TASMANIAN
ASSOCIATION OF
STATE
SCHOOL
ORGANISATIONS

TASSO

We're in this together. We speak as a proud voice for families within Tasmanian State Schools, ensuring their needs, ideas and voice is heard.

TASSO SUBMISSION
Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations pays respect to the Palawa people as the Traditional Custodians of the land in beautiful Lutruwita, Tasmania.

We pay respect to elders' past, present and emerging and acknowledge their deep connection to country.

We also express our gratitude that we share this land today, our sorrow for some of the costs of that sharing, and our hope and belief that we move to a place of equity, justice, and partnership together.

Acknowledging Parents

TASSO acknowledges parents and caregivers as the first educators in their child's life. We celebrate and honour the diversity of families and recognise the vital role family and community play in supporting children and young people throughout their learning journeys.

TASSO prepared this submission with the help of Tasmanian parents and caregivers. We extend our appreciation to all who have shared their experiences and engaged with our consultation process for this submission.

Background

Who is TASSO?

The Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations (TASSO) is the peak body representing the parents and community who form the School Association within Tasmanian public schools.

Our mission is to strengthen every state school association in Tasmania so they can achieve the best student outcomes. We work to empower the heart of Tassie State schools – their community – by supporting School Associations.

Our work includes providing essential training, resources, and support to school committees. Most importantly, we help them meet their constitutional requirements and do great things. We also support office-bearers in their roles and facilitate valuable networking opportunities.

We represent the School Association Committees from within Tasmania's 123 Primary Schools (Kindergarten to Grade 6), 54 High Schools (Grade 7 – 12), and 8 Colleges (Grade 11 and 12).

At TASSO, we believe in the value of government education. We are committed to making sure that state school education in Tasmania delivers the best possible education for Tassie kids. We speak as a proud voice for families to make sure their needs and ideas are heard.

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Introduction

TASSO welcomes the inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. Through our consultations, we have learned about the numerous challenges faced by families, children, teaching and support staff, and the wider community regarding these issues. Daily occurrences of bullying and discrimination within the Tasmanian school environment have been reported, highlighting the need for urgent and effective action.

Our sorrow deepens as we learn about the profound and ongoing impact of these issues on the victims. Bullying and discrimination are severely affecting their ability to feel safe, enjoy their learning experience, and receive the support they need to thrive throughout their educational journey. It is deeply concerning that these problems start as early as kindergarten and persist through to college, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive and effective measures to address these challenges.

To define our meanings behind some of the words included in our submission, we are approaching this paper with the definitions of the following terms, sourced from the Oxford Dictionary:

Bullying is "the use of force, coercion, hurtful teasing, or threat, to abuse, aggressively dominate or intimidate. The behaviour is often repeated and habitual. One essential prerequisite is the perception of an imbalance of physical or social power. This imbalance distinguishes bullying from conflict."

Bully is "a person who habitually seeks to harm or intimidate those whom they perceive as vulnerable."

Victim is "a person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action."

Enabler is "a person or thing that makes something possible"

Discrimination is "the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, or disability."

In our submission, we will present a selection of lived experiences that illustrate the effects of short-term, one-off, and ongoing bullying and discrimination. These experiences highlight the urgent need for change in the Tasmanian school environment to ensure that all children are safe, supported, and able to fully participate in their education, including during their commute to and from school.

We are highlighting within our submission that not all bullying has occurred peer-to-peer, there has been reports of bullying from senior staff, teaching staff, and support staff at the school towards students during our consultations.

Our submission is organised into three sections, each addressing the terms of reference provided by Government Administration Committee A. This structure aims to comprehensively cover the relevant issues and propose actionable recommendations for improvement.

The Current Environment

Forming the School Culture
The values in which the Department of Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) operate within are:

Connection. Courage. Growth.
Respect. Responsibility.

Courage
Accepting challenges and embracing opportunities.
Growth
Aspiring to learn and improving even when it is tough.
Respect
Caring for ourselves, each other, and our environment.
Responsibility
Stepping up and doing what is right.
Connection
Building positives relationships and a sense of belonging.

Each State School within Tasmania applies these values as their own under DECYPs instruction.

