

# **PUBLIC**

**GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE A MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART ON TUESDAY 22 OCTOBER, 2024**

## **INQUIRY INTO DISCRIMINATION AND BULLYING IN TASMANIAN SCHOOLS**

**The public hearing commenced at 9.48 a.m.**

**CHAIR** - We'll now move into open session.

Kim, I will give you the opportunity to put a brief opening statement on the record so you get that chance to put those remarks on the record. Then we will ask a series of questions as we've done in closed session, if you're okay with that.

**Mr CHEN** - Cheers.

**CHAIR** - Start the broadcast please. We're on air now.

Thank you very much for proceeding with our open session of our hearing now. For the purpose of those listening online to this broadcast, I will get you to state your names, please.

**Mr CHEN** - Kim Chen, Concerned Catholics Tasmania.

**CHAIR** - Thank you.

**Dr HINDMARSH** - Trish Hindmarsh, Concerned Catholics Tasmania and former Catholic educator.

**Mr FLINT** - Peter Flint, member of Concerned Catholics and also a Christian Brother.

**Mr SMITH** - Chris Smith, member of Concerned Catholics Tasmania and former school principal.

**CHAIR** - Thank you very much. We recognise that during these hearings that we may discuss highly sensitive matters that may have deeply impacted the lives of many Tasmanians. Now this may be a trigger for individuals listening to or participating in these proceedings. I would encourage anyone impacted by the content during this hearing to contact services and support such as Lifeline TAS on 1800 984 434, Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

Kim, I'm going to offer your Concerned Catholics Tasmania the opportunity to have a brief opening statement before we move into some questions, please.

**Mr CHEN** - Thank you, Chair. The motivation for us being here is the distress and dismay of school principals and other staff in Catholic schools across Tasmania. That is why we're here and are concerned. We're also aware of the report, which is now eight years old, from the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute. The problem of bullying, in particular, has been mentioned on the public record for a long time but nothing seems to us to have been done which is effective. It's not to say that the legislation hasn't been passed; it's just not effective.

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We've made complaints to Equal Opportunity Tasmania, and the Anti-discrimination Commissioner seems to have her hands strung and not have the powers and authority that perhaps she needs. We've made complaints to the Non-government Schools Registration Board and we are concerned about the powers and limitations on the powers of that board to either give protection to whistleblowers or to be rigorous in their demands for particular evidence.

We are concerned about the legislative overview. We're concerned that the Anti-discrimination Commissioner seems to have limited resources in order to do her work. We are concerned of rumours that the Regulator's resources under the recent legislation that was passed last year are inadequate for that person to carry out all investigations needed. We do see there's a need for further intervention.

Our view is that bullying is a very easy position to start. Discrimination gets difficult, but the outlawing of bullying is not difficult. That is what has been made clear, stated by the Institute eight years ago, supported by the Anti-discrimination Commissioner and the Law Society. That is our concern. Our concern is the welfare of people in the system and elimination of the problem. I thank this committee for addressing it. Hopefully we can come up with a solution that suits.

**CHAIR** - Obviously, each of you have been involved with Catholic Education for a very long time, some of you. I wonder if you would outline to the committee how you have seen some of the culture across Catholic Education change during that time, particularly when it comes to the issues that you have identified in your public submission.

**Dr HINDMARSH** - It is true that people from within Catholic Education, including principals and staff, do come to Concerned Catholics Tasmania with their anxieties and their experiences that are adverse to their wellbeing. They do this because they experience themselves living in a culture that is not one of trust, openness and provision of transparent and effective complaint channels. That is why we are here: people see us almost as a de facto group that they can go to because they know that we have the best interests - hopefully. We believe we do.

We try to have the best interests of the church and of its organisation, Catholic Education Tasmania, at heart. We are quite good at being able to listen. Now we want to do more than listen. We want to take advantage of the public opportunity that your inquiry presents to anyone, including ourselves, to make representations to the parliament.

**Mr BAYLEY** - How would you describe the relationship between schools – and Catholic Education Tasmania, I acknowledge that is a difficult question to answer because they are not a collective, the individual schools, but broadly, given cultural issues that you have just outlined to the Chair's question, how would you describe the relationship between schools and staff and the administration of Catholic Education Tasmania?

**Mr FLINT** - I can only go by what happened at Barnbougle and also from a limited number of discussions with principals which were more casual than seeking answers. I would say relationships are frightened. Staff and schools are frightened of the senior management of the Catholic Education Office.

I was talking to the principal of St Virgil's and I said to him, 'How do you get on with Catholic Education?' He said to me, somewhat forcefully, 'In terms of -

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**CHAIR** - We are not in camera at the moment, this is a public hearing, so I want to make sure that you are comfortable sharing that experience.

**Mr FLINT** - No, he would have said it in public here, 'In terms of cannon law and doctrine, we must hear you. In terms of school governance, no. We are separate'. So, that was said a bit forcefully.

**Mr SMITH** - We talk about the changes in Catholic Education - the question may have been yours, Chair, I am sorry - and I suppose there has been a move towards greater centralisation over the years and therefore a bigger bureaucracy, for want of a better term, being built up. That has had its many benefits in terms of efficiencies of scale and giving small schools the support that they need. That is fine if the culture is right. But if the culture then becomes a very conservative culture, where the culture being expressed may be different from the reality of the culture in the schools, where there are children who are uncertain about their gender, and so on and so forth, that is where you get what is a culture clash almost. And where principals and staff are being put in that difficult position - 'Do I follow this line, or do I look after the best interests of my students and my staff?'. That is what I would see as one of the progressive changes.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Just on that, in your experience, in your time, is that culture clash as you put it, greater now or lesser now, or where is it on the spectrum of clash in your experience within the system?

**Mr SMITH** - In recent years, as we have become as a Catholic Church in Tasmania, we've had more conservative leadership in terms of many things, and the panel would be well aware of those things. That's the path we've been on.

**Mr BAYLEY** - The clash is bigger now than you've seen it before. Is that what you're saying?

**Mr SMITH** - Yes.

**Mr CHEN** - One of the things we struggle with in Tasmania is it doesn't fit what we understand as being Catholic. The notion that somebody should be directive of a principal flies against the principle of Catholic social teaching called subsidiarity. That is, you leave the principal to run the school and you accept that they're qualified to do it. If they fail, then you assist, but you don't try to dictate what that principal does in that school.

We're losing that culture of being responsible, and that means loss of vocation. For a principal, the most important thing is the care of the staff and students in that community. That's what they're there for. That's what they started in the job for. But they're now being impeded, and not only are they being impeded, but they're being impeded in ways that doesn't fit how it is to be Catholic, that they've understood and grown up with. That's a huge tension within a person, and that's why they are distressed people running Catholic schools.

**Ms JOHNSTON** - Thank you. Perhaps the question for you, Trish, as former Director of Catholic Education. Obviously the letter that the Archbishop sent out recently, *We are the Salt to the Earth*, espouses a particular view of Catholic and Catholicism. I suppose I'm interested in how you see the implications of that letter on the school community and the

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pastoral care delivered in schools, recognising the strong desire to ensure the wellbeing and welfare of students and staff in Catholic schools. The Archbishop is obviously firmly of the view that that is a Catholic view he's espoused in that particular letter.

Concerned Catholics, I'm hearing something of a different story, but that's not what all Catholics think. From your experience as a director, former director, how do you see that impacting on the pastoral care delivered in schools?

**Dr HINDMARSH** - Allowing for the reality that the Archbishop has the right within his own authority and his appointment to make statements that reflect the current doctrine of the Church and support that. Allowing for that, the exception that I and others on the committee, and I believe parents and principals would take to that letter, is the tone and the reiteration of what is termed by the Church as gender ideology.

To reiterate that idea, which is not a well substantiated concept. To reiterate that, in terms of exclusion of certain students and staff, if not exclusion, at least very strong embarrassment, loss of self-confidence, when an edict like this comes, but particularly the concern is that that letter was to be distributed by students, put in their hands to take home to their families to be read together with their parents.

Extraordinarily unpastoral in terms of looking after those members of the community, not only who might identify or have children who are LGBTIQ, but also the school community who have a very strong need to be in support of those siblings, and adolescents are particularly committed to support, with some exceptions, of course. They're not all angels, but in general, adolescents strongly support their peers who identify in this way. Teachers will always go out of their way to respect and protect them, with very few exceptions.

So, it was an embarrassing exercise and, I thought, a very unpastoral way to distribute that letter.

**CHAIR** - We've had the opportunity today to speak to you on two occasions. I feel that we've had some good, thorough discussion. I want to, on behalf of our committee, thank you very much, first for presenting to us in person, but also for the candid way in which you've shared your experiences, we really appreciate that, and the insight into what it is you hope to achieve. In your submission you certainly outlined a number of initiatives that you want to see change and will provide advocacy around. That's very useful to our committee as well.

After you've provided evidence today, I have to let you know that what you've said today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave this table, you will need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments that you make to anyone, including the media, even if you are just repeating what you said to us this morning. I hope that you understand that's the way in which our committees and open sessions work. I thank you very much.

I ask that we stop the broadcast.

**THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.**

**The committee suspended at 10.05 a.m.**

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**The committee resumed at 10.08 a.m.**

**CHAIR** - Welcome to today's hearing of the Government Administration Committee A's Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools. Thank you very much for your submission. Could you please state your name and capacity in which you are appearing before this committee?

**Dr QUIBELL** - My name is Ruth Grace Quibell. I'm appearing as a representative of the Association for Children with Disability.

**CHAIR** - Thank you. Gary, I'll get you to -

**Mr McMURTRIE** - My name is Gary McMurtrie.

**CHAIR** - Thank you. And your title?

**Mr McMURTRIE** - I am the Advocacy Team Leader for the Association of Children with Disability.

**CHAIR** - This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, allowing individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place outside of the parliament. This protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory or repeated or referred to by you outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing is public. The public and media may be present and should you wish aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to the committee at the time.

As I have already introduced, I am the chair of the committee. We have Vica Bayley, Kristie Johnston and Josh Willie, and Miriam Beswick online.

Before you, Ruth, you have a statutory declaration. If you could please make that statement for us, please.

