



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS  
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Mrs Elizabeth Kikkert MLA (Deputy Chair),  
Mr Mark Parton MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

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

**Submission Number: 08**

**Date Authorised for Publication: 21 May 2019**

**A SUBMISSION BY THE ACT PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION (ACTPA)**

**to**

**THE ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**Inquiry into the Management and Minimisation of  
Violence and Bullying in ACT Schools**

**May 2019**

**ACTPA represents ACT Principals and Deputy Principals in school and office sites of the ACT Education Directorate. ACTPA operates under the pillars of professional learning, professional advocacy, wellbeing and research and innovation.**

Contacts:

[Redacted contact information]

[Redacted contact information]

[Redacted contact information]

ACTPA <https://www.actpa.com.au>

ACT schools are safe schools.

For the last three years ACT residents have identified that they feel safe in Canberra. They also feel positive about housing, health services, job prospects and education opportunities, gaining Canberra top ranking in the *Life in Australia Index*.

*Melbourne has for many years been regarded as Australia's most liveable city, however, when it comes to how residents actually feel about where they live, Canberra comes out on top.*<sup>1</sup>

Canberrans are positive about their city, as they are about their government schooling. The overall satisfaction of parents and carers with the education provided at ACT public schools, has maintained a mid-eighty percent ranking from 2013 to 2017, with 2017 being at 85%.<sup>2</sup>

The Canberra community is also a concerned and involved community. The ACT recorded the highest participation rate of all Australian states and territories in the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey at 82.4%. (Note: the ACT also recorded the highest percentage of 'yes' votes at 74%.)<sup>3</sup> Similarly the ACT has recorded the nation's highest percentage of eligible residents enrolled to vote in the Australian Federal Election 2019 at 99.2% with the national average at 96.8%.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore expected and welcomed that the ACT community, will not only engage in and provide positive feedback re schooling but will also raise its concerns with ACT schools and the system. Whilst restating that ACT schools are safe schools, it is acknowledged that some parents and carers from time to time will have concerns about safety. As noted by the ACT Director General of Education in a message to all Education Directorate staff (March 2019),

*ACT public schools are safe places dedicated to learning with more than 49,000 students and nearly 4,000 teachers attending ACT public schools every day, mostly without incident. We are proud to welcome every child at our schools, regardless of background or circumstance - including those with complex needs and/or challenging behaviours. However, schools are a reflection of the larger community. Complex and challenging behaviours are present in all aspects of society.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Life in Australia Index 2019, realestate.com.au (REA Group LTD) & Ipsos, <https://www.realestate.com.au/blog/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/21103807/realestate.com.au-Life-in-Australia-Report-powered-by-Ipsos.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> ACT Government Annual Report 2017-18, Education Directorate, [https://www.education.act.gov.au/about-us/policies-and-publications/publications\\_a-z/annual-report/annual-report-2017-2018](https://www.education.act.gov.au/about-us/policies-and-publications/publications_a-z/annual-report/annual-report-2017-2018)

<sup>3</sup> Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey 2017, Australian Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1800.0>

<sup>4</sup> Size of the electoral roll and enrolment rate 2019, Australian Electoral Commission, [https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling\\_to\\_vote/Enrolment\\_stats/national/2019.htm](https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/national/2019.htm)

<sup>5</sup> A Message from the Director General, Natalie Howson, EDU Alerts 19 March 2019

The ACT community is generally a safe community, as is Australia, despite many issues which could impact negatively on individuals...issues which could result in some people, including children, displaying complex and challenging behaviours.

There are disturbing social trends influencing behaviour. The 2016 Personal Safety Survey (ABS) showed a possible horrific influencer of behaviour noting men's and women's experiences of physical and/or sexual abuse before the age of 15 years by an adult, revealing that,

*'One in six [Australian] women (16% or 1.5 million) and one in ten men (11% or 991,600) aged 18 years and over experienced abuse before the age of 15.'*

Further, the '2016 PSS asked respondents if they ever heard or saw violence (physical assault) being directed at one parent by another before the age of 15.

- *One in ten men witnessed violence towards their mother by a partner before the age of 15 (10% or 896,700) and one in twenty-five men witnessed violence towards their father by a partner before the age of 15 (4% or 380,000).*
- *One in eight women witnessed violence towards their mother by a partner before the age of 15 (13% or 1.2 million) and one in twenty women witnessed violence towards their father by a partner before the age of 15 (4.7% or 440,900).<sup>6</sup>*

Of significant interest and concern to schools is the impact of digital technology on children especially in relation to mobile devices and children's screen time. The eminent Finnish educator and currently Professor of Education at the Gonski Institute for Education at the University of New South Wales, Professor Pasi Sahlberg warns of the impact on children's wellbeing from digital devices. He notes that screen time for children has increased rapidly since 2000 whilst their wellbeing and health have seen a corresponding decline, with increases in anxiety, depression, social challenges, behavioural disorders, addictions, suicidal behaviours and inadequate sleep. He predicts 2021 to be the tipping point in this scenario.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, Australian society and schools function well, despite the presence of many negative trends within the community. This is especially valid for the ACT. In part, this appears to be result of ACT societal goodwill and engagement and the positive and supportive structures that are in place in the ACT generally and within our schools.