Throughout our consultations, it has been highlighted that a lack of autonomy for schools to develop and apply their own set of values can hinder the formation of a unique and cohesive school culture. When schools are unable to establish and nurture their own values, it detracts from their ability to fully embrace and respect a distinct culture.

Parents have suggested that allowing schools to operate based on their own developed and chosen values would foster a deeper connection and commitment to those values. By empowering schools to create and implement their own mission and values, each school can cultivate a culture that is meaningful and relevant to its community.

Reverting to a model where schools have the freedom to define their own values would support the development of a strong and embedded school culture, enhancing the overall educational environment and making it more reflective of and responsive to the needs of the school community.

Bullying

"My child moved schools due to bullying and harassment. Bullying ending up with an assault charge which is still going through court. As a result, my child has been diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, and depression. She sees a therapist once per week and has totally removed herself from all peers her own age. We struggle to get her to leave the house."

Within the Student Behaviour Management Policy, section 5.2 on preventing bullying, it is clearly stated that the Department of Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) does not tolerate any form of bullying in Tasmanian Government schools.

However, while this policy outlines approaches for addressing the behaviour of the bully, it falls short in addressing the needs and support for the victim. Specifically, there is no comprehensive policy detailing how to support a child who cannot attend school due to significant bullying, or how the re-entry process to the same or a different school should be managed.

As a result, parents are often left to navigate these challenging circumstances on their own, grappling with the emotional turmoil, fear, and uncertainty that accompany their child's experience with bullying. This highlights a significant gap in the current system, underscoring the need for clearer, more supportive guidelines and processes for managing and assisting victims of bullying. This should include strategies for reintegration and ongoing support to ensure that affected students can return to school in a safe and supportive environment.

To better understand these issues, we conducted a survey as part of our consultations, gathering insights from a diverse group of 65 respondents, including parents, children, and adult survivors of bullying. The survey revealed that:

- **44%** of respondents indicated that their child experienced bullying while in primary school.

- **56%** reported that the bullying occurred during high school.

- There were no reports of bullying through our consultations in college.

These findings underscore the prevalence of bullying across different educational stages and the urgent need for effective support systems tailored to both primary and high school students.

Among the respondents, 92% of parents and caregivers were aware of the bullying incidents before the school informed them of it, while only 8% were contacted by the school regarding the situation.

The school responses to being notified of bullying varied significantly:

- *Helpful Responses:* Some schools took proactive steps to address the issue and work towards a positive resolution.
- *Dismissive Responses:* Others downplayed the severity of the situation, using rationales such as "it was just that age group" or suggesting that the victim could simply be moved to another class.
- *Inadequate Responses:* In some cases, schools were reluctant to take substantial action and proposed measures like having the victim spend their meal breaks with the principal to feel safer, rather than addressing the root causes of the bullying.

These varied responses indicate a need for more consistent and effective strategies across schools to ensure that bullying is properly addressed and that victims receive appropriate support.

Our consultations revealed significant concerns about the support provided by schools in addressing bullying:

- **58%** of respondents felt unsupported by the school in dealing with bullying issues.

- **25%** were unsure of the level of support due to these being still active incidents.

- Only **16%** felt that the school provided adequate support.

Additionally, the impact of bullying on school attendance and participation was notable:

- **69%** of respondents reported that their child had missed school because of bullying.

- **44%** indicated that their child had been excluded from standard school activities due to bullying, while the bully continued to participate in these activities.

Furthermore, we learned of three instances where parents decided to start home schooling their children because the bullying could not be effectively addressed by the schools.

This underscores the critical need for more robust and supportive measures to ensure that all students can safely attend and participate in their educational environment.

"My child was called a 'retard', 'spastic', was accused of being gay, and was generally provoked and prodded for the nice, big reaction that they provide when they are dysregulated. My child has a genetic condition and suspected of autism at least at a level 2. It had been fairly well resolved with the school, however, even though my child had high substantial needs while in grade 3-6 at primary school, they did not have a dedicated TA or someone to keep an eye on them during break times, and that was when other children often sought them out to wind them up. I still don't think it was resolved the way that it should have been. The school used restorative practices, and I don't think the students involved (same year group as my child) took it particularly seriously, i.e., they continued the behaviour because they knew they'd just end up in a meeting and they could continue to attend school. I think if they had a strike system, and were fully informed of the potential, and "last resort" consequences, i.e., expulsion, they may have taken it more seriously."