**Dr RUTH QUIBELL**, ADVOCATE, THE ASSOCIATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITY TASMANIA, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED

**Mr GARY McMURTRIE**, ADVOCACY TEAM LEADER, THE ASSOCIATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITY TASMANIA WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED VIA WEBEX

**CHAIR** - Before I invite you to provide an opening statement to your submission, I want to acknowledge that during these hearings we may discuss highly sensitive matters that may have deeply impacted the lives of Tasmanians, and these could be a trigger for individuals listening to or participating in these proceedings. I'd encourage anyone impacted by the content matter during this hearing to contact services and supports such as Lifeline Tasmania on 1800 984 434, Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

Ruth, we'd like to offer you the opportunity to make an opening statement.

**Dr QUIBELL** - Gary's actually going to make the opening statement.

**CHAIR** - Okay. Gary, over to you. Thank you.

**Mr McMURTRIE** - Thank you all. If I can, just by way of context, the Association for Children with Disability in Tasmania is often referred to as ACD Tas, far more convenient.

We are a not-for-profit organisation and we're peer led. We're a family organisation established by families who have children with disability. Most of our board members and staff still are people who have children, family or lived experience of disability. Our staff operate across the whole of Tasmania in all sectors, but as we are specialising in children living with disability, one of our primary focuses is education. We support approximately 250 families, children and young people. They require information, advocacy and support.

We believe we're somewhat uniquely placed with respect to the role of this inquiry to speak on individual and systemic drivers of that lived experience of discrimination, unequal and disadvantaged treatments, bullying and harassment for Tasmanian families. In 2022-23, ACD Tas assisted 267 families of children and young people experiencing issues with education. Bullying and discrimination are probably the most commonly reported issues of families.

Some of the key issues we'd like to convey to this inquiry is that bullying and discrimination are found across all aspects of education sectors at all levels. It's not just restricted to student peers, it also affects the staff at schools, and also can be considered in some respects institutional.

One of the things we'd like to suggest would be very helpful is that there be a data-driven transparency across all sectors of education, not just to identify problems - we know the problems are there - but also excellence, because the latter is there to learn from and celebrate.

Some of the important work that we're doing both with the Department of Education and with the other areas of education, is to proactively ask them to engage with us and to look at this as a time of change, challenge and opportunity. To do so is not just to look at, 'Okay, this is a bad problem or this is an issue', but rather, 'Where is the excellence, where can we learn from that and how do we make it different?'

One of the things we note is that when it comes to bullying and discrimination, there's actually a really solid legislative framework. There may be areas where that could be tweaked, and there are others who are better to advise on policy-related matters in that area, but notwithstanding, the legislative framework is very strong.

The outcome though is that bullying and discrimination has been incredibly persistent. For us, one of the reasons we'd like to raise in relation to that is that what drives a good outcome for a student or a bad outcome for a student is often the culture of the senior leadership of a school. That leadership impacts the school's capacity to meet the needs of that child, the legal obligations that they have. We'd like to note that those legal obligations are the same across the whole education sector.

Leadership is one of those areas that can greatly transform the life of a young person living with disability or many other types of disadvantages. It depends on the courage and the willingness of the leadership team to set the culture of a particular school. We've seen areas of

excellence, things that profoundly change how an outcome is achieved for a young person. In some instances a principal has agreed to have an external independent behavioural specialist come in, educate their staff, train their staff, take a totally different approach to the education of a young person who for most of their primary school life has been excluded from full-time participation, implement a play based therapy driven program that then has returned that child to full-time education.

We've had others where senior leaders have become involved where there's been a critical incident, a very dangerous one. When they dug into the background, they had the honesty, the openness, the courage to then say, 'We know what triggered this. The reports we've been getting from the peers and from our own staff are not true. What they're saying this young person is doing did not happen and we know that to be the case. We're here to fix it'.

I've had another principal, incredibly skilled, incredibly professional made a written comment in the haste at the moment that was seen by family to be really upsetting. To the credit of that principal, what they said was, 'That was a rookie mistake. That should never have happened. I'm here to work with you to make sure that we fix this', and they did.

As a way forward in what can change, we'd like to see that there is the opportunity to identify the excellence, not just the areas of problem. That is going to take data that doesn't currently exist if you want to look at areas that we know are of concern. When it comes to disability, we know that the greater proportion of students that have restricted attendance at school, who are suspended or who are excluded, or who are forced out - perhaps in a polite way, but forced out of an educational environment - are over-representative and by a long margin. That data is not actually collected so that that is easily seen, and that the transfer of those students, particularly into the public sector is not always obvious.

They are the other sorts of areas at the policy level that would be greatly helpful to be able to identify those areas of excellence because the problems are everywhere. There are those who are having far more success than others in how they respond in those areas that might be a problem. Even when they are identified, those should be approached as an opportunity to upskill, particularly starting with the senior leadership of schools, giving other teaching and educative staff greater supports and understanding of some of the complexities here.

We would be the first to note that when it comes to discrimination, when it comes to bullying, these are really complex matters. They are complex matters that affect the children who are involved, the families that are involved, the staff that are involved, and flow onto the wider school community. Sometimes that brings the priorities in schools, which are very complex entities, into conflict.

We often hear from principals that, on the one hand, they have a child with disability who has many challenges and behavioural issues. Their first response is, 'Well, our responsibility is to all of the other students and family and staff members'. Our response is always, 'Well, of course, that is a primary responsibility of the principal, but you have a legislative obligation to ensure that all the needs of this child have already been met, including addressing their behaviour before you get to the pointy end of restricting or excluding that child'. It is one of the most common things that we see.

The other thing we always hear is that, 'We don't have the resources'. Our standard response to schools is that that's a matter for schools to resolve. That's not a matter that a family

can settle. It should never be raised with families. All it does is undermine the confidence of the relationship between the two.

One of the things that does happen is families who have children with challenging behaviour are often encouraged to seek a fresh start, to look at a new school. That often involves a transfer into the public sector from other areas. We would suggest that that's part of the wider, if you like, institutionalised practices of discrimination, particularly when it is also implied that the school cannot meet the student support needs. All schools are funded for the likes of disability. They all share the same legal framework obligations. That transfer in itself should be a matter of concern, if schools aren't actually meeting individual needs of students.

One of the other factors that often comes up - and it is the reason that we are most often involved with families - is that they feel they are being dismissed as a parent or a carer. That can go as far as schools actually disputing the professional advice of specialists. We appreciate that everybody who works in schools are professional educators. That does not mean that they are professionals across all dimension of disability, which is an incredibly diverse, complex area that, even for those of us who work in it on a daily basis, can't be across all dimensions.

It is an absolute imperative that all views, particularly those of the family who know the child best, and those who are external to schools, who are the experts in the field, have a legitimate voice. It is actually required under things like the disability education standards, but it's often not reflected in the professional practices of schools.

One of the most common things we get with families is that there will be a learning plan - which is where the rubber hits the road in terms of translating the obligations of the disability education standards into a plan that everybody agrees to - being shoved on under a family member or guardian's nose saying, 'Tell me what you think and when you're happy with it, sign it'. That's not genuine consultation. That is not leveraging the possibilities of understanding that child across all dimensions of home, therapy, and education. This needs to be a partnership and that partnership needs to value all the contributions that go into it.

I guess, in terms of the report Dr Ruth Quibell has put together on behalf of the advocacy team, she's in a wonderful position to answer any questions at all, to tease out any aspect of that submission.

From my point of view, my role here is about trying to give that some sort of context in terms of what we see with families across all areas of education across Tasmania, and incredibly harmful impacts that that has on the lives of some of our most vulnerable children throughout their lifetime.

We do agree that not meeting the needs of individuals - be they an everyday student or one living with disability or disadvantage - for all of those children, the long-term benefits of education are profound, sustained, lifelong. They're something that we believe needs to be elevated above the politics of what might play out around some of these difficult questions. We need to focus on the pragmatic practicalities of real outcomes that shift the dial in real directions.

Thank you for the opportunity. I am looking forward to answering any questions that you may have.



**CHAIR** - Thanks very much, Gary. I'll lead off with an opening question on behalf of the committee. You've obviously spoken about the individualised work that you do across school communities. I wonder how you'd describe your relationship, for example, with the Department of Children and Young People in Tasmania and also, the independent schools across the state. Do you work collaboratively with those bodies or?

**Dr QUIBELL** – Absolutely.

**Mr McMURTRIE** - We do, indeed.

**CHAIR** - Great. That's excellent. The other question I want to ask you is on the second page of your submission, where you speak about educational issues being the primary reason why families and children are accessing your advocacy services. You talk about the fact that you could attribute this to the fact that the Tasmanian education system has struggled to return to pre-COVID times. I wonder if you might elaborate on that and inform the committee of how you attribute that, and why?

**Dr QUIBELL** - I have to say that that would have to be a question for Gary, because I have only worked post-COVID in this field. Gary, are you comfortable to do that?

**Mr McMURTRIE** - I am. I believe one of the concerns here is that COVID was a difficult period for everybody, but for families and children living with disability it was profoundly either empowering or disastrous. I say that because for some children coping with the day-to-day structures of formal education is a real struggle. They pour all their emotional and intellectual energy into just trying to regulate themselves during the day. So, the opportunity to have long periods where you're at home in very known, predictable circumstances was actually empowering for some. For others, who need that type of routine, being at home for long periods of time was really disastrous. The lack of the school framework was really disruptive for them.

For both groups, returning post-COVID to the education sector, I believe could have been difficult for a number of students. For those types of students, it greatly added to the complexities of understanding and reintroducing them into the day-to-day aspects of education.

It was compounded by the fact that, at the same time, COVID didn't go away. What schools experienced post the opening up after COVID were huge impacts on their staffing capabilities, so a lot of staff were going down with COVID in succession. For the children who are trying to cope in reintegrating into education, they had revolving series of different staff that they weren't used to. Those staff didn't necessarily know those students who, in a lot of cases, while there might have been a learning plan for the child, the understanding and the pragmatic guidance that should've given wasn't there in detail. That comes back to some of the weaknesses in how some of those learning plans are formulated. They really presume you're going to have a stability of circumstances. In a lot of cases, that is true. You do have that in most circumstances, but COVID was a great disruptor to that.

**CHAIR** - Thank you very much. I'm going to open it up to the committee.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Thank you. I'd like to invite you to talk to us a little bit more about exclusion within schools, which is one of the areas you've identified here in your table on page 6, in terms of a key concern. I'm interested in this from a pedagogical and management

perspective, but also the holistic level. We obviously have the support school structures here and a mix of education opportunities for students - some in support school settings and some within the schools more broadly. I invite you to talk about exclusion within schools, because that struck me as both a challenge and - not a necessity, that's absolutely the wrong word - but I'm sure there are reasons why students are separated. Not excluded, but separated.

