direct and indirect discrimination, prohibited conduct, unequal and disadvantageous treatment, bullying and harassment in Tasmanian schools in regard to students and staff

Schools strive to be a place of equality, opportunity and learning for all students and a safe, equitable and inspiring workplace for staff. Unfortunately, discrimination, bullying and harassment persist for school students and staff across Australia with substantial levels of this unequal treatment relating to sex, gender and sexuality. To end bullying and discrimination, there is a need to address the underlying drivers and social context which enables these behaviours to occur.

This section outlines the gendered nature of discrimination, harassment and bullying occurring within school settings and highlights that these behaviours constitute forms of gender-based violence.

Key Points:

- Rigid ideas of gender, sex and sexuality are driving a significant proportion of bullying, discrimination and harassment in schools
- Bullying and discrimination have serious impacts on young people's mental and physical health, safety, and wellbeing, particularly LGBTIQ+ young people.
- Social norms related to masculinity are changing rapidly and are impacting the nature of harassment experienced by staff and students
- Gender inequality alongside other forms disadvantage and discrimination need to be addressed to ensure students and staff have access to the support, knowledge and skills needed to facilitate respectful relationships.

Current research into bullying, discrimination and gendered violence in Australian schools

- Research examining bullying have found it to be a highly gendered behaviour, particularly amongst adolescents.⁴
- According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1 in 3 Australian teenagers report experiencing discrimination.⁵ At ages 16–17, 1 in 8 females (13%) reported sex discrimination compared to 1 in 20 males (5%).⁶
- Trans young people aged 14-25 experience elevated rates, with 74% reporting experiences of bullying.⁷
- In addition, 39% of same sex attracted teens report sexual identity discrimination between the ages of 14 and 17 (compared to 5% of all teens).⁸

Although this data is not disaggregated by jurisdiction, a separate Australian study demonstrated students in Tasmania report the highest levels of bullying across Australia.⁹ Mission Australia found 30% of females aged 15 to 19-year-olds in Tasmania reported

experiencing unfair treatment or discrimination in the last year compared to 23% of male 15 to 19-year-olds.¹⁰ Of those who had been unfairly treated, the most common reasons for this were physical appearance (female: 38%, male: 28%) and gender (female: 28%, male: 9%).¹¹

The gendered nature of bullying drives experiences of both victimisation and perpetration. Young men with supportive attitudes towards rigid forms of masculinities are much more likely to make sexual comments to women they don't know while also being more likely to have personally experienced physical bullying in the past month.¹² Bullying can also be targeted towards boys who do not adhere to dominant forms of masculinity (like being tough, stoic, hypersexual) or the sexual harassment of girls can be used by boys as a way to establish male status and bond with other boys.¹³ Research shows bullying tends to become more sexualised in nature as students move into secondary school, manifesting in forms of sexual, gender based and homophobic harassment.¹⁴

Rigid ideas of gender and sexuality are also driving alarming rates of sexual and gender-based harassment and assault for young LGBTIQ+ people with significant associated negative impacts.

- A large Australian study within young people aged between 14-21 who identified as LGBTIQ+ has shown that approximately 60.2% of participants said that they had felt unsafe or uncomfortable in the past 12 months at secondary school due to their sexuality or gender identity.¹⁵ This resulted in over a third of secondary school students missing day/s at their educational setting in the past 12 months.¹⁶
- Transgender students report experiencing elevated levels of harassment, bullying and physical or sexual violence in school, predominantly perpetrated by classmates.¹⁷ Transgender young people who experience bullying report higher rates of wanting to hurt themselves, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, self-harming, reckless behaviour, and diagnoses of depression, eating disorders, anxiety, personality disorders and PTSD than those who did not experience bullying.¹⁸
- LGBTIQ+ young people who are part of educational institutions in which they feel validated and confident to express their identities, report better mental health and subjective happiness¹⁹.

Perpetration of bullying and sexual harassment

There is growing evidence recognising the links between the perpetration of bullying with the perpetration of sexual harassment and sexual violence. For example, homophobic name-calling of peers in early high school was found to be predictor of future sexual violence perpetration against both male and female students.²⁰ Homophobic teasing is likely influenced, not only by attitudes towards gender equality, but also the level of acceptance of the behaviour within peer groups, often being viewed as pro-social.²¹

Peer social norms are changing rapidly with the recent rise and popularity of online of male influences like Andrew Tate. This is leading to challenges related to ideas of male

supremacy within Australian schools.²² This includes harmful and problematic messages, such as that men need to conform to rigid ideas of masculinity (be tough, strong, hypersexual) to be a 'real man', that women are possessions of men and should submit/be accountable to men. Teachers report this influence as leading to a noticeable shift in boys' behaviour towards women and girls.²³ Important emerging evidence is demonstrating the increase in sexual harassment, sexism and misogyny perpetrated by boys towards female teachers. Many female teachers state that their workplaces are no longer safe due to misogynistic behaviour directed towards them and female students.²⁴ Teachers are unable to effectively address these issues in classrooms where they are constantly being challenged, disrespected and harassed based on their gender.

