Submission Cover Sheet

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

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Below is an account of what my son has experienced over a three year period.

This has been extremely traumatic for him and us as parents. We still have arguments each morning because he does not want to go to school because of anxiety.

I believe there needs to be more resources for schools to assist in dealing with inappropriate student behavior. When corporal punishment was removed, and I am not suggesting to bring that back, it needed to be replaced with robust alternatives. I spoke with a teacher only last week who shook their head and agreed the students with severe behavior issues are causing a great deal of stress and taking up a lot of time and resources. Staff feel “hamstrung” because they can only do so much. Our Deputy Principal agreed when I shared this conversation with them. They are also frustrated. Behaviour is taking up so much time and energy students are not able to focus on learning.

I also have concerns around accountability. There appears to be very little accountability for Principal’s in our schools. The process for complaining to the EDU is a long, protracted process, and that is if anyone will listen. There appears to be a culture of looking after colleagues within the EDU. An external complaints avenue may be one way to address this problem.

Another concern is around reporting of incidents in schools. I found out via the EDU staff I am in contact with that none of the incidents involving my son were reported to EDU, and they met the guidelines for incidents which should have been reported. I am not in the process of having them contact the school to access the internal reporting system to see if any of the incidents were reported internally. I pointed out the ramifications if nothing is recorded. For instance I was advised one avenue was for us to apply for a court order to keep the student away from our son. The Courts would want documented evidence of the issues and if the school does not have incidents recorded this could prove to be problematic. Also, if we chose to take a litigious path we would require all evidence of incidents, again we would have nothing to show.

My son’s experience

In 2016 my son was in year 1 when he and two of his friends were targeted repeatedly by the same two students in the playground at lunchtime and recess. They were physically assaulted, kicked in the groin, punched in the stomach and thrown to the ground. I, with the two other boys mother’s, approached teachers regarding this issue and spoke to the then Deputy Principal, on several occasions, and were told each time they could not discuss what was happening with regards to the two students but to have faith in the school process and that we will see changes. One afternoon our boys told us they had again been physically attacked at lunchtime by the same two students. Their teacher came over to us very
apologetically stating she had witnessed for herself that day exactly what we had all been saying was happening for some time. The offending children had been told they were not allowed in the playground during breaks and were to sit inside with staff however one forgot his lunch and was told to retrieve it from his classroom. Instead of doing that he went straight to the playground and straight to our boys. This teacher witnessed what happened and couldn’t apologise enough and organised for me to meet with the acting Deputy at that time as our Deputy was away. The acting Deputy listened to the whole story, of what we now referred to as bullying, and harassment, and told me that one of the children was not a bad child but was under the bad influence of the other, and that that child came from a home where he was not taught correct behaviours, had the mind of a 3 year old and this was his way of making friends. I was again told to have faith in what the school was doing to resolve these behaviours.

During this period of bullying and harassment my son would come home from school and have angry outbursts, crying, asking why me, and why do I have to keep putting up with this, do I have to keep putting up with this until I go to high school because no one seems to really care or do anything about it. I kept telling him I was doing all I could and told him what I was being told which was to have faith in what the school was doing, but he and I, had lost all faith by then.

Fortunately, we then had the 6 week break and hoped things might be different when school resumed. Unfortunately they were not and the bullying and physical violence continued. He was now in Year 2 and was very upset one afternoon but didn’t want to talk about it. I eventually got him to tell me the following day that this child had come up to him in the hallway during a break and choked him, strangling him using both hands. He told me he could not see out of his eyes. I work in medicine and realised straight away that this was serious and he had been close to passing out. I sent an email to the Deputy Principal asking him to look into this incident immediately and that I was now considering going to the Police as this had been going on far too long without any obvious changes in behaviour. I received a call from the Deputy Principal informing me he had spoken to the student who had admitted what he did and had shook hands with my son and apologised. As far as I am aware there were no other consequences or support for the student. As far as I am aware there were no other consequences or support for the student. I spoke to friends within the police force about my options and began weighing up how to approach this in a formal way because by this time my son was displaying signs of an anxiety disorder. He was hypersensitive to anyone speaking badly to him and did not want to go to school. He had developed a habit of wiping his mouth with the collar of his shirt, which would then leave the skin red and raw, he was then teased about having sores and a moustache. He was coming home from school having angry outbursts and telling us it was ok, because he would chop his head off and kill himself. On one occasion he took a bread knife out of the draw holding it to his throat as he said it. I spoke to the Deputy Principal about what was happening and he commented “well we all know he won’t achieve anything with a butter knife”. I could not believe the flippant response and I approached one of the school psychologist’s about the issue. He advised me to see a private psychologist, which I was already in the process of arranging. The GP who provided him with a mental health plan asked me why we had left it so long before getting him help to deal with bullying. I stated the school kept reassuring me they were dealing with the problem and to have faith in that process. But once my son started making suicidal
comments I realised just how huge an impact this was having on him and acted immediately to take him to see a professional.

A few weeks later I received a text from another mother asking me who the boys were who had been bullying my son, because her daughter had been assaulted that day, punched in the face and kicked in the stomach in a random attack on the playground at lunchtime. It was the same 2 students responsible that we had been complaining about for now over a year. Her daughter had to have an abdominal ultrasound because she was in pain and I know that her parents spoke to the Principal and Deputy Principal and the result was the child was suspended for one day. They were also told details of what was happening in terms of dealing with this child.

