



Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

SUBMISSION

TO THE

SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE INQUIRY

INTO

DISRUPTION IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Sharron Healy  
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March 2023

*One voice for every child in government education*

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Please indicate your name if an individual, or your organisation name if you are responding on behalf of an organisation.

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations is a peak community organisation and the  
*One voice for every child in government education.*

Do you wish your submission to be treated as confidential?

No



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### Introduction

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) represents the families and communities of more than 2.6 million Australian children and young people who attend government schools. We are one of Australia's and arguably the world's oldest continually operational parent organisations. We were founded in 1947 to bring together different state and territory parent organisations, as well as other families interested in public education, to produce national policies that represent how families want public education to be provided for all children. As a result of variations in how our members in state and territory peak parent organisations have tackled national problems throughout time, membership varies; nevertheless, our commitment to promoting equality and access for all young people attending government schools in Australia remains continuous.

We believe that the primary responsibility of governments, federal, state and territory is to establish and maintain government education systems that:

- positively engage with family and community at all levels of education;
- are of the highest standard and open to all, regardless of race, gender, religion, social/economic status, geographic location, or ability; and
- can respond to changing educational landscapes and develop flexible and diverse programs necessary to meet all student needs.

ACSSO thanks the Senate Education and Employment Committee for the opportunity to comment on *"The problem of rising disturbance in Australian school classrooms."* We also acknowledge our state and territory affiliate contributions to this submission.

Australian schools are busy, vibrant, and filled with lessons that promote interaction between students and teachers. The fact poor discipline can be defined as not listening and being off task is perhaps a little melodramatic compared with some of the more extreme but infrequent outbursts that can occur.

We note reports that there is a wide range of disorderly behaviour and disturbance in classrooms, ranging from small disruptions to more serious behaviours that endanger the safety of kids and school workers. We recognise that disruptive behaviour has an effect on student learning, student engagement, teacher morale and relationships between the home and school and we encourage the investigation into this matter.

In many ways, the best behaviour management relies on what happens when no misbehaviour is present. At these times, effective teachers are building positive relationships, acknowledging, and supporting students, gathering their feedback, and supporting those who need assistance. Most teachers do this well, most of the time, but disruptions still happen.



Behaviours, student engagement and school success are impacted by a multitude of factors such as trauma, bullying, poor motivation, difficulty in understanding, tiredness, competing curriculum priorities and the ever-present cycles of assessment. Students who are not neurotypical will often express frustration through behaviour.

We believe that all behaviour is a form of communication, and that disruptive behaviour may arise from a variety of reasons. Challenging behaviour may be an alert to school staff that something is not being addressed.

Examples of this could include:

- a student who is struggling in a particular subject and is not getting enough help may engage in behaviour to avoid the lesson. Instead of participating, the student may walk about the class, distracting other pupils. When the teacher asks them to finish their work, the situation might escalate; they may refuse and storm out of the classroom. Avoidance of classwork by exhibiting inappropriate behaviours is common, particularly amongst students who feel their needs are not being met.
- challenging behaviour shown by a student because they do not feel secure. When a student who has been affected by trauma gets triggered, is an illustration of this. The student may become too alert and exhibit aggressive or violent behaviour.
- some students may also utilise behaviour to earn attention or material benefits. While this may be true in certain circumstances, teachers often use it to explain behaviour without examining alternative possibilities. At times, students are considered to be mischievous. However, we know that certain adolescents may lack the necessary communication skills to convey their demands and do so via their behaviour.
- basic necessities such as hunger or physical discomfort (for example, earache) may sometimes be the source of disruptive behaviour. Students who have sensory disorders that are not being handled properly may also react via behaviour.
- Non-neuro-typical students may be feeling a sense of frustration or unfair treatment and have difficulty regulating their emotions.

There is enormous pressure on teachers to achieve results and the issue of a crowded, and often irrelevant curriculum is well documented. This pressure is also being felt by students and families, especially in the senior school years. Such pressures can affect a teacher's ability to manage a class and can also affect a student's ability to self-regulate.

The way teachers and support personnel react to inappropriate behaviour may have a significant impact. A teacher may be able to de-escalate the situation if they can identify the student's unfulfilled need and react in a manner that meets that need. This has long-term advantages because it creates a school climate in which students feel supported and builds positive relationships.