Research indicates the need for a systemic approach that focuses on gender, power and control.²⁵ RRE provides the tool for systems level thinking that supports leadership, processes and practices to address gendered based harassment of students and staff to ensure a school and workplace that is free from discrimination, harassment and violence.

As the above evidence outlines, gendered norms and stereotypes are produced, promoted, and practiced through institutions including schools, and peer relationships. How schools can positively influence gender equality and social norms and effectively reduce rates of gendered bullying and discrimination through RRE is outlined in the response to the following term of reference (pg 10).

Bullying and discrimination as forms of gender-based violence

Bullying and discrimination are forms of gender-based violence²⁶ and are human rights violations which have serious impacts on young people's mental and physical health, safety, and wellbeing.²⁷ As a result, understanding bullying and discrimination within Tasmanian schools through a gendered and intersectional lens is essential if the underlying drivers of this behaviour are to be addressed.

International and Australian research clearly demonstrates that violence, discrimination and unfair treatment against women is driven by gender inequality.²⁸ In particular, the following four expressions of gender inequality increase the likelihood of violence against women occurring. These are known as the 'gendered drivers':

- Condoning violence against women
- Men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence
- Rigid gender roles and stereotypes
- Men disrespecting women to bond with other men

To stop gender-based violence, including discrimination, bullying and harassment we need to take action on each of these drivers. RRE does this by teaching about gender, power and control through the curriculum, challenging harmful and limiting gender stereotypes, role-modelling equality and respect across the school, and taking a whole-of-school approach to gender equality.

Gender inequality underpins a significant proportion of bullying, discrimination and violence against all young people.²⁹ This inequality is based in rigid attitudes, behaviours, and views about gender, sex and bodies. This can be evident in schools when we fail to support or hold young people to account for acts of gender-based violence, including discrimination and bullying. Instead, we may excuse them as one-off incidents or as not consequential enough to deem action.

While gender inequality needs to remain at the centre of efforts to prevent gender-based violence, it must be addressed alongside other forms of discrimination and disadvantage such as racism, ableism and homophobia. A comprehensive approach involves challenging not only gender inequality, but other forms of structural inequalities, negative stereotypes and discrimination, including those based on Aboriginality, disability, age, class and socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and refugee status. For example, a female First Nations student attending a school predominantly made up of students of Caucasian Anglo-Australian heritage may experience both sexism and racism, which significantly impacts the nature and severity of the discrimination experienced, as well the support required to safely and appropriately respond to the student.

As a result, a gender and power analysis must underpin our understanding of unequal and discriminatory treatment in Tasmanian schools. This allows the underlying causes of bullying and discrimination to be addressed and ensures students and staff have access to the support, knowledge and skills needed to facilitate respectful relationships at school, with peers, and in the community.

(b) Inquire into and report upon the measures necessary to prevent and remedy discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools in regard to students and staff

The vision to be free from discrimination and bullying within Tasmanian schools is achievable and will ensure staff and students thrive, learn and work in equitable, safe and respectful environments. However, underlying social inequalities, including gender inequality, need to be centred within prevention measures to ensure progress is made in remedying unequal treatment in schools.

Respectful relationships education, which engages schools as workplaces, education institutions and community hubs, offers the most promising approach to embedding gender equality and addressing the drivers of all forms of gender-based violence, including bullying, harassment and discrimination in schools.

Moving beyond bullying education

Despite bullying education having prominence in schools for some time, research has found that previous approaches have oversimplified the role of social norms and inequalities as well as peer hierarchies present within adolescent relationships. The limited success of bullying interventions and programs has been attributed to the widespread absence of a critical power lens, including gender.³⁰ Nuanced interventions that challenge

negative social and peer norms and develop the necessary skills for building and maintaining respectful relationships are needed.³¹

A challenge for addressing bullying is the internalisation and normalisation of gender inequality. Young people often justify forms of gendered inequality, discrimination and violence encountered in schools³² believing they are part of a typical school experience.³³ In the Australian context it has been found that young people do not necessarily recognise the gendered nature of domestic and family violence, or that perpetration is most commonly by men, and many hold victim-blaming attitudes.³⁴

Research into effective approaches also found that it is important to attune to the ways in which bullying tends to become more sexualised in nature as students move into secondary school, manifesting in forms of sexual and gender-based harassment and homophobic harassment.³⁵

This is why evidenced based approaches to RRE, characterised by a critical analysis of gender inequality and power, are essential to the prevention of gender-based violence. RRE recognises and supports the creation of actions to directly address these drivers across all areas of the school environment. Schools can actively role model and promote gender equality, inclusivity and respect in everything they do – from their leadership structures, uniform policies, teacher roles and responsibilities, behavioural expectations and procedures. These components all have an impact on how the school operates and ultimately, the culture it promotes. Due to the comprehensive nature of RRE, a sustained commitment, vision and investment by leaders is crucial to support an evidence-based approach.