The signs of bullying occurring
Parents and caregivers reported a range of distressing signs and outcomes related to their child's experience with bullying:

Emotional and Behavioural Changes: Children became withdrawn, anxious, angry, upset, and experienced nightmares. They began to avoid school, leading to noticeable changes in their behaviour at home, decreased happiness and confidence, and a detachment from their usual interactions and self. Additionally, academic performance declined, and in some severe cases, children began self-harming, with one parent noting that their child, in Grade 3, started self-harming because of bullying.

Early Age of Bullying: Bullying began as early as age 5, with most incidents involving peers of the same or similar age.

Parental Reactions: Parents and caregivers felt a range of intense emotions including powerlessness, anger, frustration, and sadness. Many felt let down and disappointed by the school's response and systems and were deeply concerned about their child's well-being.

"I have now given my child permission to retaliate as the school has not done enough to put an end to it"

Challenges with Reporting: Parents who reported bullying to their child's class teacher often found the process unhelpful, due to cultural and leadership barriers within the school. This difficulty in escalating issues reflects a broader problem where ineffective support at the school level contributes to a cycle of unresolved bullying.

"Feel like teachers' hands are tied, and are not able to cope with bullies at the school"

Top-Down Approach: Our consultations suggest that if students observe that teaching and support staff struggle to effect change or seek support, it can perpetuate a cycle of bullying. This top-down approach highlights the need for systemic change where leadership and staff are empowered and equipped to address bullying effectively, breaking the cycle and fostering a safer school environment.

These findings emphasise the urgent need for comprehensive and effective strategies to support both victims and their families, and to address the systemic issues that allow bullying to persist.

Exposing another risk

As it stands, Tasmanian schools currently have no responsibility or response mechanisms for bullying or incidents that occur outside of school grounds. This creates significant challenges when bullying or discrimination happens during the commute to or from school, whether on a school bus or while walking.

The key issues of this are:

Lack of School Responsibility:

Schools are not accountable for incidents occurring off-campus, which can include bullying or discrimination during travel to and from school.

Passenger Conduct Code:

The existing Passenger Conduct Code for School Bus Services places the responsibility for disciplinary action on the bus operator.

This policy means that schools have no authority or responsibility for what happens on the bus, leaving a gap in the support and resolution process.

Both situations - bullying occurring off school grounds, such as on a school bus or during the commute to and from school - present a profound sense of helplessness for parents and caregivers.

They often encounter the response, "It didn't happen on school grounds, therefore there is nothing we can do." This stance leaves parents feeling powerless and frustrated, as they are unable to secure support or intervention from the school in addressing the issues their children face outside of school property.

When local police are contacted regarding incidents of bullying or discrimination that occur outside school grounds, parents often report being directed back to the school.

This response creates a significant barrier, especially when they have already encountered obstacles within the school system.

The findings from our consultations reveal several critical issues regarding bullying:

Prevalence During School Hours:

81% of respondents reported that bullying primarily occurred during school hours, indicating that the majority of incidents take place while students are under the direct supervision of the school.

Escalation to Physical Violence:

Of those affected, 55% shared that the bullying escalated to physical violence, highlighting a serious and dangerous dimension of the problem that requires immediate attention and intervention.

Extension to Online Bullying:

35% of respondents indicated that the bullying extended to online platforms, adding layers of complexity to the issue. This is particularly challenging as some schools only address online (or cyber) bullying if it occurs during school hours and using school-provided equipment.

The practices in place that exists; do they work?

There is a significant concern regarding the effectiveness of the current anti-bullying strategies in Tasmanian schools. A large majority (70 per cent) of parents believe that the existing approaches are not working effectively.

Only a small percentage (8 per cent) think the processes are successful, while a notable portion (22 per cent) are still waiting for resolution on their cases.

The media reports, such as the one from the Examiner, highlight these issues further by describing systemic problems and instances where protocols and procedures are failing to address bullying and violence effectively. This suggests a need for a thorough review and possible overhaul of the current systems in place.