In recent years, teacher education programs have been required to react to government agendas centred on academic achievement. Programs concerning inclusive education, classroom management and student engagement have been seen as secondary.

Unfortunately, the abilities of classroom management are significantly more sophisticated than merely "excellent teaching". A common misconception shared by both new and seasoned teachers is that if their teaching is engaging, there should be no cause for misbehaviour.

However, just curiosity is insufficient. Classroom energy varies, as do skill levels, and not everyone is inspired by the same material. To keep things moving, teachers must read the room and react to a



variety of student needs. Quality teaching includes addressing individual needs and knowing and valuing the student is key.

Further professional learning in how to deal with behavioural difficulties would be of great value to teachers and support staff. They should, however, be proficient in preventative measures and should be assisted in developing such abilities.

### Classroom Management

Classroom management encompasses *both* teacher practise *and* student behaviour. A healthy classroom atmosphere, strong interpersonal interactions, and clarity and consistency of expectations and consequences (both positive and negative) all contribute to a productive learning environment.

Awareness, patience, excellent timing, limits, and instinct are all required for effective classroom management. It is not easy leading a large group of easily distracted young people with varying talents and temperaments on a meaningful learning trip. School staff must be flexible and able to adjust if plans don't go the way it was anticipated.

Working with young people entails establishing an atmosphere in which they feel secure to stretch and make errors along the way. When students feel secure being vulnerable with their peers, we know their connections improve, and their learning outcomes increase.

The recent legislative revisions to suspensions in the ACT are welcomed by ACSSO, as they recognise that problematic behaviour may be a reaction to an unmet need. Before suspending children with impairments, ACT public schools must now examine whether reasonable accommodations were applied properly. Suspension currently may also result in an evaluation of reasonable changes to ensure that a student is being supported. This is a beneficial development since we know that if appropriate accommodations are made, children's needs are more likely to be satisfied, and behavioural concerns should be lessened. NSW has made some similar adjustments to their suspension / expulsion policy.

ACSSO's position is that:

- Despite appearances, the key to a well-managed engaging classroom is not magic. The bulk of it is built on building *strong relationships with students*.
- Students are more willing to follow rules when they have trust in their teachers, and teachers gain more from their teaching experience when they make an effort to get to know each student on a more personal level.
- Each class should have a more family-like atmosphere. Teachers need to take a deep dive into what they are doing well and what might be improved. Teacher-student connection development needs to be an area of continuous improvement for everyone.
- Include parents and guardians. Every student is someone's child, and parents/guardians/caregivers want teachers to see the best in their child. A healthy relationship with a student's family may frequently benefit in the classroom.



### A Teacher needs Resilience.

We've all heard how important it is to instil resilience in our youth. *What about our teaching profession?*

Teaching as a caring vocation can be emotionally draining, resulting in high stress levels and job burnout.

Although teaching may be a highly gratifying career, we know that teachers confront numerous and intricate barriers in a sector that has experienced work intensification, increased accountability, and calls for teacher quality improvements. Teacher burnout and stress are significant problems, however teacher resilience has been connected to positive outcomes such as teacher quality, enthusiasm, and devotion, as well as positive student outcomes. Teacher shortages has led to larger class sizes, multi-stage classes and many combinations not conducive to student engagement and teacher workload. Often this leads to strategies that are reactive, rather than pro-active.

We know that teacher resilience has a direct impact on their job satisfaction, engagement, self-efficacy, and motivation; this is crucial for the profession, particularly considering that a big number of new teachers leave within the first five years. We know that resilience is a quality that can be learned and nurtured through time by being aware of ideas, behaviours, and responses that work as protective factors in challenging situations.

Another shortcoming of teacher education programs is that they do not prepare teachers for the reality of their professions, their tensions, and issues, and how to cope with such challenges while staying strong. They are mainly concerned with enhancing a teacher's pedagogical talents and students' test results while ignoring the social and emotional aspects of teaching.

Our teaching workforce needs the ability to thrive and not just survive.

### Relevant curriculum

All curricula should have the same goal: to help students learn. Student results should begin with a sound strategy, regardless of state or territory. However, Australia is also a multicultural society, and by respecting culture and identity, we empower students to see themselves in their learning.

A curriculum, however, does much more than direct math, reading, and history instruction. From teachers to administrators, it may benefit schools just as much as students. It can also help schools connect with parents and the community.