I was very angry to hear she had been assaulted by these children and what made me even more angry was that there were no consequences when my son was strangled. Nor was I ever given any assurances of what was being done to help support changes in this child’s behaviour. I met with the Deputy Principal, the Principal joined us but kept leaving and walking back in. I told the Deputy that there was no consistency as far as I was concerned in the school’s approach in dealing with these issues and children. And expressed how angry I was at the lack of consequences when my child was strangled and when the other female student was assaulted he was suspended, he also then placed in an LSG class away from the rest of the year 2 students. I received what I felt were very defensive responses, I stated this child was out of control and was told in a stern way that was not true. I left feeling still angry but hoped that maybe with this child now out of the mainstream year 2 classes we might see some positive changes. I also felt lost as to what to do to take my concerns any further as I had been confronted on the phone by the Principal on one occasion regarding comments I had made and I felt if I went to the Education Directorate with a complaint it was only going to make things worse for my son.

I have had several people ask at times why didn’t I just move my son to a different school. This did of course cross our minds, but he had friends at the school, and why should a child be forced to move schools because the appalling behaviour of others cannot be managed appropriately.

I attended a meeting organised by the P&C Council about violence and bullying in schools, interestingly of the 6 parents present there were 3 parents from our school at this meeting. I left feeling a sense of is this really going to go anywhere and achieve anything and unfortunately the parent who agreed to convene future meetings never got in contact. I understand this group is still working on this issue though, 2 years later.

Last year my son was in a composite class with Year 4 students, he was in year 3. There was a student in his class who kept harassing him verbally and alienating him from others in the class, telling other students to not include him in things etc. He had started rubbing his mouth with his shirt collar and so I approached the Year 3 Executive teacher. I told him the whole story of what happened with the other child, the strangling, how it was dealt with. He didn’t say anything but the look on his face told me all I needed to know. He told me it was his job to provide a safe environment
for students and he would talk to the student, my son and their teacher and to see him again that afternoon. He met me later that afternoon and provided a comprehensive run down of what he had done that day and I agreed we would see how that impacted the child’s future behaviour, and that if there were further issues I would be back to see him. Two days later the Principal stopped me in the corridor, my son was with me, and told me “We need to work on ****’s resilience, because the other child’s behaviour is not going to change and the parent’s will not help to make any changes”. I was angry that for one this was discussed with me in front of my son and I felt it was a poor approach and attitude like it was all just too hard. I emailed her two days later when I calmed down, and copied in the Year 3 Executive teacher, stating his help had been appreciated and we had seen an improvement already in class that week, then relayed the conversation I had with the Principal telling her I likened her comment to telling the victim of domestic violence they needed to toughen up because the abuser would not change. I received no reply to that email. However, two weeks later the Executive teachers gave a presentation at a P&C meeting about wellbeing and behaviour at our school. I asked at the end what the approach was when it was deemed a child’s behaviour would not change and the parent’s were not likely to help make it change. I was told this was not the place to discuss individuals, even though I did not mention any individuals, it was a generic question that I wanted a response to, that I had never received. I felt this presentation that night was a passive aggressive way of replying to my email.

My son is now in Year 4. The first week back at school I noticed he had starting to become anxious again and was again rubbing his mouth with the collar of his shirt. I kept asking if anything was bothering him and he didn’t want to talk about it. I picked him up from school last Friday and while waiting saw the child who had strangled my son walk out of his classroom. This child is in my son’s class this year. I understood straight away why his anxiety levels had gone through the roof again and spoke to the Executive teacher for Year 4 on Friday who didn’t seem to be aware of the past issues with this child and my son. She told him he was able to sit at a table outside his room if he felt unsafe and was able to sit at a table in the Executive’s office also. As far as I am concerned this is not a reasonable solution to this issue. My son is there to get an education, and I feel once again that he, the victim, is being punished and disadvantaged. I am meeting with my son’s teacher tonight at parent teacher interviews and will be discussing this issue with him, he taught my son last year and is aware of the anxiety problems he has been battling. I contacted the school about my concerns, asking to know the process for deciding which classes students are placed in and why this student was placed in my son’s class when I have been very clear and open about his anxiety disorder. It seems an incredibly poorly considered, cruel even, choice to make when there are 3 other classes he could have been placed in away from my son. I was told I should have sent an email to the Principal requesting he not be in the same class as this child. As far as we were aware that child was in a learning support class and not in mainstream classes. It did not even cross my mind there was a need to send such an email. I have also had a conversation with staff within school improvement at EDU who agreed the school should have been well aware of the situation and should never have allowed them to be placed in the same class. I am concerned my son’s learning is suffering this year due to his anxiety disorder and not feeling safe at school. He did not have an anxiety disorder prior to any of this. It has been caused by the incompetence of the school leadership. I also have a letter from his psychologist noting he suffers from a
generalised anxiety disorder and a degree of PTSD as a result of his experiences. We are currently in the process of applying for supports in the way of funding for the school in hope that if approved, this will provide the school with funding to purchase more resources for mindfulness and training for staff around identifying and managing anxiety. I am however aware that any funding is provided to the school and it is at the school’s discretion as to how this funding is used. There is absolutely no guarantee that it will be used to assist my son. I have a friend whose son has severe autism and their school was allocated funding to provide a full time support person but that in reality was a part time support person which resulted in his mother finding him wandering outside the school grounds at school pick up time, he now attends a different school.

Our school requires some major changes in leadership and culture. There are clearly not enough supports and resources available to schools to deal with problem behaviour. A 9 year old child should not have to continue seeing a psychologist, since age 7, because they feel all hope is lost!

I am more than happy to speak with members of the committee if necessary to clarify or provide further information.

Thank you