**Dr QUIBELL** - Often what we see is a pathway out of the classroom, and it begins gradually. That's often because teachers are not quite clear what's going on with the student, and often the parents aren't and the child isn't. That pathway can be a really gradual one of trying to understand how does this student's disability manifest. Is it because the sensory environment of the classroom is too much? Often there are big classrooms and they are loud. That can be really difficult. The student, in response, might manifest behaviours of concern, and the initial line will be a response of discipline to try to address that, have a behavioural response.

When that's a pattern that's repeated over time, being in the classroom can be very difficult. Sometimes a parent will support the child working in a pod or going to a different area of the school as part of their de-escalation. That can continue over time, to the point where the child is actually working alone in a room with a support teacher. I wouldn't say that it is happening all the time, but it's more that it can happen without a clear plan.

I'm not sure if Gary would agree that he's seeing the same thing in the north of the state, but certainly in the north-west, there's this reports that the students sometimes are working in window boxes, you know, this little glassed area. I think the concern is when it becomes 'this student always works separately', 'this is what this student needs'. What parents are often looking for is, this is a child who's going to grow up and need skills to work in the world and live in the world, so they're often looking for a plan back, a supported plan, back into the classroom. Whether that is gradually built up over time so the child gets success, or whether it's something that's seen over multiple years.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Who's giving advice around that plan and planning at the individual child level? Is there specialist support staff within the Department or within the school, or is it coming externally? How is that really critical and tailored information being fed into the school?

**Dr QUIBELL** - From what I've seen, the principal is the decision-maker and can seek support from their support teacher, inclusive practice staff from the Department and student support leaders. I think the major issue is, not necessarily seeking that support, but bringing the family, the parents, the carers along for that conversation and ensuring that whatever is happening is at the pace of the family and with the family's explicit support.

Often, I'll see good collaboration with external therapists as well.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Does this come down then, the approach, given the principal has such a significant role in the culture and the leadership models school by school, so it's very different across the schools?

**Dr QUIBELL** - Yes, this is where senior leadership makes a difference, because it's difficult to have conversations about identifying a student having a disability. It's difficult to say that we need to try these different approaches and I think that makes the difference between

a student having a pattern of repeat suspensions and trying different approaches and also having a principal that's prepared to talk to the parents and own, 'Oh, maybe we made a misstep here and we didn't understand what was happening'.

I can't speak to individual examples, I'm sorry. I don't have consent from the parents too, but I think it works when the senior leadership not necessarily has a concrete plan, but has confidence to say this is difficult, let's work together. That collaborative approach makes such a difference.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Across the state school system, what percentage of schools has that positive senior leadership structure and culture that is approaching this in the correct way?

**Dr QUIBELL** - I couldn't say. We don't work in all schools. It's very much family driven. We don't go and do advocacy off our own back. It's always initiated by a parent or a carer.

**Mr McMURTRIE** - Part of the discussions we've had with both the Department of Education and Catholic Education is the need for them to collect the data that would allow them to answer that particular question because nobody actually knows the answer. We have a sense of where we see good practice and where we see matters of concern. It is a spectrum across the whole school system. Each of the school sectors has different levels of inherent resources to draw on.

The public education system has the widest gamut when it comes to disability. Catholic Education has their student support section which is not as extensive but again embeds some expertise around disability within that sector. Independent schools, it largely comes down to just the staff of the school and needing to make decisions that are independent of those types of support structures.

What I would say coming back to the issue of learning plan and how this plays out. Often for families, what it feels like is that there's this big dark tunnel where the school might have some idea of where it's going, but the family has no idea. There are no signposts, there is no clear agreements in terms of what this is going to look like for this particular child. They're the circumstances I think Ruth was alluding to in how that gradual disengagement of a child can happen from a classroom.

There are some circumstances where that's actually necessary to meet the needs of an individual child, but that should always be an agreed reasonable adjustment. The understanding of what constitutes a reasonable adjustment varies greatly across schools, and as Ruth has pointed out, is largely driven by the culture of the senior leadership of the school and their willingness to engage or not engage with family and professionals, be they internal, external, or a mixture of both.

**Ms JOHNSTON** - Thank you. Gary. I think in your opening statement you use the words you would like to see data-driven transparency across all education settings. You talked about collecting data and not only the issues but also on excellence. What are the specific questions or data subsets that you think are missing at the moment that would enable the Department or others to be able to collect that kind of information? What are the questions that are missing that we're not asking?

**Mr McMURTRIE** - Probably two parts. The first is that basic data is there in terms of, there's some bits of data about restricted attendance, but certainly in suspensions and exclusions, there's greater data. What that data is not broken down by is things like disability. In other words, as I said, if you collect data on that dimension, what you will soon find is that disability in particular is well and truly over-represented in that data, as are the other normal indicators of disadvantage often in combination. So if that's sort of data is collected and we are encouraging schools, education sectors to do that, but we'd rather see that it be generic, a requirement to not include that data, but also where it links to the transfer of students. We would be very surprised if it wasn't blatantly obvious that there is a large transference of children with disability, particularly with complex behaviour, exiting out of some education sectors into the public sector.

**Ms JOHNSTON** - Thank you. It probably leads on to my next question around that, that transfer from the private sector into I'm assuming that the public sector you're talking about there, could that data be collected by the public sector or how are the private sector reporting on that exiting of students or they don't, is that their issue or is that part of the reason why?

**Mr McMURTRIE** - I believe there are requirements to include in terms of exclusion to report, but the most common thing that we would see is the encouragement to a family that the needs of your child might be better served elsewhere at a different school. So that doesn't result, as far as I'm aware, in any way, shape or form of data being collected about how prevalent that transference is, but we consider that it's likely to be very widespread, very prominent, if the data is collected. Again, the reason for collecting that from our point of view is not to be punitive. It's really to come back to the key areas that all schools share the same obligation. All schools are supposedly resourced to support disability and other areas, yet it would be this large pattern of migration. That would be our expectation of where it goes and it's done sometimes overtly in terms of exclusion, more commonly by the encouragement that, 'We don't believe we can meet the needs of your child. We think that would be better suited in other areas of education and schools encourage you to look for those opportunities'.

**Mr WILLIE** - I've got a couple of questions. I believe that there is data collected around suspensions and exclusion for disability. I know from my former roles as shadow minister for education we could ask for it through the parliament and it did reveal high percentages of students with a disability being suspended but and also repeat suspensions. Is it more a matter of transparency like that information should be in the public domain rather than having to be requested through parliament or right to information?

**Mr McMURTRIE** - Yes, we do think that it should be open and transparent and other data in other key areas that complement that should also be similarly treated. For example, one of the things that we have consistently raised is that while there are complaint mechanisms, they're largely seen by families as either ineffectual or a mechanism of further punitive actions and very rarely felt to be fair or open in terms of how particular concerns are dealt with. That's a tricky area in that it involves, much like our work, sensitive matters to do with at times very disadvantaged families.

At the same time, the complaints process should actually, in some way, shape or form, be part of what drives a change. If we accept that there is a very solid legislative foundation to ensure that discrimination, bullying, those types of activities, don't occur yet we know that that is very prominent, we need mechanisms to identify where that is actually going wrong and

why, even in the circumstances where people raise concerns, those concerns don't result in a positive outcome for that person or that family or that child.

**Mr WILLIE** - They need to be dealt with in a timely fashion as well.

**Mr McMURTRIE** - Absolutely, and to their credit, I believe that at least in the Department of Education, they are upgrading their complaints process at the moment. That's my understanding. I haven't got all the details on that, but I don't think I'm speaking to things that the Department doesn't know. I think they are understood to be an issue. It doesn't affect just education. It's the same in health and other sectors that often those who are in positions of power are not subject to the same manner of oversight, constraint and accountability that sometimes the rest of society is.

**Mr WILLIE** - My other question is around workforce. Obviously, in the education sector, we've got a national crisis almost in terms of workforce. We know that there's classes being collapsed around Tasmania because they can't get relief teachers. No doubt it would be impacting specialist staff as well. Have you seen a corresponding increase in discrimination and needs not being met because of these workforce challenges?

**Dr QUIBELL** - I think that there is often a rotating amount of Teacher Assistants and that does create an issue for some students with disabilities who don't adapt to changing staff well. So that's certainly an issue. I hear from most meetings I go to that staff are juggling timetables, so it's something that's on the school staff's minds. For students with disabilities, I'd say it's mostly just that they don't have predictability. They don't know who they will have from one day to the next. I think there's been some changes around communicating to parents in post COVID when so many staff were off sick, the schools that handled that well got their communication under control. They knew that if the student didn't have a night's notice, their next day was going to be bad. They got really into using all the communication mechanisms that they had at their disposal to just try to minimise that, to really collaborate with the parents and say, 'Okay, you can prepare your student the night before, we have a new Teacher Assistant coming in'. That new TA might not be at 100 per cent from day one, but that's an example of the school leadership team really asking, 'What does this student need? We have this set of circumstances. How can we make it the best possible?'.

**Mr WILLIE** - The other question I've got is what sorts of initiatives are being implemented to increase capacity around staff understanding of disability and being able to meet student needs and all those sorts of things?

**Dr QUIBELL** - That might be one for Gary to answer. From my perspective, that's not what I'm seeing. You know, often I will support the families to meet with the principal, and the principals will decide what extra support, professional training that their staff needs. There does seem to be a generational shift though with younger teachers coming up being more equipped to understand that a student needs a learning plan; this is what it involves; this is what neurodivergence in the classroom is; what we can expect to see. 'We will have two students who might have ADHD, three students who might have ASD, and we need to adjust our teaching practice to that.' I think that's becoming more of an accepted part of the teaching role.

**Mr WILLIE** - That's good to hear.

**Mr McMURTRIE** - To build on that a little bit, our day-to-day role, as Ruth is indicating, there is individual advocacy. That's working one-on-one with families and in particular schools. However, we do have somewhat of a wider role in systemic advocacy and our organisation approaches that in a particular way. We're not the ones you will see out there in the media banging on the table over particular issues. Our approach to that is to proactively do things like we're doing at the moment with Catholic Education and the Department of Education, engaging at the senior level of the areas of responsibility within those entities to say, 'Look, this is a period of dynamic change and opportunity'.

We have had the disability royal commission, the inquiry into institutional breakdowns in Tasmania, a whole bunch of other things. We would like to work with you in identifying and tackling where we think meaningful change can be made and we are raising the same things there that we are raising today. If you want to change one thing that will make the biggest difference, it is the culture of the leadership team in schools but first, you have to know where that exists and who you can learn from to make it different because we all know changing culture is not an easy task at all.