*It produces as well as reflects culture and identity.*

ACSSO's stance is:

- the curriculum must be adaptable and relevant to the society in which students live as well as the job applications and practises they will inherit.
- Families want material that is current, relevant to today's society, and given in a number of formats. They want "real-world" applications.
- We all know that information is a fluid commodity; parents want their children to acquire at school, in collaboration with their families, the knowledge, skills, understanding, and capacities to be lifelong learners and to assist their own acquisition of knowledge relevant to their objectives. The foundation that enables students to acquire the capacity to critically analyse, communicate effectively, and problem solve must be included in the curriculum.
- Families prefer student-led curriculum that builds on their strengths rather than assessment requirements driving curriculum delivery.



ACSSO believes that regular curriculum discussions within a community will allow all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students and communities, to engage. Receiving feedback from a variety of sources may help identify strengths and limitations. It also serves as a venue for teachers to share best practices, knowledge, and resources. Knowledge changes quickly – our teachers should facilitate learning at school, they can no longer hold the knowledge.

### Mental Health Check-In

Access to health and wellness services is tough, and the consequences soon reach the classroom. Students need quick evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment techniques for a variety of health issues. When this does not occur, it has a direct influence on a student's classroom experience and capacity to participate in learning.

Many children and adolescents have mental ill-health that limits their access to and involvement in learning, and these issues are often misinterpreted, leading to actions that are inconsistent with school expectations. The worldwide epidemic of COVID-19 exacerbated these difficulties, increasing the need for school-based mental health care and leveraging our acquired expertise about how to offer loving educational settings to suit the needs of our nation's young.

According to our information, one in every seven Australian young people suffers from a mental condition, and recent studies show that Australian adolescents are five times less likely to seek treatment when experiencing psychological discomfort.

Positive mental health, like physical health, enhances life success. It has an impact on how we think, feel, and behave. It also influences how we deal with stress, interact with people, and make good decisions. Mental health is essential throughout life, from infancy and adolescence to maturity. To promote overall well-being, schools must prioritise three crucial and interconnected components of mental health: social (how we interact with others), emotional (how we feel), and behavioural (how we behave) supports.

ACSSO believes that Australia was already in a mental health crisis before the pandemic: the rising mental health needs of children and adolescents were mostly unmet due to political inaction, low capacity, various obstacles to care, and inequities across communities. The COVID-19 epidemic exacerbated the situation. However, we believe that this crisis has disproportionately impacted disadvantaged people, and that COVID-19 has worsened existing injustices and deficiencies across our education system.

Our National Survey in February 2022 revealed that more than 80% of parents were worried about their child's mental health and well-being. Many young people dropped out of school during the pandemic, and many have been traumatised by the events of the epidemic, bushfires, and floods. The demand is great, but obtaining the correct help is crucial - training in trauma response and dealing with families under such stress is critical. More time has been spent “catching up” than re-engaging.

It is difficult for the general public to get access to allied health practitioners. Wait lists for psychologists, speech pathologists, and occupational therapists may be as long as six, twelve, or even twenty-four months. If a young person does not yet have an official diagnosis that is financially covered by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the cost might be exorbitant. Wait times may be extended even further if a specialty practitioner is necessary (for example, an Occupational Therapist [OT] with particular expertise with autism).





ACSSO's position is that:

- At a time when young people are experiencing increasing social pressures and mental health issues, qualified and sufficient professional school counselling services are urgently needed.
  - The rise in the prevalence of mental health issues, the diagnosis of autism and other student disability diagnoses, and parental preference for the inclusion of students with confirmed disabilities in mainstream classes all have an impact on the additional support required for staff, students, and families in the classroom.

While it is unfortunate that a pandemic was required to concentrate attention on Australia's adolescent mental health issue, we hope it ushers in a new age in which Australian governments prioritise young people's mental health. We need that now and in the future.

The objective being to achieve the following:

- Optimal physical health is something we all have;
- Optimal mental health is something we all have; and
- Wellbeing is something we all deserve.

### Family engagement

According to studies, one of the well-established drivers of academic accomplishment is family engagement, which has a direct beneficial effect on a child's learning achievement.

This fundamental reality should serve as a guiding concept when we consider how schools should be structured and children should be educated. Schools alone cannot meet all of a child's developmental requirements; substantial parental participation, engagement and community assistance are required.