The Australian Government's Consent and Respectful Relationships Education measure, linked to significant funding, is a demonstration of the priority and urgency being placed on preventing gender-based violence, discrimination and inequality through the delivery of high quality, age-appropriate, evidence-based respectful relationships education, including consent and sexuality education, ideally supported by a whole school approach.

It provides a unique opportunity for school sectors and jurisdictions to evaluate, review and build upon their current approach to RRE. Tasmania is a member of the NRREEWG and recipients of this grant funding, which means there are important opportunities to ensure approaches to RRE in Tasmania are aligned to the evidence base and accessible to all Tasmanian students.

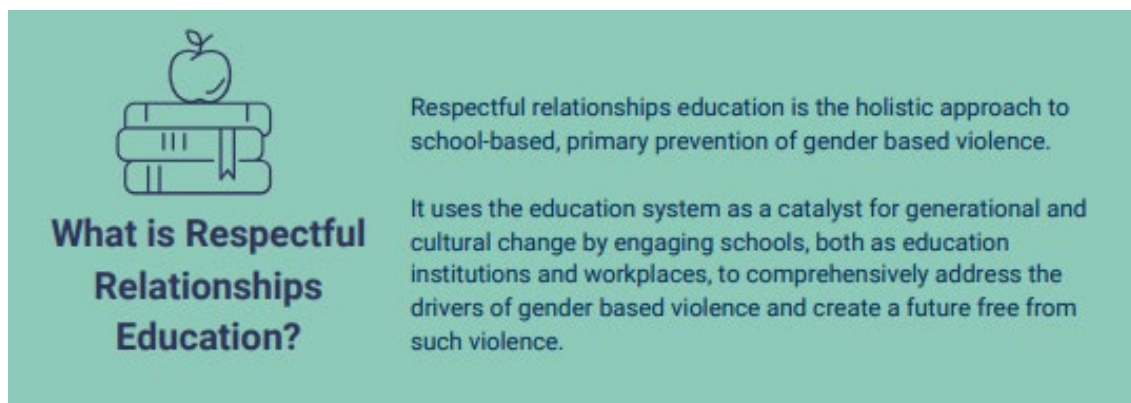
An evidence-based approach to respectful relationships education to prevent gendered bullying, harassment and discrimination

International and national evidence on RRE outlines that policy and program design must include seven core elements to be effective as a strategy to prevent gender-based violence.³⁶ Figure 1 provides an overview of these seven elements.



Figure 1: seven core elements of evidence-based RRE

RRE is the holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence, which includes teaching and learning about healthy relationships, gender, power and control.³⁷



RRE provides an opportunity to reach young children early in their development and shape their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour around gender equality and respect. By continuing this education in later years, it provides crucial support and skills to adolescents who are experiencing their first intimate relationships. RRE also supports the creation of safe learning environments for all young people, through the transformation of school cultures to create environments that promote gender equality, respect, and non-violence. The positive, safe and empowering school cultures that can be fostered through whole-of-school RRE supports both student and teacher wellbeing.³⁸

Respectful Relationship Education – more than curriculum delivery

RRE is often considered as only what is delivered in the classroom. Whilst RRE curriculum materials that enables students to identify, question and challenge the drivers of gender-based violence is a major facet, evidence shows that to achieve maximum effectiveness, RRE should be realised through a whole-of-school approach. This means addressing the

overlapping domains that shape the social climate surrounding students and staff, including curriculum, school policy and practices, school culture and ethos, the working conditions and culture experienced by staff, and the relationships modelled to students by their school community, including staff, parents, carers and community groups.

The delivery of classroom-based learning, or curriculum, can lead to the false assumption that RRE is 'already being done'. But RRE is broader than the delivery of classroom-based learning. What sets RRE apart is that it explicitly centres on addressing the drivers of gender-based violence. As such, RRE goes further than raising awareness of violence and promoting protective behaviours, like consent, and is characterised by a critical analysis of gender and power. While alignment with other areas of work (such as social and emotional learning or sexuality education) are desirable, RRE requires dedicated focus and investment, with attention to (and monitoring of) the creation of more gender equal and respectful attitudes, behaviours, structures and practices across the school culture.