To their credit, the responses there have been incredibly positive. From what I have heard and seen, particularly from the Department of Education, they have done some incredible things. One, they have used us as a conduit to another area of our organisation you will hear from who has made an independent submission to this inquiry, where we have a program empowering young people. Having a source to go back to the voices of the young people who experience these discriminatory and bullying practices is a great resource that can be leveraged to better understand what actually takes place and what the impact is.

There are things that occur that you would never think of in your daily life. So, if you are a young child in a wheelchair who has basically absconded with by a peer and the teacher does nothing and that repeatedly happens, it is not something that the rest of the able-bodied world often thinks about as a bullying type of circumstances and one that is incredibly discriminatory, one that has an impact on individuals through their lifetime in being so vulnerable to the actions of others.

I do understand within the Department of Education that they have recently put out tenders for things like creating senior management mentoring programs. I do not know the details of that. I have only seen the public request for submissions, but we would see that, again, as an incredibly positive first step.

**CHAIR** – Miriam, do you have any questions?

**Mrs BESWICK** - I think they have all been pretty well covered.

**CHAIR** – Ok, great, thank you. Vica do you have anything else?

**Mr BAYLEY** - You went to where I was going to go there, Gary, around culture and leadership. We have heard from probably just about all witnesses about how significant culture and leadership is. I had two questions; one was about the Department and the level of resourcing there is to improve culture or make sure that culture is as good as it can be, I guess within the different systems, whether it be the state or the Catholic where you work, and also I was really interested in your comment around younger teachers being more aware and open and interested.

It is 25 years since I did my post-grad teaching degree and I do not recall any of that content being there, but are they teaching it in university now? - the openness and the engagement and the need to be flexible and wide-ranging in terms of accommodating all types of students in the classroom?

**Dr QUIBELL** - That is a really good question. I believe that there is something in the training through UTAS, but I also think it is something in the current moment. It is like a cultural shift to actually understanding that people with disabilities have a right to be at schools, to be learning, and that is a significant shift and that is where it comes from. It is just the assumption: 'Of course, you have a right to be here. Of course, you have needs. I will make the adjustments'.

I would say that newest teachers do need really good mentors. That is where the senior leadership comes in to ensure they continue on that path. In terms of resources, Gary can add to that.

**Mr McMURTRIE** - I will just add onto that because I think Ruth's actually pulling out two different threads there. One is the cultural shift where I think there is, not just within education, but across the Australian community in general, a greater understanding of disability and how impactful that has been for generations, culminating in the disability royal commission. So there are cultural shifts in that respect.

On the other side of that coin, when it comes to that leadership question, I keep coming back to the fact that we have a very solid legislative framework and generic obligations across all areas of education, yet, like we saw with the disability royal commission - and one of the first things they did was an education discussion paper - there are ongoing disastrous outcomes for young people living with disability, and we would say that extends to all other areas of known disadvantage.

That is an institutional-level problem. It manifests in every educational environment, but the outcome - positive or negative - is mostly determined by the culture of the senior leadership. Some of that is incredibly open, supportive and understanding of the obligations. Others place other obligations above those without meeting their legislative requirements, and even sometimes not understanding that what they are doing is discriminatory at an institutional level, even if politely put, 'Perhaps your child will be better served elsewhere'.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Can you give us some examples of those things that may be prioritised?

**Mr McMURTRIE** - The most common one is that the welfare and safety of other students and staff is paramount. We would always say yes, it is a paramount concern, notwithstanding that does not remove the obligations that every school has to meet the needs of particularly children with disability, because there are very specific federal international covenants that cover that. In practice, that's the way that it tries to get played - 'We're just not going to go there. Yes, we understand that that child has needs, but we have staff and other students that we have to worry about'.

**CHAIR** - Thank you both very much. I note in your submission that you highlight the need for us to clearly look at disability-related components in our reporting back of the work

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that this committee does. I can let you know that we will do that as part of our recommendations back to the parliament.

It's been great speaking to you today, and you've been so comprehensive in the information and perspective that you have provided. Thank you both, Ruth and Gary, very much. That does bring our session to an end. Is there anything else that you wanted to put on the record before we conclude?

**Mr McMURTRIE** - All I can say is I am incredibly grateful that such a longstanding, challenging issue is being dealt with in this open type of format, I hope backed by the aim to actually shift the dial and make a difference.

**CHAIR** - Thank you, Gary. That's the hope of our endeavours.

Before you both leave us, I need to let you know that what you've said to us today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table or end the tele hook-up, you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to the comments that you make to anyone, including the media, even if you're just repeating what you've said to us. Thank you both again very much and enjoy the rest of your day.

**THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.**

**The committee suspended at 10.57 a.m.**





## PUBLIC

**The committee resumed at 11.01 a.m.**

**CHAIR** - Welcome to today's hearing of the Government Administration Committee A's Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools. My name is Anita Dow. I'm the Chair of this committee. With me today here I have Vica Bayley, Kristie Johnston, and Josh Willie, and online we have Miriam Beswick, as members of this committee that you'll be presenting to today.

I thank you very much for your comprehensive submission to the work that this committee is doing, and for being here today.

Could each of you please state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing before the committee? We might start with you, Jess.

**Ms BENNETT** - Hi, I'm Jessica Bennett. I'm the Operations Manager of TASSO.

**Ms WHARTON** - I'm Ros Wharton and I'm a parent representative for TASSO.

**Mr ALLAN** - John Allan, I'm the president of TASSO.

**CHAIR** - Can I confirm that each of you have received and read the guide that was sent to you by our committee secretary?

**WITNESSES** - Yes.

**CHAIR** - This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, allowing individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place outside of the parliament. This protection is not accorded to you of statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to you outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing is public. The public and the media may be present. We don't have anyone in here with us today, but people are watching online. Should you wish aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to the committee at the time.

Before you, you each have a statutory declaration. Could I ask that each of you take that, please? We'll start with you, Jess.

Ms **JESSICA BENNETT**, OPERATIONS MANAGER, TASMANIAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS (TASSO), **Ms ROSALIND WHARTON**, PARENT and **Mr JOHN ALLAN**, PRESIDENT, TASMANIAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS (TASSO), WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED

**CHAIR** - Before I invite you to make an opening statement, I want to recognise that during these hearings we may discuss highly sensitive matters that may have deeply impacted the lives of Tasmanians, and that this may be a trigger for individuals listening to or participating in these proceedings today. I'd encourage anyone impacted by the content matter during this hearing to contact services and supports, such as Lifeline Tasmania on 1800 984 434, Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800, or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

We would love to hear from you if you have an opening statement for the committee.

**Mr ALLAN** - Thank you for inviting us to speak to the committee. TASSO saw the request and thought it was well within its place to poll our member base, which includes primarily school associations. We sought a comment from as many as we spoke to, basically, around this matter.

One key point that came through was that more people were willing to talk to us about bullying than other matters in the consultation. As you'll notice, our submission is primarily on that topic. Jess is probably going to be best to speak to the submission, because that was done through the office. Ros is here to speak primarily around personal experience, although perhaps not in as much detail in a public forum as would otherwise be provided. We are happy to continue at the end of this, if there is the opportunity to speak in camera.

**CHAIR** - We've allocated 45 minutes, so we may, when that end 15-minute mark is up, indicate if you'd like the opportunity to move into in camera. Then we can do so, if you felt you'd like to offer something further.

**Ms BENNETT** - The biggest thing that we'd to talk about is the impacts of bullying on families, and the impacts of an under-resourced system, potentially, that doesn't offer the supports within the structure of schools that is often needed. The predominant story that we hear - and it seems to be the same story from every family that contacts us - is if bullying restorative practices within schools don't work, the impact that that has on the family life and the impact that has on the family life, and the impact that it has on the student.

What we see is that restorative play in primary school, restorative conversations in high school - when they break down, and they're not working, and bullying continues, parents will often start advocating for their student within that school space, seeking consultation with the principal or senior staff. At that point we see kids really start to withdraw from the school system. They have a fear of going to school. There's a resistance to getting them through the gates. In primary school, kids are missing school because they don't feel safe to be there. The practice that seems to happen is that the onus of protecting themselves is falling to the victim of the bullying.

We hear parents say that they go in and speak to senior staff and they're told that the child that's perpetrated the bullying has had their punishment issued and, 'We can't do anything more because we can't suspend them', often because of a family situation at home. Parents are told that, that the child that's causing harm to my child can't be punished any further because it's a suspension, and that's not the best place for that student at home, which is understandable. We're all very understanding that that is an issue. Then what happens is that the child who is the victim of the bullying will sometimes retaliate and cop a harsher penalty than what has been issued, in the eyes of the student, than the bully themselves. That's causing, for kids - we talk often about for adults, it's really easy for us to understand that there's reasons behind the decisions that are made in the school. There's really easy to understand. But for kids it really is an injustice in this. It's really hard to speak through the injustice caused to that victim.

Then it continues on, and we get kids with school refusal, lack of attendance, and that's not what we want. We need to come up with a solution that really gives a fix to bullying. Let's fix it. I don't know what the answer is.

I also find that often students don't have the power to do the advocacy themselves. There's no means to advocate on your own. If your parents aren't able to step in and advocate in, say, a grade 7 environment, where we know that kids don't have safe adults within schools yet, and they've got that transition - it's obviously a little different in district schools. You don't have that safe environment to go and talk to somebody, there's no way for that student to raise a concern early, so there's no early intervention.

We need a mode that students can have their voice heard, and also speak on behalf of their friends. We hear students who will tell us that their friend is being bullied by somebody and they don't know where to go or where to turn to. We need to create a pathway that allows them to have their own voice and that their voice is heard. I think that's really lacking within the system.

I'm going hand over to Ros, who might like to speak a little bit to the impacts of bullying on her family, in particular, if you're comfortable with doing so.

**Ms WHARTON** - I can do that. Can I just add further to what you just were communicating around the kids not having effective ways to do it? I think that in quite a lot of schools, the teachers don't have any agency to be able to take - one of the topics that came up when I was speaking yesterday with another parent and a teacher, was that the teachers also don't have agency in a lot of schools to be able to make decisions and commitments and affect change in what's actually happening in the schoolyard because it needs to be constantly run through leadership. Which is problematic, if it's a top-down problem, which in some cases it is. In our case it is.

