Submission Cover Sheet

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

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SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT AND MINIMISATION OF BULLYING AND VIOLENCE IN ACT SCHOOLS

To whom it may concern,

Thank-you for providing the opportunity to contribute a submission to this Inquiry. Our submission provides information relating to Item 2(a) of the Terms of Reference: the societal context of bullying and violence as a whole-community issue.

In this submission, we focus on the causes and factors that contribute to bullying and violence by young people within schools. These risk factors can lead to other adverse outcomes for young people and families, presenting an opportunity to provide early support. This submission also describes work that is already underway between three secondary schools and community organisations to identify and support young people earlier, before concerns escalate.

About the Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition) is the peak body representing young people aged 12-25 in the ACT, and those who work with them. We undertake policy analysis, sector development, advocacy, research and projects that respond to ongoing and current issues.

The social causes that contribute to youth violence and bullying

“The kids who need our love the most are the ones who ask for it in the most un-loveable ways. Violence is communication.” (Welfare Coordinator, ACT school)

The factors that lead young people to become involved in violence and/or bullying are complex, interconnected, and exist across individual, family, school and community levels. Australian research summarising the evidence about youth violence identifies it is a whole of community issue, due to these many contributing factors.¹

The common risk factors that increase the likelihood of young people participating in violent behaviour also predict the increased risk of other antisocial behaviours, harmful drug use, school disengagement and mental health concerns.² Therefore, by addressing risk factors to reduce youth violence, outcomes for young people and families can be improved across a range of domains.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the complex, multi-level interaction between the range of risk factors that can contribute to youth violence, demonstrating the significant influence of social and environmental factors, including family relationships, peer relationships, school and the community environment.

² ibid, p 10.
The Australian Institute of Family Studies developed resources for practitioners to provide support to children who are bullying at school. These resources also point towards the link between family relationships and bullying at school, and the need for practitioners to assess risk factors and strengthen protective factors, particularly in relation to families, but also across individual, school and community levels.  

In the ACT, school welfare staff report that the young people they come into contact with who participate in violence (verbal or physical) or bullying at school, can experience a range of these contributing risk factors. In particular, they identified young people’s low self-esteem, difficulties regulating heightened emotions, and the limited role-modelling of positive problem-solving behaviours available to them through the family home. These young people may also experience family instability or family conflict.

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More broadly, schools and community organisations report that issues experienced by students may include, among other concerns: trauma, mental health, family instability and conflict, bullying and harassment, alcohol and other drug abuse, school disengagement, social isolation and lack of connectedness to the community, homelessness, and involvement in statutory systems such as the child protection and youth justice system.

Protective factors against youth violence include strong bonding to family, school, peers and community; through which prosocial beliefs and standards for behaviour are communicated. Key social influences include responsive parenting, schooling and other out-of-home environments; within broader supportive social and economic environments, outlined in Figure 2. These external influences strengthen individual skills and behaviours. In addition to youth violence, these factors can help to prevent other outcomes, including youth homelessness, school disengagement, mental health and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Figure 2. Pathways to positive participation

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Providing early support to young people and families

The interconnection of risk factors for youth violence and bullying with other adverse outcomes for young people and families presents an important opportunity to provide a whole-of-community response to support families early.

Schools are uniquely situated to provide pathways for children, young people and families to access supports within their local communities. In the ACT, processes for student support vary between schools and operate with limited resources. Schools endeavour to provide a range of supports to meet the diverse needs of their students and may partner with or refer students to external community services.

However, little progress has been made in the ACT to shift from a crisis-oriented service system, with responses directed towards supporting students who are already experiencing concerns. Schools and community services report systemic barriers to identifying young people early (before they present with externalising behaviours, such as violence, bullying or antisocial behaviours). This unavoidably pushes welfare teams into a 'reactive' crisis response space.

Earlier identification of students through universal screening would support schools and services to identify and provide earlier support, before concerns escalate to crisis point. Schools and community services can then work together to assess and refer young people (and potentially also their families) to additional supports and activities. Such models of early identification and coordinated support between schools and community services are already operating in other Australian jurisdictions, based upon ‘The Geelong Project’ model in Victoria 7.

Three schools in the ACT region, alongside three community organisations, are already taking steps to implement a similar model of coordinated support within their local communities. This community-development, place-based work has strengthened formal collaboration between schools and community services to provide coordinated supports to students and their families. Together, these sites are examining ways to shift away from crisis-oriented responses towards earlier identification and support. The Youth Coalition is providing support to progress this work.

In relation to school violence and bullying, an evidence-based model of early identification and coordinated support may lead to a reduction in the number of young people commencing or continuing these behaviours; if young people experiencing risk factors are identified and supported appropriately. This model may also assist schools to identify young people who are experiencing (rather than participating in) bullying at school or within their community, in order to enable further supports to be provided.

Thank-you for the opportunity to contribute a submission to this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

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7 For more information, visit: http://www.thegeelongproject.com.au/