"We need acknowledgement that one approach does not resolve all"

The complexities of addressing bullying within different educational settings: Primary (K-6), High (7-10/12), and District (K-10/12) these highlight several unique challenges.

Each setting has its own dynamics, which can complicate efforts to manage and prevent bullying.

"very few consequences for the damaged children who are the perpetrators"

During consultation we heard of some desire to make the bully's family aware and gauge responsibility for their child's actions.

Discussion of this highlighted the importance in making the family of a bully responsible for their child's actions is a concept that requires careful consideration.

While the idea of holding families accountable might seem like a way to address underlying issues, it needs to be approached with sensitivity and fairness.

Discrimination

When looking at the DECYP website in the Wellbeing, Student Behaviour section: *Keeping children safe against discrimination, bullying and harassment this section* goes into detail about bullying, but doesn't highlight much about discrimination.

We are very aware that discrimination can be a form of bullying, from our consultations, we wish to raise the voice of parents and care givers in that the discrimination they shared with us extended beyond bullying.

Acknowledge Discrimination Beyond Bullying

Broaden the Definition:
Discrimination vs. Bullying:
Emphasise that discrimination can extend beyond bullying and may include systemic issues or biases based on learning styles, abilities, and other personal attributes.

Highlight and Address Diverse Learning Needs

Educating our teaching staff to be more adaptable to the children they teach, in response to the way they like to be asked to do tasks, complete their work, working individually or within a group, and if their needs extend to the support of a teacher's assistant or not.

Learning inside a classroom for the bulk of the day is the traditional format of education delivery. We acknowledge that students can get outside and learn in the school garden, or outdoor classrooms more these days, but there is still work to be done.

Recognise Learning Styles:
Beyond Introvert/Extrovert: Acknowledge the full spectrum of learning styles and needs, including visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learners, and those with special educational needs or disabilities.

Individualised Learning:
Encourage an individualised approach to education that respects and adapts to the unique learning preferences and needs of each student.

These need to be supported within the school environment.
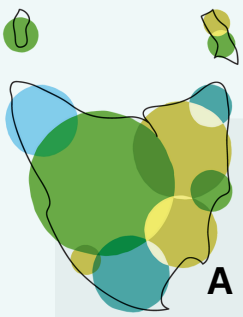
A message from a parent

"We are currently living in a capitalistic neuronormative culture, that has so many intersectionalities, that one size fits all solutions cater for such a narrow group of neurotypical people, that these solutions then become discriminatory and exclusionary. This then creates systematic abuse and trauma, intergenerational trauma, and continuing cycles of the disparity between intergenerational poverty or wealth.

When schools are set up in a way that is harmful to neurodivergent students, and then accommodations are withheld, it's not surprising that a child that isn't coping becomes so distressed that they lose control of themselves. They are working overtime to try and exist in an environment not built for them, that discriminates against them and withholds what they need, and they are then blamed and shamed for their "moral deficits" as a human being.

It's no wonder that things like learnt helplessness and defiance become common place.
The problem is that when people are in a position of privilege, be it a politician, bureaucrat, teacher etc, equality feels like oppression. Because you feel that you lose power or control.

If the only real way to truly get rid of bullying and discrimination meant we were to have a truly neuro-affirming cultural and legislative policy shift, then the current system where we are forced to live in a culture that demands neuronormativity is a discriminatory culture and legislative framework and will not change anything.

The "system" needs a percentage of the population to be in poverty and disconnected from access to services, so that when times are hard they have a vulnerable cohort that they can then point at and blame for everyone's financial problems, because while the general population listens to the discriminatory propaganda published by government spin doctors, they distract the population from the fact that the lower socio-economic sector are taxed more harshly than the rich and wealthy, who get a lot more government handouts than those "disgusting dole bludgers" or "disabled people rorting" the NDIS. When you demonise a vulnerable cohort that can't fight back, you are moving people through the pyramid of hate from indifference through to discrimination through to harmful punitive legislation that punishes people for things beyond their control.

And then when you do have a good teacher that is inclusive and affirming and legitimately cares and wants to break these harmful cycles, you tie their hands behind their backs and render them ineffective by cutting their funding and crowding their curriculum up with more work than can possibly be achieved, while cutting their wages and asking them to do more with less.

