



Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools.

Submission by

The Association of Independent Schools of the
ACT (AISACT)

May 2019

Introduction

The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT (AISACT) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission regarding the Inquiry into management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools.

The ACT independent school sector provides a diverse range of schooling options to families living in the ACT and in the surrounding region, and to families needing boarding school facilities.

Independent schools play an important role in providing educational alternatives to those provided by the government sector. The ACT community is multicultural and diverse and the independent school sector reflects this. It should be a basic premise that parents should have a choice, where possible, about where their child is educated. There are many reasons underpinning parental choice, including pedagogical style, learning environment, faith, values, gender, school culture and pastoral structures.

Independent schools have emerged in direct response to community demand and have a long history of accepting an educational leadership role in the national capital, and a shared role with governments, in setting up schools in the ACT.

In the end, it is about parents finding a school which provides the best 'fit' and, therefore, the best opportunities for success for their child.

All students, irrespective of where they are educated, are entitled to a high quality of education, and it is the responsibility of governments to provide a suitable level of funding for all students to achieve quality outcomes.

The Association represents all eighteen independent schools which together educate 14,514 students, or around 19% of the ACT school population (29% of ACT high school students attend Independent schools). Enrolment in Canberra's Independent schools has historically been very strong, and have seen a 21% increase in student enrolment over the past 10 years.

Independent schools in the ACT have a wide range of student populations, with the smallest school having 27 students and the largest over 1800 students.

Issues

Research and recent reviews all articulate the evidence that strong school cultures and positive relationships between students, staff, parents and the community are the cornerstone ensuring that schools are student/child centred. As such, schools are best placed to address the societal context of bullying and violence that exists within our whole community.

The values of the Association of Independent Schools ACT underpin the provision of education in our 18 Member schools. These Values are:

Independence – the right of schools to actively promote their independence.

Choice – The opportunity for parents and carers to exercise choice

Diversity – The provision of diversity in education.

Excellence– The pursuit of educational excellence.

Association of Independent Schools of the ACT Incorporated

Unit 4, 16 Thesiger Court, Deakin ACT | PO Box 225, Deakin West ACT 2600

Telephone 02 6162 0834 | **Facsimile** 02 6162 0837 | **Email** aisact@ais.act.edu.au | **ABN** 51 980 437 786

Following are overarching comments to be considered in how AISACT Member schools work to provide the positive culture in their schools which lead to minimising bullying and violence.

Each Member school has a strong ethos, culture and community expectation which underpins their operation. Schools proudly and pro-actively articulate and promote their faith perspectives and/or specific educational philosophy, which in turn provides a framework for responding to and managing bullying and violence in schools.

Pastoral care is a core element of Independent schools. Schools provide very strong pastoral care, utilising a range of different practices, some of which have been continually evolving for decades. Structures and models of pastoral care in each Independent school are reflective of the culture and expectations of the school, and are fit for purpose for the context of the individual school. They may be structured vertically (across multiple year levels), horizontally (single year level), based on House structures (vertical, horizontal, or a combination). The common structural theme is that the focus is on small group regular contact with a specific staff member, whose responsibility is to be the first part of an integrated system within the school dedicated to 'knowing the student'.

Clear statements describing high expectations of students, within the context of the culture and ethos of a school, is a fundamental tenant of Independent schools. Ensuring good communication between staff and students, between staff and most importantly with parent and carers, of these expectations, and other matters, is a key element of best practice which Member schools will always seek to demonstrate.

As parents exercise a choice to enrol in an Independent school, there exists a real and implied contract between parents and school with regard to understanding the expectations around bullying and violence. In most cases, this provides the essential partnership between home and school which is vital to address problems as and when they emerge.

Schools invest enormous amounts of time in the provision of relevant professional learning opportunities for staff which support the schools philosophy and culture. Schools also provide access to programs and resources from a range of providers which assist the staff in student support, or interventions, where required.

The current emphasis on principals and staff wellbeing also cascades to student wellbeing, and the principles that apply regarding early identification and intervention in these areas can assist in supporting the minimisation of bullying and harassment.

Andrew Wrigley
Executive Director
Association of Independent Schools of the ACT
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