So for our experience: our daughter had her first bullying experience in day care. She was pulled out. Most relevant probably to this particular hearing is her most recent experience was she started grade 7 in high school at a regional school, and she didn't actually even make it to school. She just got on the bus. That was enough - got on the bus and took a seat and then started getting abused and it just grew from there. She didn't do anything and there was no purpose for any of it. She didn't know the girl who had abused her but the girl was a senior girl so she knew everybody at school. It just escalated until halfway through term 2. She was afraid to go back to school because everybody was going to bash her.

We held her back for a week and I thought we'd just let things settle down. At the end of that week, on the night before she went to school, a group of them had passed her mobile number around, which is private and she's been very protective of, but there was a very calculated attack - cyber. I'll call it a 'text message'. It was just all text messages, and the language and the threats - I don't know very many adults who would be able to deal with that, so she didn't return to school. She hasn't returned to school.

We enrolled in an e-school but she's actually currently unable to learn at all. She basically has PTSD. We can't take her anywhere where there are teenagers. She just won't go to the supermarket if it's school's-out time. She won't go to watch her friend play football because there are going to be other kids there.

I've had to stop work and be home full-time and I'm missing something key, I'm sure.

**Ms BENNETT** - I know this place isn't potentially where this comes in, but the process to get into e-school is quite challenging as well. Our children aren't feeling safe to get through

the doors at school but we value education and we want them to continue education. If the school has barriers to providing work, we often have a long gap between kids learning and that's a real problem.

The impacts of bullying are there and they're evident and I believe you probably all have seen the evidence through this - your submissions and everything, but then we have these group of kids who really potentially love school who are missing school for a large chunk of time and we really don't want them disengaged. We don't want any kid disengaged from school but if we're disengaging because of our inability to manage a bullying situation within a school environment and then the school's not prepared to give work to actually compensate and keep them up to date, that's a real problem as well and that's a flow-on effect for all of us.

If we go into in-camera, we can maybe all share some personal stories of how bullying has affected all of us and the impacts it's had at home.

The mental health of the victim of bullying, I find that we often dismiss it. It was an underlying cause that's caused the mental health. It's not the bullying that's the cause but the bullying is tipping kids over edges. We might have some resilience problems and some other things going on in our lives and then the bullying comes in and it tips us over an edge. If we're not prepared as a society to start educating these kids when these things happen, how do we expect them to retain to year 12? How do we get Rosalind's daughter back into the school system after 12 months of grade 7 out of the school system?

**Ms WHARTON** - Our daughter is quite resilient. She's very empathetic and compassionate and we've had very many conversations over the years. Because we live in a smaller community, there are kids and friends from every background. Some kids are more disadvantaged than others, and some kids are more supportive than others. We've had lengthy conversations around what different families look like and what different levels of privilege might look like.

We are privileged because we are able to seek medical help for her. We can pay for a psychologist, we can pay for a counsellor, we can take her to the doctor and the paediatrician and that sort of thing. We make choices that are in her best interest, not necessarily always popular, but every choice we make is in her best interest.

Some of the kids who were perpetrating the bullying were doing it from a place of pain and suffering, so we've talked at length about that and she's empathetic to that. My heart breaks for the perpetrators as much as for my daughter, if I'm really honest, because I couldn't affect any change for them. I couldn't affect any support.

As much as I pleaded with the school, I was super proactive before school, during school, all the way through to communicate with the teachers and with the AST, with the social worker and support workers to let them know that this wasn't okay and it wasn't acceptable. My daughter was suffering. What are you doing to support the children who are actually perpetrating this? If we're spending a dollar and a minute on my child, the victim, we need to be spending \$3 and 10 minutes with these children because they need so much help. If they are doing this to my child, if they are saying these things to my child, what kind of pain are they in? Why are we not taking this as seriously as what it is?

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**Mr ALLAN** - I would add that we put out a set of written responses to ours and we've seen 70-something -

**Ms BENNETT** - Sixty-five written responses.

**Mr ALLAN** - The majority are telling stories like this. I'm sure that many of the submissions to your panel have the same from direct responses.

We also note that in terms of data, there is a lot of data supporting that this is happening in our schools. Even if we look at the school engagement surveys, we see that somewhere in the order of half of students reported that they experience physical bullying in the previous 12 months. That's reported as high engagement in the way that data is presented and it's reported as positive in terms of 'not low'. Not low is suggesting a major problem, whereas in practice the reported numbers are in that medium category. That means that it's more than half.

**CHAIR** - Thank you, Ros.

John, you've just touched on what my question was going to be. Regarding that survey you did, you have some quantitative results but also qualitative commentary through your report. I wondered if you could confidentially make that available to the committee?

**Mr ALLAN** - We have some problems on confidentiality of the way that information was collected insofar as we may not be able to provide the direct responses to you because we didn't -

**Ms BENNETT** - We didn't openly say that we would provide the responses, just that we would collate it so people have that ability to be very open about what they said without the ability for people to go, 'I know who wrote that response.' A lot of parents were very open with the schools that they were attached with. It would be a bit challenging and specific teachers, there was a lot of information that - people were very generous with their responses because we said that we wouldn't share with anyone.

**CHAIR** - That is fine. We appreciate you putting those that you felt that you could throughout the work of your submission. The other question that I wanted to ask before I move to Vica is you talk about school culture and you talk about the fact that the Department for Education, Children and Young People have a standard set of values that schools adhere to and embed in the philosophies and ethos of their school. You talk about the fact that through the consultation you have done, feedback from parents and others would be better if schools were able to develop their own set of values. I wondered if you might elaborate a bit on that for the committee?

**Ms BENNETT** - There is a number of schools that have kept their old values embedded in their community and are shadowing them with the DECYP values because they feel the values they have created have been in consultation with students, parents and staff. They run with those values as an ethos of the school. They sit in every assembly, they sit in rewards, they sit in the language of the school. The new values do not necessarily have the same and potentially they will eventually, but currently they do not. So it feels almost prescriptive and sits over the top and what does it really mean when, for example, connectedness, the new value; it is a good value to have, but for some schools, inclusiveness is working better and to the change to connectedness is not working.

It is really to that language and all the teachers speak it and if you are involved in a school that has not changed, it is there in every assembly that you attend, it is in every school association committee meeting, it is in every single aspect of the school, that language of those values are so embedded in practice and there is a lot of resistance to the new ones.

**Ms WHARTON** - I worked with Bicheno Primary several years ago, which is just a tiny little school, but I was a part of the process of creating their values. It was my job to come up with different language to sort of trial. Then we actually worked with the students and with every class there were student representatives to create what the values were and what they meant. It was a really beautiful and connective experience for the students and the teachers.

**Mr ALLAN** - I would also add, I think it is as much about the buy-in to implementation as it is to the words themselves because, at the end of the day, any values statement, they are all more or less saying the same thing in perhaps a slightly different set of words or priority of themes, but where there is not that buy in to those values and that ownership- ownership comes as a prerequisite to buy in, that they are not able to implement them in that same way, you know, how does this behaviour represent our schools' values?

**Ms BENNETT** - And I did hear a student say that we do not have to 'aspire to' anymore because it is not a value anymore. Just what we want!

**Mr BAYLEY** - I wanted to go to culture as well, because that is where you started with your submission and I guess also to point to some of your recommendations around enhancing training, education, and awareness. I am interested in the link between that. First thing I want to say, thank you, Ros, for sharing your story and acknowledge the pain and your efforts and how brave it is to share that with us.

Have you seen across schools where values are taken up fully or that culture has better results when it comes to bullying and the restorative actions and the agency of teachers? Are you seeing a direct correlation there? You are one of the kind of unique organisations I think that has perspective across the state school system and the diversity of different cultures in the senior leadership teams. I would love to see - we have the data in terms of the survey, but also - your anecdotal observations and analysis as well.

**Ms BENNETT** - This is a tricky one for us so often because the experience we have sometimes comes from our own personal experience and it blurs some lines with openness, I guess. The schools that I have had contact with that have strong leadership that have not changed to the DECYP values tend to have strong leadership support within their schools. That is my perception. I am not sure how it correlates to the bullying cultures within schools. I can speak to some of my experience in high school space and the culture that bullying is not tolerated, and the restorative action that seems to work and the contacts that I have with friends who have entered into that high school space, that is different across schools. Some schools seem to offer soft punishments to students as a first resort and it often does not get to suspension. I am not sure how it tracks in suspension data though.

I have some experience with friends who are entered into the independent/Catholic sector and their experience of bullying is that it's often addressed a lot earlier because there's mechanisms for students to raise their concerns a lot earlier, so things get stamped out earlier. Not to say that there isn't bullying within those spaces, and it certainly pushes a little bit more

online - is their experience - than what it is in the school grounds. Yes, that probably doesn't answer your question.

**Ms WHARTON** - I can speak to the two different cultures that I've observed in my area, but I'm not sure whether or not that should perhaps be in camera because I'd like to not -

**Mr BAYLEY** - Sure, however you'd like to do it. We will come back.

**Mr ALLAN** - I would say that, I think, fundamentally, if teaching staff are actively looking out for the interests of the children in their care and advocating for those interests and are able to deal with things within their own remit, a lot of problems don't seem to metastasise as much. You see that where there is higher and lower turnover in staff, for example. Where, if you look at the student engagement survey results on a per school basis, that connectedness - I think from one of the questions is - there is someone, a staff member, I know and trust at the school. That may not be precise verbiage. They also have lower levels of some of the other measures that are negative. I think that, in terms of the culture of how the school engage with the children in their care can make a lot of difference in terms of those outcomes.

**Ms BENNETT** - Yes, I'd probably add, too, the involvement of parents; bringing parents in from both sides. The students who are perpetrating the bullying, their parents are brought into the school and it's a community approach to restorative action. It's not just kept in-house. There's a difference in schools with that approach as well. Some schools have a mindset that parents don't want to be engaged and that they're not going to turn up so they don't bother trying. I find that sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. Let's be honest, it's a mixed bag of how that works in the real world. But I know families who have had children who have been perpetrating bullying. They have been brought in and there's been conversations about how we can improve this and the consequences are discussed with the parents alongside the student and the consequences of those actions if it continues, what will happen. There's a real shared responsibility because we're raising children in a community and we feel like sometimes we forget that. That we silo bullying in schools and it's all addressed by the schools, but we're not bringing in the community to help address that.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Is there a jurisdiction that does it really well to your knowledge and your experience, interstate or overseas?