I think there are a lot of people that know and understand that this is the root cause of the issue, but so many people are so busy trying to keep a roof over head they either don't have time to fight for social justice and equality, or are kept in a place of scarcity and fear, because they are taught that if they agree the issue is policy and funding, and that if the government was to fund things properly in a more equitable manner they would have to take from other areas to make those funding allocations, then they are conditioned to believe ensuring equality for another person would bring them more hardship and struggles and oppression."

Let's do better!

Bullying and discrimination has existed for years in Tasmanian schools. This will continue to exist and escalate while there are system failures. We must do better in addressing these issues effectively and create a safer environment for our children, our teaching staff and the school community.

TASSO recommends the following towards a future that supports effective, systemic and changemaking processes to address bullying and discrimination:

Establish a Bullying Hotline (or app):

Purpose: Like elder abuse hotlines, this hotline would provide a confidential, accessible channel for reporting bullying incidents, whether they occur during school hours or outside of them.

This hotline should offer 24/7 support, guidance on next steps, and connect callers with appropriate resources and interventions. It should also notify the school when incidents have been reported.
This is already in place in some private schools within Tasmania.

Develop a Support System for Parents of Victims:

Purpose: Provide comprehensive support for parents navigating the challenges of bullying and discrimination.

Offer counselling and support services, guidance on how to address bullying and discrimination effectively, and resources for advocating for change. Establish support groups to connect parents with others in similar situations.

Implement Support for the Bully:

Purpose: Understand and address the root causes of the bullying behaviour.

Develop programs to support bullies in understanding and modifying their behaviour. This includes counselling and intervention programs that address underlying issues, such as family dynamics, mental health, or social pressures.

Advocating for the parents' voice that restorative practices do not work. This results in more trauma and negative impact on the victim of the bullying, and at times enables the bully to continue.

Enhance Training, Education, and Awareness:

Empower educators, students, and parents with the knowledge and skills needed to prevent and address bullying and discrimination. School Association Committees may be a great outlet for this.

- **For Educators:** Regular training on recognising, preventing, and managing bullying and discrimination. Include strategies for handling both in-person and online bullying.

- **For Students:** Incorporate bullying and discrimination prevention and intervention into the curriculum, promoting empathy and respect.

- **For Parents:** Provide educational resources and workshops to help them recognise signs of bullying and discrimination and understand how to support their children.

- **For your School Association Committee:** Can this be tabled as an agenda item, is there information sessions you can host as a school through your school association, how can you increase parent engagement and understanding to strengthen your approaches towards a safe school environment.

Systematic and Coordinated Approach:

Integrated Strategy:
Ensure coordination between schools, law enforcement, mental health professionals, and community organisations to address bullying comprehensively.

"The school needs to acknowledge and accept what is happening as reported to them"

Policy Development: Advocate for statewide policies that mandate schools to address both physical and cyberbullying, including incidents occurring outside school hours or on non-school equipment/grounds.

Next Steps

Advocacy and Collaboration
Work with stakeholders, including education departments, mental health organisations, and parent groups, to develop and implement these initiatives.

Monitoring and Evaluation
Regularly assess the effectiveness of these measures, making adjustments based on feedback and evolving needs.

Address skill shortages that may exist:
- How often and how much training are staff of schools being trained in facilitating and addressing bullying, providing an inclusive school environment, understanding learning for all abilities?
- What does mentoring and continuous improvement look like in this space?
- Is there a possibility for a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) program around providing safe, equal, and equitable school environments for children to learn, enjoy and thrive within, regardless of their learning ability and needs?

By adopting this systematic approach, we can create a supportive and effective framework for preventing and addressing bullying, fostering a safer and more inclusive environment for all students within the Tasmanian school community.

Conclusion

Everyone has a critical role to play in addressing the bullying and discrimination that occurs in Tasmanian Schools. **Together, we can do better.**

TASSO will continue to advocate for changes to be made to enable a school environment for our children to be safe, well, thriving and enjoy their learning journey in Tasmanian schools.

We're in this together. We speak as a proud voice for families within Tasmanian State Schools, ensuring their needs, ideas and voice is heard.

Sources:

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