The need of a good cooperation between schools and families in educating children may seem obvious. This friendship was natural and easy to sustain in earlier times. Teachers and parents were often neighbours and had several opportunities to discuss a child's development. Teachers and parents sent the same signals to children, and they knew that they were expected to keep the same norms at home and at school.

These ties, however, have all too frequently gone by the wayside as society has gotten more complicated and demanding. Parents are discouraged from spending time in classrooms in many places, (under the guise of COVID restrictions) and teachers are expected to speak with family members only when a student is in difficulty (too late to start a relationship). In far too many situations, the outcome is misunderstanding, distrust, and a lack of respect, such that when a student falls behind, teachers blame parents and parents blame teachers.

Building solid ties between families and schools will require remarkable efforts. Schools must reach out to families and accept them as full participants in the educational process. Families, in turn, must make a time and energy commitment to help their children both at home and at school.

Students receive the home support they need to create a lifetime love of learning when their families are engaged in their children's school lives.

Working as full partners, parents, teachers, principals, businesses, and other community members may develop an educational curriculum that fits specific local requirements and represents diversity within a school while maintaining high performance objectives and standards. They may create a





loving and responsive educational environment that recognises and reacts to children's diversity as well as similarities.

ACSSO believes that encouraging family engagement is the most effective way for fostering a happy learning environment for all students.

## Conclusion

Nothing is more distracting in a classroom than a student who is disturbing the class. Disruptions in the classroom squander important instructional time and may potentially lead to long-term behavioural issues for students. Some teachers adopt a reactive approach to classroom disturbances; however, ACSSO believes that being proactive and taking actions to minimise disruptions before they occur is the most successful way. Though some classroom disturbances are likely, it is ACSSO's belief that teachers may drastically limit their frequency with some concentrated classroom management tactics.

Classroom management encompasses both teacher practise and student behaviour, and requires a combination of awareness, patience, excellent timing, limits, and instinct. ACSSO believes that the key to a well-managed classroom is building strong relationships with students (and families), and that teachers should take a deep dive into what they are doing well and what might be improved. Recent legislative revisions to suspensions in the ACT are welcomed, as they recognise that problematic behaviour may be a reaction to an unmet need. And recognise that suspension may also result in an evaluation of reasonable changes to ensure that a student is being supported.

Teaching as a caring vocation can be emotionally draining, resulting in high stress levels and job burnout. Teacher resilience has been linked to positive outcomes such as teacher quality, enthusiasm, and devotion, as well as positive student outcomes. However, teacher education programs do not prepare teachers for the reality of their profession, their tensions, and issues, and how to cope with such challenges while staying strong. Our teaching workforce needs the ability to thrive and not just survive.

All curricula should have the same goal: to help students learn. ACSSO's stance is that the curriculum must be adaptable and relevant to the society in which students live as well as the job applications and practises they will inherit. Families want material that is current, relevant to today's society, and given in a number of formats. Regular curriculum discussions within a community will allow all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students and communities, to engage. Feedback from a variety of sources may help identify strengths and limitations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for school-based mental health care, as one in every seven Australian young people suffers from a mental condition and recent studies show that Australian adolescents are five times less likely to seek treatment when experiencing psychological discomfort. To promote overall well-being, schools must prioritise three crucial components of mental health: social, emotional, and behavioural.

ACSSO's National Survey in February 2022 revealed that 80% of parents were greatly concerned about their child's mental health and well-being. Access to allied health practitioners is difficult, with wait lists for psychologists, speech pathologists, and occupational therapists as long as six, twelve, or even twenty-four months. ACSSO's position is that qualified and sufficient professional school counselling services are urgently needed, as the rise in the prevalence of mental health issues, the diagnosis of autism and other student disability diagnoses, and parental preference for the inclusion of students with confirmed disabilities in mainstream classes all have an impact on the additional support required for staff, students, and families in the classroom.



Studies have shown that family engagement has a direct beneficial effect on a child's learning achievement. To foster a happy learning environment for all students, schools must reach out to families and accept them as full participants in the educational process, while families must make a time and energy commitment to help their children both at home and at school. Working as full partners, parents, teachers, principals, businesses, and other community members can develop an educational curriculum that fits specific local requirements and represents diversity within a school while maintaining high performance objectives and standards.