**Ms BENNETT** - I've heard some really positive things out of the UK, where there's not suspensions, that they actually go to another facility and they have a lot more restorative practice around having the additional mental health supports in place. It's not just teachers; they're receiving their education but also having the mental healthcare. If you're suspended from school, you're removed from your school but you're not out of school itself. I haven't looked into whether that's actually a positive. They certainly do things a lot differently over there, with police action and all sorts of things happening.

**Ms WHARTON** - Change the language a little bit too. Rather than the bullying being a bad behaviour, the bullying is a symptom of somebody who needs help. Bullying does not equal power; bullying means weak, need help, that sort of thing.

**Ms BENNETT** - When we spoke with Ros online - did you refer to it when we renamed a King Hit to a Coward Punch? Let's rename bullying and have this notion that you see bullying, you go and get help for the bully, not the victim. We really need to change the way we are



addressing bullying in schools. It's actually not the victim who is weak. It's actually something that's going on with that bully.

I thought that was really amazing, given the experience that she'd gone through, that she could be so compassionate and empathetic to the bullies, especially in her situation. Amazing.

**Ms WHARTON** - It's common sense, really - sorry, I had a thought and it's gone.

**Ms BENNETT** - It'll come back.

**Ms JOHNSTON** - Thank you so much for sharing. In particular you, Ros. It is certainly an amazing job that you're doing as a mum. Well done.

I'm really keen to explore one of your recommendations. You talk about developing a support system for parents of victims. Perhaps, Ros, you can do it in the public forum but if you can explain the kinds of support that you are provided with from the school, the school community - or maybe not provided, that might be the issue - and how you think that can be done better. Obviously, there is significant impact on your daughter and on children who are bullied in particular. What can be done to support parents through that really difficult time?

**Ms WHARTON** - It's a really good question. It's one that I've pondered endlessly. There is no clear action and there was no clear action to be taken when I sought help from the school. Initially, my daughter didn't want me to contact the school because she felt that it would make the bullying worse - and I respected that.

After about a week, I contacted the AST to let him know that this was going on and to let him know that this was my daughter's request, but can you please take under advisement that this is happening and take a look at the situation. However, because it was on the bus, there was no accountability for the school. The same logic is applied to the device. Unless it's actually in the school grounds, there's no support, or there's no action to be taken. The bus drivers can't be held accountable for that. They shouldn't be having to monitor what's going on on the bus, as well as keep our children safe by driving the bus.

This may speak to school culture. From my experience, the people who I dealt with were beautiful and heartfelt and really wanted to help. There's a lot of really stunning and amazing, talented people at the school. But they were unable to do anything ultimately, always having to refer back to leadership. There was no agency for any of them to make a decision or see a course of action, or advise anything, without referring back to leadership or protocol, or anything like that. There's probably a longer conversation there in school culture, which we can continue.

**Ms JOHNSTON** - In terms of supporting your daughter to continue with her education, while she didn't feel safe to be in the physical school environment, were they able to provide you with resources?

**Ms WHARTON** - No.

**Ms JOHNSTON** - You spoke earlier about problems with eSchooling and that gap between being able to enrol in eSchool. Is that on an individual teacher basis, is that a decision

the school makes or the principal makes, in terms of providing - were you given a reason why they couldn't provide you? If your child had COVID, I'm assuming that they could do that.

**Ms WHARTON** - No. No, I did ask several times for work to be sent home. Again, it was always, 'We'll need to talk to' and 'we'll get to', and nothing eventuated. I had no clue about eSchool. This has come out of the blue for us. I didn't know that eSchool existed; I just thought there was either school or home school. The doctor told me about eSchool and said, 'This is what we'll do.' It was like, 'Okay, right.'

**Ms BENNETT** - How long had she not been at school at that point?

**Ms WHARTON** - A month. To be able to enrol in eSchool we needed to be able to see the paediatrician. We needed a letter from him. We couldn't see him for three months, he was away, and he doesn't read emails or do anything in between, other than prescriptions, if need be. So, we had to suffice with a report from the psychologist. She was amazing and, thankfully, she had been seeing somebody for long enough that she was able to be comprehensive in her recommendation, and that was enough - but we were lucky.

**Ms BENNETT** - That wasn't a school psychologist either, was it? It was a private psychologist.

**Ms WHARTON** - No, private.

**CHAIR** - Did you feel that you were well supported from the Education Department point of view, with their support staff and the support network around your family?

**Ms WHARTON** - I wasn't, no. Not at all. Not for lack of wanting. I need to be clear that everybody who I dealt with wanted to help, but were unable to.

**CHAIR** - Was that due to the lack of those specialist staff?

**Ms WHARTON** - Lack of specialist staff, lack of support staff, lack of agency to be able to make the call. We had started before the school year started. We had asked to be referred through to the school psychologist and social worker, and by the middle of term 2, once everything had escalated, that still hadn't happened.

**Mr ALLAN** - I want to add to the point around the support group, that in doing our consultation for this submission, we found that there were a lot of very common themes from people where they had the same experience. Or 'person A' - even during our calls, 'person A' knew about a particular pathway to get services or support, and nobody else knew. Those kinds of things are valuable when you do have a support group of any kind, and that's talking to our submission.

We also were discussing this morning about students - the students themselves being part of a support network for each other as well.

**Mr WILLIE** - I'm interested in this delineation between school and home. Obviously, that's very complex. There's social media, there's bus trips, there's walking to school. Was the school very firm that 'we can't deal with that at all', or did they make any attempts to speak with the other family of the student who was perpetrating?

**Ms WHARTON** - There were multiple students. Our experience was quite widespread. There was a group of kids that was targeting our daughter. To my knowledge, there were no repercussions for any of the children, or conversations with any of the parents. These kids are coming from very different backgrounds. It's likely there was no positive change to be effected by having those conversations with the parents, which is where our schools need more support.

**Mr WILLIE** - Yes, it is where some of this is cyclical too, isn't it? If you had supportive parents of the perpetrator, potentially it could have been a conversation between the school and some corrective -

**Ms WHARTON** - My instinct was to bring the children in. Because we live where we live, our school pool is quite spread out. To get from where they live to where we live is a 45-minute drive. They're not nearby. In the past, what we have done is literally invite them into our home - it's that whole 'it takes a village' thing. If there's no support at home, then let's bring them into ours, and maybe that's enough to help them see that there's other choices that can be made, and other ways to be. But there for the grace of God go I. When I was a child, I didn't have a great childhood or a great family life. But because of the kindness of other parents, I'm able to say, actually, I'm okay. I can be employed and I can have a good life. That's the ethos that I move forward with.

The school system - it seems like there's money going into education, but the allocation of those funds is dodgy. We need to be clear about where those resources need to go, so that we can support our disadvantaged families so that they know that there's better choices to be made and there are other paths to walk.

**Mr WILLIE** - This one is probably a bit left-field, probably for John and Jess. Obviously social media, there's a lot of discussion at a national level around bans for teenagers. We've had a mobile phone policy implemented across schools. I'm interested in whether that's had any impact on bullying and discrimination in schools and how that's being enforced.

**Mr ALLAN** - I'm sure it's in the submission, but I don't recall from the data that we collected that there was anything that really stood out about mobile phones and social media, just that it was a vector of communication as part of -

**Ms BENNETT** - Our student wellbeing data really reflected the same - around 30 per cent of kids experience cyber bullying, and obviously given that our data and the collective data from schools is from grade 4 through to year 10, that probably tracks that a lot of the cyber stuff is happening in the higher grades. The mobile phone bans in schools - there are a lot of sneaky practices from kids. Kids are pretty clever at getting around -

**Ms WHARTON** - They just don't hand them in.

**Ms BENNETT** - But I'm not sure that the sneaky method is to bully kids at that point in time. I suspect a lot of that - I don't know, this is anecdotal - I suspect a lot of that happens outside of school, so not necessarily cyber bullying within the school. That, again, is why schools say 'not our concern'. We got that picture from a lot of parents, that schools say, 'It's happening online. It's not our concern'. It's the same with bus stops, buses and outside of school, the bullying is coming out of school into the community with the same kids from your school.

## PUBLIC

It also comes back into the school, but it's not overt bullying within the school grounds, so therefore it's not treated as it maybe should be.

Again, it comes back to that village. We're all responsible for raising our kids, and if something is happening with your school kids outside of school and parents aren't doing the job that maybe they should be, then who is responsible? We need to create good, positive examples for our kids. If for some families that is the school, then we need to create that so that the school steps in and says, 'Actually this is not acceptable behaviour, and these are the consequences of those actions in the school environment'. Whether we should or shouldn't, or whether it's right or wrong, really goes out of the window when we look at kids disengaging from school. As a society, we have responsibility. It's everyone's job.

**Ms WHARTON** - It doesn't matter where you come from; every child deserves to have a solid start.

**Ms BENNETT** - They all deserve to feel safe, and if the bullying is happening outside of school and that student is not feeling safe to turn up at school, then it is a school's responsibility. If it's affecting data and engagement with learning, it might be happening outside of the school gates, but it's affecting school life.

**CHAIR** - If you'd like us to go in camera, please indicate that now and we can do that. Is there anything else that you'd like to say confidentially, or do you think we've covered it?

**Mr ALLAN** - I think it's probably worth us briefly having that off the broadcast discussion.

**CHAIR** - Stop the broadcast, please.

**The committee suspended at 11.44 a.m.**

## PUBLIC

**The committee resumed at 12.00 p.m.**

**CHAIR** - Welcome, Mat, to today's hearing of the Government Administration Committee A inquiring into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. We thank you very much for your comprehensive submission you have provided on behalf of Tasmanian principals.

Could we begin please by stating your name and the capacity in which you're appearing before our committee today?

**Mr GRINING** - Mat Grining, President of the Tasmanian Principals Association.

**CHAIR** - I'm Anita Dow, the Chair of the committee. The other members are Josh Willie, Kristie Johnston and Vica Bayley, and Miriam Beswick is online.

Can I confirm that you've received and read the guide sent to you by the committee secretary?

**Mr GRINING** - Yes.

**CHAIR** - This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, allowing individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place outside the parliament. This protection is not accorded to you statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing is public. The public and media may be present. Should you wish aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to the committee at this time.

I'm going to get you to make a declaration for the committee.