A whole-of-school approach to RRE ensures a culture among both staff and students where gender stereotypes are challenged, gender-based discrimination is unacceptable, and gender equality is actively promoted, modelled and embedded across the entire school, not only in the curriculum. In line with the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry, it can also play a role in preventing discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools to the benefit of both students and staff.

Schools as workplaces, community hubs and educational institutes

As education institutions, workplaces and community hubs, primary and secondary schools are widely recognised as key settings in which to promote respectful relationships, nonviolence and gender equality. With over 9,500 schools, over 4 million students and over 290,000 teachers across Australia, our education system provides near universal reach to children in their formative years and to adolescents creating their first intimate relationships³⁹. As quoted from ANROWS *Attitudes Matter: The 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey - Findings for young Australians* (2023)

...intervention in early childhood and school-aged settings are timely for beginning to address stereotyped ideas, attitudes and practices about gender roles and relationships that underpin gender inequalities and violence against women.⁴⁰

Schools have a role as a significant workplace and leader within school communities. They have a responsibility to provide safe and supportive environments for all those with whom they engage. The intersections of the role of schools and how respect, equality and non-violence can be centred is depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 2: schools as workplaces, community hubs and educational institutions

Schools are workplaces where structures, norms and practices can support gender equality for staff and students⁴¹. They hold significant influence and can act to both reinforce gendered dichotomies as well as reduce perceived differences⁴². For example, approximately 71.9% of Australian classroom teachers identify as women⁴³ although traditional masculine practices are active within certain sites such as curriculum divisions, discipline systems and sports⁴⁴. Informal cultures and practices of the workplace directly impact on what students are learning about gender equality, respect and professional relationships. Whole school approaches to RRE support these workplace practices to model healthy relationships and processes.

The relationship between the classroom teacher and their students is essential in the context of facilitating safe and supportive discussions on topics such as gender and violence. Research indicates that students who consider adults in their school to be supportive, are more likely to have positive help-seeking attitudes in response to bullying and violence and are more likely to report homophobic harassment of peers to their teachers⁴⁵. However, the relationships between teachers and students are changing with the rapid rise of harmful and problematic male influencers on social media. Female teachers are experiencing high levels of distress related to being harassed, undermined and challenged by male students prescribing to dominating forms of masculinity⁴⁶. They need greater support to address boys' concerning attitudes and behaviour to make their workplace safe⁴⁷ and to ensure a workplace that is free from discrimination, harassment and violence.

Teachers are unable to effectively address these issues in classrooms without leadership and systems support. Research indicates the need for a whole school approach that enables the delivery of the required in-depth content and reinforces messages through pedagogy, policies, decision making processes, and overall school culture. Attention to how gendered dynamics play out in schools and education departments is important to ensure consistent modelling and messaging in all areas of the school – as an educational institutional, workplace and community hub. Best practice approaches to RRE ensure

school leaders and staff are prepared to take proportionate action, navigate conversations, and are provided with sufficient support including professional learning.

What are the benefits of RRE?

- Increase student knowledge of, positive attitudes towards, and confidence in discussing issues of gender equality, respectful relationships and domestic violence
- Decrease in student adherence to gender stereotypical attitudes
- Improved teacher – student relationships
- Improved student behaviour
- Increased understanding of respectful relationships, gender equality and gender-based violence among school leadership – including principals

Evaluations of evidence-based approaches to RRE in Australia have found that in the short term, RRE can challenge violence supportive attitudes and enhance respectful behaviour, and in the long term has the potential to reduce rates of gender-based bullying and harassment and shift school cultures toward being more gender equitable¹.

The deeply entrenched nature of the drivers of gender-based violence means that a long-term commitment and systemic approach are needed for RRE to become a catalyst for generational change. A best-practice and sustainable model of RRE must incorporate all seven core components of effective RRE and requires all stakeholders – from schools to education departments and governments – to lead the way in supporting an evidence-based, consistent and unified approach. Governments have a crucial role in developing a long-term vision and approach for RRE and supporting an evidence-based whole of school approach.

Tasmania has a clear opportunity to prevent discrimination and bullying in schools through the investment and commitment to evidence-based RRE. A phased approach to the implementation will allow for the education system to plan for and support whole school approaches, professional learning opportunities, and age-appropriate curriculum. Embedding RRE in Tasmania's education system will mean that the underlying social inequalities of bullying and discrimination will be addressed, ensuring this behaviour is stopped before it starts.

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