



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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

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Submission to inquiry
Alison Mokany



Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity for me to provide my story to the committee. While I would never wish to be in this situation, I'm glad that I'm able to provide a submission that may assist others in the same situation.

Issues with the ACT education directorate began late last year with the intake of my child into the priority area of our suburb. For the past six years we have sent our children to the local primary school without major issue. The transition to high school was more challenging. Many close friends chose other schools in the surrounding area above our local school, due to concerns about bullying and violence in the priority area high school. We were denied an out of area opportunity to the surrounding area schools, despite several appeals.

This priority area only policy has created a situation where the local school contains only a subset of the local area and these are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This is because those with higher socioeconomic incomes will preferentially send their children to private schools or move out of the area due to the low confidence in the local school.

Our family unfortunately experienced violence at the priority area school from the very first day. My son was threatened by a female student in gym class, and the school spoke to her about appropriate behaviour.

Throughout the week as older students come back to the school, my son witnessed increasing incidents of violence, culminating in one of his friends by the end of the week being punched to the ground and kicked while being filmed. The students responsible were given a suspension. I am not sure psychologically how anyone is able to process this as a "normal" first week of school.

Within the next week we had had five phone calls from the school. These documented incidents of my child witnessing a king hit on a child, rocks being thrown, threatening children with being hit, and general gang behavior. At no point did the school appear to have capacity to deal with the situation appropriately.

I spoke to the acting principal and deputy principal on an ongoing basis. After every incident I contacted the department of education liaison unit to ask for assistance and advice on how to move forward with the situation. While they provided a great listening post, they were not able to

provide any concrete assistance with the management of either the school or help me or my son move forward.

The escalating issues continued into the fourth week of school when my son was attacked in the playground. He was sitting in his lunch when an older student came over and coat hanged him around the neck. The student then walked away and came back with a friend and kicked my son in the stomach. This happened at lunch time and the school did not call me until after 3 p.m.

I immediately contacted the departmental liaison unit and the police. My son provided a statement to the police and I requested a transfer of him from his current school.

Due to the violent nature of what he had experienced at the local school, I requested a transfer to a nearby school in area that would provide him with a support network of students that he knew.

I was denied a transfer, then I was denied my first appeal. shocked and appalled that I could not remove my child from a very difficult situation, I wrote the following email to the ACT minister for education on March 7, 2019. The only details in this email that I have changed is the name of the school.

Dear Minister

I am writing to you to provide written notification of the severe breaches in the duty of care of keeping students safe within your Act government schools.

I live in [REDACTED] and as this is my priority enrolment area, so my son had to be enrolled at the local High School. Since beginning at the School there have been five violent episodes of escalating bullying including physical violence that have elapsed during this time.

I have had continued dialogue with your liaison unit, the principle of the school, and the police over this issue.

The school and the education directorate seems powerless to stop a gang terrorizing year 7s.

I have requested that my son be transferred to a nearby school in our area, to maintain connection to the community and to provide a supportive peer group network that he is familiar with. Despite outlining the physical mental and psychological damage that attendance at your schools have entailed I have been denied this request.

I continue to actively have to send my child into a situation where he is beaten up on the playground through no provocation on his part.

While suspensions have been given out from the school, this is seen as a holiday by the perpetrators in particular, they deliberately targeted my son yesterday so they could receive this

reward of a holiday.

Please outline to me the mechanisms that you have in place that will ensure my child safety within your Directorate. what resources will you specifically provide to this school.

Will you be supplying security guards? Will you be adding additional teachers to supervise the breaks? what mechanisms other than suspension do you have available to you to make sure that this school is a safe school?

In particular what level of violence do your principals consider acceptable to entail psychological damage? Does my son have to be hospitalized before anything will be done about this situation.

After this email I was contacted by the Minister's office and the department of education to show me that my son would be moved. Here, the process moved quite fast with my son being removed from his old school and starting at his new school within a matter of days.

We are still counting the financial and emotional costs of this horrid start to the school year. Financially, we have had to buy uniforms, pay for buses as the new school is not within walking distance, repay for extra curricular activities such as the band program.

Emotionally it has been more difficult, my son has fitted well into his new school but had to leave many friends behind. Some of the activities that he particularly enjoyed at the local school are not available at the new school including language preferences. Transition activities that are taken for granted by other students in his year such as orientation day and school camp, he has missed out on.

There are several Act government and school based policies that I feel have contributed to the personal experience that we have had.

Firstly, making children go to a school within their priority area which does not meet their emotional, physical or academic needs is a ridiculous policy. Many good surrounding schools are all full, while the substandard local school has very few enrolments. There are good reasons for this. Issues at low enrolment schools need to be examined by the government. What is it about the high enrollment schools that mean that they are successful, when they're less than 5 km away from the low enrollment school? What mechanisms can the government put in place to ensure greater equity and distribution of students?

This policy severely disadvantages low socioeconomic families. Those with higher incomes will preferentially send their children to private school or move into high performing school areas because they have the means to do so. Higher income families are also more likely to appeal the decision of enrolment in substandard schools. This leaves underperforming local schools in a feedback loop where low socio-economic status is the norm.

Act government policies around suspension of students are also contributing to the problem. Suspension is not seen as a punishment for many students but as a holiday. Anecdotally, I have seen that some of these students parents directly benefit from having them at home, as they see it as a way to have free babysitting or assistance in family businesses such as household cleaners. There must be a better policy option and response then suspension. Whether that's an intervention team or a dedicated suspension reform day, anything but just the removal of the child from the situation.

In many cases those that have experienced violence are the ones that have to move. Why is this the case why do the victims have to change their lives while the perpetrators continue as if nothing has happened?

Lastly, I would just like to touch on mobile phone policy within the schools. For us this was a major contributing factor to the level of violence that was experienced, as the bullying continued throughout the school day due to being able to have your mobile phone on and accessible at school. There is no social or academic need to have a device other than a laptop out at school. My son's new school has a no mobile phone policy and that makes such a difference to the learning and social cohesion environment at the school.

I'm more than happy to discuss these issues with you in person or before the committee. Please feel free to redact this submission should you wish to publish it.

Please don't hesitate to contact me

Allie