Do you solemnly promise and declare that the evidence you shall give to the committee shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

**Mr GRINING** - Yes, I do.

**CHAIR** - Thank you very much. Before we offer you the opportunity to make an opening statement to us, I want to recognise that during these hearings we may discuss highly sensitive matters that may have deeply impacted the lives of Tasmanians. This may be a trigger for individuals listening to or participating in these proceedings. I'd encourage anyone impacted by the content matter during this hearing to contact services and support such as Lifeline Tasmania 1800 984 434, Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

If you'd like to make an opening statement to the committee, that would be most welcome.

**Mr GRINING** – Sure. Thanks for the opportunity to be able to provide first a submission and, more broadly, to provide a platform for discussing the issues of bullying and discrimination across the education landscape in Tasmania.

It was heartening to see that it was inclusive of all sectors of government and non-government in education, because any educator or educational leader would absolutely

agree the children in our schools and colleges and communities, we have a collective responsibility irrespective of the sector or government or non-government system we may be a part of. I applaud the members of parliament for agreeing to and committing to this process as well.

As detailed in our submission, there are certainly two lines there on discrimination and bullying. We probably should pick those up and explore those as to quite separate themes, but also appreciating there are times when we see the impacts of those intersecting in schools, whether it be for our students, for our workforce, for our educational leaders and our members, in our case for the Principals Association, and there can be times when we do see those two factors of discrimination and bullying intersecting.

There are certainly a number of strengths we see in being a government system and of which our members are obviously a part of. We represent government principals, educational leaders and also those in non-school based roles that may still have maintained a membership with the Principals Association.

Certainly, the strength of being a system is we are a system that has some really clear expectations, policies and procedures that are either directed by or informed by relevant acts of parliament or pieces of legislation. Certainly, with respect to discrimination, we feel there are some very robust procedures and pieces of legislation that direct how schools, school leaders and our employer need to conduct themselves to ensure that we are part of a broader educational landscape in public education that is free from discrimination.

**CHAIR** - Thank you very much. I'll start with a question in relation to your submission. Obviously this is in relation to discrimination and bullying, the work of this inquiry, but it is a good opportunity to put on the public record some of the pressures that our principals are facing across our schools across the state. You've highlighted some of the issues and challenges around discrimination and bullying. What are some of the other challenges that they're currently facing? Do you or they feel that they are being well-supported, particularly in the public education system by the Department, with the resources, and the support, whether that's psychosocial support or practical support, to do their job and to actually deal with this issue across schools?

**Mr GRINING** - Thanks for that question. There would certainly be a response that would be quite individualised and quite unique. The experiences of one principal or school leader might be quite different depending on context, depending on years of experience, depending on access to peer supports or external supports. Irrespective of your time in the role or your time in that community, one thing that all principals would experience that are impacted from your question would probably be role clarity and expectation.

What is expected of a principal in 2024 by their community, by the employer, by broader society is quite different from what it was 10 years ago. The feedback from our members would be that whilst the expectations on school leaders in their communities has continued to change as society has changed, the nature and access to supports probably hasn't been relative to that change, I'd say. We would implore that our system, our government, our heads of agency would continue to closely monitor the expectations of school leaders and the role clarity around the principalship, so that there can be some alignment between the resources and supports and the experiences of the people on the ground in their schools and communities.

**CHAIR** - Thank you. I am going to go to Miriam first this time to see if she has a question.

**Mrs BESWICK** - What do you see as the biggest barriers for dealing with bullying in schools?

**Mr GRINING** - One of the biggest barriers or challenges is the influence, and resources, and support, and connection that we have with families. Across a number of different social services and agencies other than education, they would report that it is increasingly difficult to engage families for a range of reasons. The societal structure is quite different for this current generation of students that we see coming through, and the access to family supports. Whether it be being able to physically have parents come in and have a conference with a family or being able to have phone contacts, or even around having some clear and consistent messages between home and school to support the young people that we're committed to. That is a real challenge. The way that we can connect with and engage with families continues to be a real challenge that that can be a real enabler, but also a real barrier as well.

**Mrs BESWICK** - In your submission you're talking about managing underperforming staff and supporting - having more of our systems around that. What does that look like, do you think?

**Mr GRINING** - Yes, sure. My last response was probably in relation to any reports of student level bullying. When we surveyed our members, we asked some questions in relation to student-level experiences: student to the respondent, the parent-level to the respondent, community-level, but also within the workforce and from the employer as well. There can certainly be challenges when you have members of your workforce where there are sustained negative targeted behaviours from them. There would be suggestions and experiences from members where the conduct of staff may not be in line with the State Service Code of Conduct or the Professional Standards in Education. Therefore, the opportunity to be able to take that person through a performance management pathway - which is detailed, but it is very challenging being the site manager, being the coach of that staff member, but also needing to take that person through a performance management process.

**Mrs BESWICK** - That would also be the same any other way around too, if you've got complaints from lower level staff towards your principals.

**Mr GRINING** - Absolutely. We would want to see that there is trust and transparency, and having that step removed. From both sides of the coin, I think it's so important that there is a process where there is a step removed where people can access those types of supports, so that they can continue to undertake the operational requirements of their role, whether it be as a principal, a class teacher, or any other role. It is a step removed from that relationship, so some appropriate supports can be accessed as well.

**Mr WILLIE** - Wasn't that supposed to happen through the Principal Action Plan, Mat?

**Mr GRINING** - That's right, Josh. We're finding that where people have been able to access that resource, that has been well received, but it hasn't been as comprehensive as our members would suggest. Access has been challenging.

**Ms JOHNSTON** - Thanks Mat. We've heard time and time again through submissions and our hearings how important senior leadership is in each school. From your opening statements you highlighted the challenges and expectations from the various parties in a school community, whether it be the school community itself or the Department. I'm guessing that the view of the association is that principals are very well-placed to understand the needs specific to their school communities, recognising that no one school is exactly the same as the other. Cohorts are different, and the needs of those communities are quite unique. How do you feel principals are supported in advocating to the Department, particularly when it comes to supporting students with great need, whether they live with a disability or whether they have unique needs or addressing bullying? How well do you think the Department is in terms of being responsive to unique suggestions from principals, for instance?

**Mr GRINING** - I've got that question, I just need to adjust my Internet connection, if that's okay. Excuse me for a moment.

Sorry about that, Kristie, not enough hamsters running in the wheels to keep the Internet running on the north-west coast at the moment.

As far as how well-placed our principals are to be able to advocate for the unique needs of students in student cohort groups in their school communities -

**Ms JOHNSTON** - And whether they're supported in doing so.

**Mr GRINING** - We do have some processes that are unique to Tasmania, which we should be proud of. One of them is around trauma funding and trauma-supported processes. We can nominate students, recognising they may sit outside of the current disability adjustments moderation process that we have.

We've seen great improvements in both of those areas, both in disability adjustments and how we gather evidence for and advocate for resources for students in that space. We also have a trauma moderation process to ensure there are appropriate levels of resource aligned to students, whether it's recognised trauma. Ultimately, we want to align some resources so they have appropriate access to curriculum and school level experiences as well. Those are two areas that we have seen fundamental changes, which is worth celebrating. When we're around a national table, we have some stronger processes than what some of our state and territory colleagues would report as well.

With respect to some other groups and, for the purpose of this conversation I'll describe as minority groups or groups that may be marginalised or not as well represented in particular school communities, there probably still is a level of autonomy that the school leaders have at a school level around either providing access to supports or access to resources more so than advocating at a Departmental level, if that makes sense.

The challenge is the access on the ground, whether you're in Hobart, a regional area or an isolated area. The access to the supports and resources or specialists really is post code dependent. We really do see the impacts of that as well. Whether that be with respect to social work or school psychology services, even private services through NDIS or any other complementary or allied health services, we are greatly impacted at a geographical level at the moment in ways that we haven't seen before.



**Ms JOHNSTON** - That speaks to the resourcing and supports available to a school community and the principal in particular. What about in terms of policy or school values? I'm not sure if you managed to hear the evidence of our previous witnesses where they talked about the DECYP values that are now universal across all schools, but then some schools are maintaining their core values they've had for a long time because there's been buy-in and ownership from their school communities about that. How are principals supported to empower school communities to reflect those values or policies that are needed in their communities, which probably do align with the greater DECYP values, but are unique to each school community?

**Mr GRINING** - As far as the contextualising, I think that came into the part of your first question as well. There's still the opportunity to be able to contextualise the improvement journey or the journey of your school community with respect to community voice, student voice, respect and acknowledge history from the community. I can point to a number of examples where schools have a very firm commitment to the Department's values around ways of working and implementation of the Department strategic plan, but they also have held really dear their school level expectations, values or norms, around recognisable behaviours that they pick up on and celebrate in their school community. What probably sits above that is that it's so important that there are some authentic opportunities for school communities to be involved in that level of decision making, direction and operation of a school.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Thanks for your submission. Through the submissions and the evidence, we've already heard so much about the importance and significance of the senior leadership group within a school and its trickle-down effect on these issues. I want to acknowledge and thank you and all principals for your work. You're also in a unique situation. You mentioned in your opening about how things change. Things are different today from 10 years ago and 10 years before. I'm interested in your observation, and principals' observations, as to the quality, adjustment and preparedness of graduates who are coming into your schools to identify these issues and be empowered. I guess, based on their training and their life experience as opposed to the culture of the school, be empowered to escalate or do something about them. I am interested in a comment about the quality of the education that graduates are getting and how ready they are for 2024 school life.

**Mr GRINING** - Sure. I guess if we're taking the angle around discrimination and bullying as far as the preparation around understanding the complexities or nuances and navigating that -

**Mr BAYLEY** - Absolutely.

**Mr GRINING** - It's really interesting and I'll flesh a few things out as well. Typically, a four year education degree or a two years master's degree, and that is if you have a pre-existing degree, would be enough to have a teacher's registration in Tasmania. Then you would typically start your entry into the profession with DECYP or a non-government provider.

For a number of years we've had limited authority to teach - LAT is the acronym. In other states and territories, it might be called a commission to teach. If there was a particular workforce shortage, let's say in an area of being a Japanese teacher, or in being an MDT - materials designer technology teacher - you might be granted a LAT to do that before fully completing your degree.

What we're seeing now is that there is a significant percentage of 4th year Bachelor of Education students who haven't completed their qualification, or those who are in that second year of their Masters of Teaching who haven't completed their masters, who are in classroom with the same level of expectations as their peers around them. So, our early career teachers are now a large cohort of those who haven't completed their qualification, Vica. That has provided a real challenge there as well.

