

Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) Submission to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

Introduction

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the **Anti-Bullying Rapid Review**. APPA is the national voice for over 7,600 primary school leaders across Australia and provides this submission grounded in our members' commitment to student wellbeing and learning. We believe every child has the right to feel safe, respected, and included at school, and that the foundation for learning rests on this sense of belonging and security.

Bullying is not solely a school issue. It is a broader societal concern that requires a united national approach. We therefore support the development of a consistent, inclusive, and action-oriented national standard that is community-informed, school-ready, and fit for purpose across diverse educational contexts.

1. Successful Policies, Models, and Practices

Many schools across Australia use whole-school wellbeing frameworks that proactively build a culture of safety, inclusion, and mutual respect. Key success factors include:

- **Student agency and voice** in the design, implementation, and evaluation of strategies to prevent and address bullying;
- Intentional **social-emotional learning programs** that develop empathy, resilience, peace enabling and conflict-resolution skills;
- Whole-school approaches like **Restorative Practices**, where accountability and relationship repair are prioritised over punishment;
- Proven programs such as **Dan Kearn's 'Good Guys' and 'Girl Power'**, which help students understand 'mean on purpose' behaviour and appropriate responses;
- Embedded **responsive classroom** strategies and trauma-aware practices that focus on building inclusive, connected learning environments.

Successful strategies are not just programmatic; they are cultural. Schools that focus on building respectful relationships across all members of the community, students, staff, and families, report more sustainable improvements.

Importantly, youth participation must be central. Children and young people must be heard when designing, testing, and evaluating approaches that affect them. When student voices are incorporated, systems become more responsive, relevant, and effective.

2. Policies, Models or Practices That Are Not Working - and Needed Changes

What is not working is any approach that treats bullying as a one-off incident or relies too heavily on compliance checklists rather than meaningful action. Policy without practice, and programs without time or resourcing, are ineffective.

From a **whole-school perspective**, barriers include:

- **Limited time and capacity** for teachers to deliver wellbeing work with fidelity;
- **Inconsistent engagement from families**, particularly where parents are unaware of how to support their child, whether as a target or perpetrator of bullying;
- **Staff exhaustion and competing demands**, which undermine even well-designed frameworks.

From a **system perspective**, challenges include:

- Fragmented or inconsistent definitions of bullying across jurisdictions;
- Reactive or siloed interventions rather than proactive, whole-of-community models;
- A lack of national leadership in messaging, resulting in mixed expectations from families and communities.

We urge greater national cohesion and a sustained narrative of **shared responsibility** between schools, families, and the wider community, including clubs, local government, and service groups.

3. Resources and Capability Building for School Staff

While some schools have access to helpful tools, many lack:

- **Access to curated, credible, and inclusive resources** that meet the diverse needs of their students, including those with disability, LGBTIQ+ identities, or from rural or disadvantaged contexts;
- **Professional learning** that is embedded, ongoing, and tailored to address the nuanced realities of interpersonal conflict, not just bullying in the abstract;
- **Workable strategies** for engaging resistant families or navigating highly emotional situations;
- **Practical tools** for building staff confidence in managing bullying and developing students' interpersonal skills.

What would help:

- A **national resource hub** of evidence-based, practical tools and training. These include FAQ's on a range of topics.



- **Curated materials** to support culturally responsive practice, tailored interventions, and whole-community engagement.
- **Opportunities for school leaders to reflect, collaborate, and improve practice**, recognising that bullying prevention is not “set and forget”, but needs regular iteration and evaluation and agility to respond to emerging issues. (The volume of issues flowing into schools from online bullying 24/7 is a case in point).

4. Addressing Equity and Inclusion

Many schools serve children who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, live with disability, identify as LGBTIQ+, or experience rural isolation or disadvantage. Tailored support is essential, but capacity is variable.

A **national standard** should ensure:

- That all bullying prevention activities are **accessible**, (i.e. to regional and remote students and CALD families), **inclusive, and culturally responsive**;
- That students from equity groups have **targeted, timely, and respectful support** in ways that reflect their identity and context;
- That schools are **resourced appropriately** to provide differentiated responses, rather than expected to stretch limited staff capacity further.

5. Reporting Systems

Many schools have internal reporting systems, but uptake can be inconsistent due to:

- **Lack of coherent definitions** of what bullying is and is not;
- **Students fearing that reporting won’t lead to action**, or worse, may lead to retaliation;
- **Parents perceiving the school will not act**, due to previous experiences or misinformation.

We recommend that reporting systems:

- Include **clear feedback loops**, so students know their concerns have been heard and acted upon;
- Support **qualitative data collection**, including student voice and family perceptions, not just incident counts. Questions seeking feedback on this could be added to existing student and family surveys;
- Are part of a broader **culture of trust**, built over time through transparency, relationships, and consistency.



6. Principles for a National Standard

A consistent national standard should:

- Start with a **clear, shared definition of bullying**, distinguishing it from conflict or friendship issues;
- Emphasise **prevention through positive relationship building** and inclusion, not just intervention after the fact;
- Be **flexible enough** to adapt to local contexts, while offering clear expectations and high standards;
- Require **student voice, family engagement, and cultural responsiveness**;
- Provide clear, **evidence-informed guidance for schools, families, and communities**;
- Include **parent education** on how to support their children, especially in recognising, responding to, and reporting issues;
- Build in **responsive, reliable, accessible system support** to schools for when they need it, with principal agency central in determining support needed.

Final Thoughts

We wish to highlight the growing impact of bullying-related anxiety and distress on students, families, and school staff. Increasingly, school leaders are managing not only the incidents themselves, but the emotional fallout, supporting students experiencing ongoing distress, engaging with parents who are overwhelmed or unsure how to respond, and assisting staff affected by vicarious trauma. These demands divert time and focus from core teaching and learning priorities.

APPA proposes a pilot initiative placing **mental health nurses** in schools, particularly in communities with high levels of mental health need. These professionals would bring targeted expertise in:

- Supporting students experiencing the psychological impacts of bullying;
- Coaching and guiding parents through appropriate, calm responses when their child is involved in bullying; either as target or instigator;
- Providing trauma-informed support to staff and school leaders after serious incidents;
- Strengthening the school's overall capacity to create and maintain a mentally healthy, safe environment.

Such a model would contribute to stronger partnerships with families, reduce the emotional toll on school staff, and promote better student outcomes. A pilot, with robust data collection, would help assess impacts on attendance, family engagement, student wellbeing, and reductions in bullying-related harm.



And finally, the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly, recently reported that children want to learn how to manage conflict. This should be a key national focus: **teaching children, to mastery, how to resolve interpersonal challenges**, not in isolation, but supported by respectful adults in homes, schools, and communities.

Let us not underestimate our children's capacity to contribute meaningfully to safer, kinder schools, or the importance of adults modelling respectful behaviour. Role modelling positive conflict resolution, both online and in person, is one of the most powerful levers we have.

This national conversation offers a chance to ensure bullying prevention is not an isolated initiative, but an embedded, living part of every school's culture. Violence towards students or staff must not be tolerated. With shared responsibility and commitment, strong family-school partnerships, and systems that listen to and act with children, we can build the conditions for every child to feel safe, heard, and supported.

APPA is committed to supporting this work, and we stand ready to contribute to the strategies going forward.

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18.6.2025