ACTPA respects the concerns that the ACT community may have about negative behaviours of violence and bullying that may occasionally occur in our schools. In March 2019 the ACT Government received two petitions from 604 ACT residents calling

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<sup>6</sup> 4906.0 - Personal Safety, Australia, 2016, Australian Bureau of Statistics, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0>

<sup>7</sup> Pasi Sahlberg, The Picture of School Improvement 2019 Principals Conference Thinking Schools - Better World Brisbane Qld, Wed 27 February 2019. <https://pasisahlberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Brisbane-Talk-2019.pdf>

for the current inquiry into violence and bullying in ACT schools arising from instances of complex and challenging behaviours. Just as principals and schools respond to concerns from parents, carers, students and the community in general, it is appropriate for the ACT Legislative Assembly to have responded to these 604 petitioners. Further, ACTPA supports the statements made through the Minister and the ACT Legislative Assembly in responding to these petitions. In particular ACTPA acknowledges the following statements:

*'Schools are not isolated from wider social issues and their effects, like bullying or violence seen in the community.'*

*'The Education Directorate's current approach to providing safe, supportive and inclusive schools is based on contemporary advice and evidence about the system's strengths and areas for further work. Four extensive pieces of work since 2015 have informed the Directorate's approach.*

*These include:*

- Schools for All Children and Young People: Report of the Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour and the Schools for All Program*
- the 2016 Independent Assessment- Occupational Violence conducted by David Capel and Associates (Caple Review)*
- the Occupational Violence Management Policy and Management Plan developed during 2016, and related work such as an enforceable undertaking agreed with the Work Safety Commissioner*
- the government's Future of Education Strategy.<sup>8</sup>*

Aligning with Directorate policy and the varying needs of students, ACT schools employ a wide range of learning processes and interventions to promote positive behaviour. The Minister's response to the two petitions exemplified one such program, *Positive Behaviour for Learning* (PBL). Characterising many behavioural processes, PBL is an approach which focuses on learning, wellbeing and engagement.

*'PBL is an internationally-adopted, evidence-based whole school approach to improve learning, behaviour and social outcomes for all students. PBL facilitates students, teachers and school communities to identify the positive behaviours and values that are expected in their school. The values and expectations are taught, reinforced and celebrated both within and outside a classroom setting. The PBL approach involves the school community working together with students, families and staff all empowered to participate in decision-making. It also involves developing school-wide consistent procedures to address negative behaviours.'<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Response to Petitions Nos 5-19 and 8-19 - Independent Inquiry into violence in ACT Public Schools. ACT Government, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Child Development, Yvette Berry, 3 April 2019.

ACTPA notes the many strategies, procedures, policies, referrals and tools available to ACT schools to respond to and counter instances of negative behaviours when they do arise. These include but are not limited to:

- Managing Behaviours Safely...A Risk Management Approach 2016
- Safe and Supportive School Policy, 2016.
- Safe and Supportive School Policy Procedures, Procedures A and B 2016
- Safe and Inclusive Schools Initiative 2018
- All Schools...Wellbeing Create Plans 2018
- Wellbeing...Entering Negative Instances 2018
- Managing Occupational Violence Policy, 2017
- Occupational Violence Management Plan, 2017
- ACT Education Directorate Code of Conduct...School Based Officers 2017
- Reportable Conduct Policy 2015

These support mechanisms also include the availability and use of school psychologists, interagency support officers and procedures and more recently the ACT Senior Practitioner. This support for students who experience behavioural issues is strongly enhanced by the wide range of school specific interventions as noted by the following example provided in confidence to ACTPA:

*'In addition to system-wide proactive programs to prevent bullying and violence many schools have developed bespoke programs to assist students with building successful relationships and emotional wellbeing. For example, one primary school has dedicated two teachers to work, full time, on a proactive program each day in which a series of innovative measures enable children to address concerns and work through issues related to learning and wellbeing. The program includes a full time 'Friendship Hub' where children are supported, counselled, taken through restorative practices and shown how to positively resolve issues with others. It also incorporates a creative play area where emotions can be worked through and cooperative play skills can be developed. The Well Being team also works very closely and positively with parents. Programs such as this are instrumental in teaching constructive behaviour and promoting a positive school and community culture that minimises bullying and violence.'*

Principals strongly believe that two of the keys to the promotion of positive behaviour in schools is the high-level professional learning engaged in by principals and teachers and the adherence to the Australian Curriculum and Learning Capabilities. As noted in the Education Directorate Annual Report 2017-18, system based professional learning actions in 2017-18 included:

- New Educator Support
- Aspiring Leaders Program
- Safe and Inclusive Schools Initiative professional learning programs
- School Leader Master Class for principals re aligning the learning power approach and the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum
- Engaging Schools Summit for school leaders
- Positive Behaviours Learning

- 'Everyone Everyday', a national award winning Social Emotional Learning program<sup>2</sup>

Further, the report noted:

*'Teacher, School Leader and Principal Performance and Development Framework (the Framework) was launched for system-wide implementation in Term one, 2018. The Framework reflects the Directorate's commitment to continuous improvement of ACT public school teacher and school leader performance through effective goal setting and evidence-based feedback. The Framework is aligned with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and Australian Professional Standard for Principals. The Framework guides our schools to support a performance and learning culture...*

*The Annual Professional Learning Program (the Program) outlines a high-quality program of professional learning in every school to support all teachers to continually develop their professional knowledge, practice and engagement. The Program provides teachers with ongoing opportunities to come together with colleagues to engage in professional conversations and investigations of teaching practice and student learning. With the support of colleagues, each teacher can focus attention on addressing educational issues directly relevant to their students' learning needs in the classroom and develop their own teaching practice to meet these needs.*

*The requirements of the Program include two days professional learning during the stand down period, along with engagement with regular professional learning opportunities during term time. In 2018, principals of all schools were required to develop a professional learning program, supported through the Annual Professional Learning Program Guidelines and Planning Template, which focused on building quality teaching practice. The Program has been designed in collaboration with the ACT TQI professional learning requirements for registration.<sup>2</sup>*

ACTPA contends that systemic delivery of the Australian Curriculum in ACT schools is essential to the learning and the emotional and social wellbeing of all children. It is key to managing and minimising violence and bullying. In particular ACTPA notes the areas of English, Humanities and Social Science and the Arts. Strongly associated with these interrelated areas are the General Capabilities which encompass *'knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions. Students develop capability when they apply knowledge and skills confidently, effectively and appropriately in complex and changing circumstances, in their learning at school and in their lives outside school.'*<sup>9</sup>

ACTPA strongly endorses the *Personal and Social Capability* which notes...

*'Students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. Personal and social capability involves students in a range of*

*practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skills.*

*Personal and social capability supports students in becoming creative and confident individuals who, as stated in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008), 'have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing', with a sense of hope and 'optimism about their lives and the future'. On a social level, it helps students to 'form and maintain healthy relationships' and prepares them 'for their potential life roles as family, community and workforce members' (MCEETYA, p. 9).*

*Students with well-developed social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, develop resilience and a sense of self-worth, resolve conflict, engage in teamwork and feel positive about themselves and the world around them. The development of personal and social capability is a foundation for learning and for citizenship...*

*In particular, the more students learn about their own emotions, values, strengths and capacities, the more they are able to manage their own emotions and behaviours, and to understand others and establish and maintain positive relationships.<sup>9</sup>*

ACTPA believes in positive relationships. It welcomes the active engagement of parents and the community in schooling and learning, creating caring and productive relationships, promoting learning success and positive behaviour. This key driver is inherent in the Directorate's *Future of Education Initiative* as noted in the Annual Report 2017-18:

*The release of the Future of Education Themes document in August 2017 made visible ... community input and key issues and provided clearer focus for more targeted consultation [within the directorate's ten year 'big conversation' strategy].*

*A series of targeted workshops was held in March 2018 to test the themes and help refine and shape the strategy. This resulted in four broad focus areas emerging that will provide the foundations for the strategy. These foundations included:*

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<sup>9</sup> General Capabilities, The Australian Curriculum. ACARA, 2014  
<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability/>

- > ***Students at the centre*** which focuses on practices that prioritise and support the engagement of every student in their learning and their learning environments;
- > ***Empowering teachers*** which focusses on supporting teachers to meet the range of diverse student need and to continually build their own practice expertise;
- > ***Creating communities of learning*** which recognises that schools need to be collaborative communities where, in tandem with government services, community agencies and the broader community, schools work together to meet the diverse needs of students and their families; and
- > ***Systems of support*** which will focus on equity and quality by ensuring schools are networked, offer smooth transitions, provide effective welfare-based supports and good access to the data needed to ensure and monitor every child's growth year on year.<sup>2</sup>

ACTPA is actively engaged in the implementation of the *Future of Education* strategy and its outcomes but community engagement in schooling and learning is ongoing. ACTPA stresses the importance of building communities of trust and working closely with parents...areas in which Principals and Deputy Principals engage every day and see as another crucial part of our roles...building relationships with parents, staff, children and the community to improve educational achievement and outcomes for all.

In concluding its submission, ACTPA declares that ACT public schools are safe places in which to learn and work, where negative instances are rare. Our school and system leaders prioritise the safety and wellbeing of our students and objectively have a very successful record in this regard. In fact, any recent purported rise in violent incidents can be attributed to the increased resourcing the ACT Education Directorate has allocated to monitoring and reporting such activity, in order to better understand and respond to issues as they arise. Raising responsible and respectful young people is a task shared by parents, schools and communities together; it is not always easy, but a more balanced and realistic view should be elevated in the public debate. Often the negative experiences are those heard loudest. It is our job as education professionals to enable learning and wellbeing progress for every child. We embrace that calling wholeheartedly. However, the students in our schools represent the range of our society's character, behaviour, values and priorities; if we are genuinely interested in addressing issues of bullying, violence and other forms of unacceptable behaviour it will continue to require a collective responsibility from the community, schools and system.

**The ACT Principals Association welcomes the opportunity to appear as a witness at a public hearing through:**

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