Whilst recent industrial agreements have provided the same level of mentoring supports to this cohort as people in their first two years of their degree, the first two years of their career it would have, we don't have the level of mentoring and support and senior leadership accessibility that we would like. So, the people in the formative stages of their career haven't got that ideal level of modelling and mentoring and unpacking and almost like that professional supervision that you would like them to have that a graduate psychologist or social worker might have. But those larger ethical and moral and professional challenges that you might be experiencing early on in your career, you need to unpack with someone. And because we've got our early career teachers and our pre-graduates, we've got a compression at both points there around what that looks like on the ground.

Back to the first part of the question around how well prepared they are from the perspective of principals, there is a very narrow part of a four year bachelor degree that focuses on disability. That is the voice from our members, particularly those who are highly experienced in working in the nature of adjustments based education and disability. They share that they find they need to always retrain staff, retrain graduates, almost for a 12 month period. We have some principals and school leaders who actually then provide a peer support for 12 months, so there is team teaching for one class for a 12 month period, so that they are best prepared in working with students with high and complex needs with respect to disability as well.

**Mr BAYLEY** - In Tasmania, is there a relationship and a conversation about that curriculum that's delivered at the university level, at the bachelor degree or masters degree level between principals and the university? Do you have input into that to try to beef things out in different areas so that those graduates are more work ready, school ready?

**Mr GRINING** - Great question. We have shared those concerns at the University of Tasmania Course Advisory Committee, and through some other forums as well. We also understand that there would be some challenges with viability of degrees. Whilst some members would say it would be terrific to have a specialist degree or post-grad qualification, specifically around inclusive education, there are some challenges - I understand - around the viability of numbers to be able to get a course off the ground that is specific to a particular area. That is a broader issue that we are seeing for teacher training in Tasmania, Vica.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Yes. Thank you. Mat.

**CHAIR** - Do you have anything further -

**Mr BAYLEY** - No, that is good. Thank you.

**Mr WILLIE** - You have discussed some of it, but obviously the workforce challenges are known to be significant across the country. Some of the things that you are recommending in your submission are not new. We know how important leadership and culture is in school.

We talked a bit about training and mentoring. I am interested in other practical things that could be done to make sure that we have these positive practices and cultures in schools that you are recommending, across the board rather than to the ground.

**Mr GRINING** - We always - by 'we' I am talking about the profession, more broadly. I always appreciate when there is really strong public messaging about the value of education and public education and valuing the workforce. There is a number of papers that point to post-COVID, particularly, in states and territories or jurisdictions where there was a long period of lockdown and learning from home where parents were the educators. I am not sure if any of you in the room found yourselves in a similar position. That did see an upswing in the appreciation and gratitude for the complexity of teaching and education.

We would also find that it has probably shifted back to a pre-COVID sense of a challenging behaviour that is directed at schools. Sometimes, it does cross the line. I appreciate that we have seen some campaigns like that, Josh. The 'crossing the line' campaign around when repeated emails goes too far, when a complaint oversteps the mark. There is some really sound messaging in that campaign. However, we still do find that, whether it is experienced by the teacher or experienced by a principal or school leader, that some of the processes in handling undesirable, unwarranted, sustained and repetitive behaviour that crosses the line probably isn't strong enough.

We could have some stronger accountabilities or processes in managing and protecting our public servants, our workforce, from what we would consider bullying behaviour. The sustained, continuous, aggressive behaviour that is impacting someone's wellbeing and the person has a knowledge that he is going to do that. We would like to see some stronger steps in place. We have some jurisdictions like Queensland that have put some stronger worker protections in place in that sense as well.

**Mr WILLIE** - You would like to see that as a recommendation of the committee?

**Mr GRINING** - Yes, we certainly do. I appreciate Miriam's early question around both sides of the coin, around the complaints process there as well. It would feel that there are multiple opportunities for a member of the public to make an unwarranted and continued and sustained grievance towards a public servant, a member of the Education Department, a principal or school leader when it has been found that there is no case to answer, Josh. Stronger processes to protect our members in the face of vexatious complaints.

**Mr WILLIE** - Stronger processes around complaints and also public education around some of these important values around schools and how important the work is that you are doing, and respect?

**Mr GRINING** - Absolutely. They are two things that we would hope to see some cut through in the broader community.

**CHAIR** - On the Queensland model, are you able to detail that or is that something that you could provide some further information to the committee out of session?

**Mr GRINING** - Yes, sure. Happy to provide that out of session, if you like.

**CHAIR** - Thank you. That would be great.

**Mr GRINING** - I could send it through to the secretary?

**CHAIR** - Yes, please. I had one more question and then I will go to, Vica.

I was quite concerned when I read through your submission. Obviously, you have presented some examples of the impact of discrimination and bullying on students and also on principals and the teaching staff. That survey result you presented is pretty alarming. I am interested if you think that this type of culture and the high incidences around harassment, bullying, particularly for principals and teachers, is leading them to leave the profession, and what you think we can do about that?

**Mr GRINING** - Thanks, Anita. I guess I need to say that it is not the overwhelming majority of principals who have those sorts of experiences and it is important that that is not lost. The data from the national survey with the Australian Catholic University is really quite compelling. It has sustained over 13 years now that we are seeing those trends and they do cover government and non-government school leaders. I guess that needs to be highlighted as well, whilst our members survey was just with government school leaders.

Certainly though, with respect to bullying, and so not with discrimination, around those highest levels that were of intensity that were from parents, that there certainly is some significant and long-lasting impacts as well. Whilst we do not have access to workers compensation or work injury data, it may be worth exploring that further as part of the inquiry as well so that we do have something tangible around understanding the impact, and also understanding and respecting that not everybody does report a workplace injury when it is a psychological injury. We have some work to do around that, around appreciating that a workplace injury with emotional/psychological is just as valid and warranted for support and for documentation and follow up and review as a physical injury would be as well.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Thanks, Mat. You have pulled out social media influence as the first in three contributing factors to bullying. We have heard evidence, alarming evidence, about that including just simple text messages as opposed to social media itself. You have lived through the phone ban in Tasmanian schools, and there is a national conversation going on about social media access for teenagers under a certain age, and so forth. I am interested in your perspectives.

I note, also, there are no recommendations pertaining to social media or technology. I am interested in you unpacking the influence of social media and technology a little bit more in this space, both on students - and I am hearing you loudly in relation to bullying of staff and discrimination of staff and principals as well.

**Mr GRINING** - Yes sure, thanks, Vica. I guess this was prior to South Australia putting the recommendation to parliament around increasing the age of access for social media as well. As far as phone bans, it was interesting to see Tasmanians approaching the other states and territories. I would say Tasmania had a really sound approach as far as no access; 'off-and-away all day' has essentially been the mantra in a majority of schools. We are supporting resources to help school communities understand that. I will say that has been largely well received and also well respected by students.

When you talk with students, they understand what the rules of engagement are with their personal devices in schools. We are also not naïve, so I understand that teenagers will always have some bumps along their journey and sometimes give in to the phone that might be in the locker, just a quick check or check their Snapchat streak during a break time. I would say, overall, that has not been pervasive into their learning; as far as the access of phones at school, that has not been a major contributing factor.

It is the out-of-hours stuff, Vica, that we do see that on arrival at school can consume a disproportionate amount of time of the class teacher, of the school leadership team, of the school support team, the professional support staff, the social worker, school chaplain, and school psychologist. Certainly, whilst this is not the position of our association, from experience, from me personally, lifting the age of access to social media is something that, from lived experience, I would certainly support.

**Mr BAYLEY** - The extent of social media use in relation to bullying of teachers and principals is a strong theme in your submission. Can you talk to that a little bit?

**Mr GRINING** - I have personally seen it and also had it reported by colleagues, whether it be memes that have been created on one particular platform that paints a staff member in a really negative light, screenshots of conversations between students, both current or previous students, that demonise or essentially victimises staff members. We've seen TikTok videos that have been created of staff members matching them up in particular relationships in a derogatory way as well. Whilst they might be individual things in isolation - and I guess we're considering the definition of bullying around it being sustained - if you're someone who is experiencing just this in isolation on top of a number of other things that are impacting your mental health at work, that can absolutely have a significant negative impact as well.

We also see that there are parents or community members who will directly contact staff, even though they might have the appropriate protections and privacy settings on their own social media accounts. There are many cases where members of the public or school community have no hesitation in contacting their child's teacher, principal or a member of their leadership team with something that is completely inappropriate - either a personal attack or a completely inappropriate encroachment on their personal time.

**Mr BAYLEY** - Would you describe that as a big problem?

**Mr GRINING** - I'd say that it is as far as the breadth of impact and the breadth of people who are impacted by it. It's not as simple as turning off your own social media account or not touching your phone from 5.00 p.m. until 8.00 a.m., because that should be an opportunity for you to be able to disconnect from work-related contact and content. However, when it is stepping into your personal time and personal life, we see that that it can have a significant impact, and that is reported by members and also by staff in our schools as well.

**Mr BAYLEY** - That's completely understandable.

**CHAIR** - If there were just three things that you could leave with this committee today on behalf of your membership for our report and recommendations to the Tasmanian parliament, what would they be?

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**Mr GRINING** - I guess appreciating that this is a cycle [TBC] issue - that this isn't an issue that sits within a particular school sector. I feel confident that our non-government colleagues would stand with us with that as well. There is a number of forums where we do sit together and discuss issues that cut through school and education broadly, and we see the same issues described in our non-government schools, our Catholic schools and independent schools as we do in our public system. Thank you for exploring this and giving it the level of emphasis that it absolutely deserves.

I guess a second message is that the strength of the system is that we do have some strong processes and illustrations in our schools of where policies and practices to ensure that discrimination isn't a part of a school or college or of our system are really strong, and something that stands really up well.

The third thing would be that we need to continue to adapt our resource and alignment to what is fair and reasonable to expect of principals and school leaders as well. Let's get that definition of a principal and that role clarity really clear. What is it that's always of government, of agency and of community? What do we expect of our principals and school leaders? Let's make sure our resource alignment is relative to that as well.

**CHAIR** - Thanks, Mat. I think that's a great way to end your contribution to our committee this morning. I thank you very much for presenting, and ask that you extend our thanks to your membership as well for the submission.

Before we finish, I need to reiterate to you that what you've said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table, you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments you may make to anyone, including the media, even if you're just repeating what you have said to us here in this forum. I hope that's clear to you and we thank you very much for your submission and for your contribution to our committee today.

**Mr GRINING** - Thanks, Anita. Thanks all. Nice to meet you all too.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**

**The committee suspended at 12.41 p.m.**