



**Submission:**

**Standing Committee on Education,  
Employment and Youth Affairs**

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

**May 2019**

# About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) represents not-for-profit community organisations and advocates for social justice in the ACT.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS Network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' vision is for Canberra to be a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community-based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

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## Acronyms

ACTCOSS	ACT Council of Social Service Inc.
AEU	Australian Education Union
ATSIEB	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body
P&C Council	ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

## Introduction

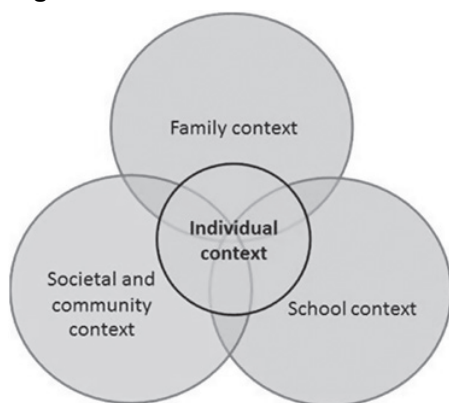
Thank you for inviting the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying and violence in ACT schools. ACTCOSS has actively campaigned for equity-based reforms to education in the ACT for several years, through our Education Equity campaign in 2016 and in our participation in the Future of Education program.

A key element of this work has been advocacy on the need for greater collaboration between schools and community, to support all young Canberrans to succeed at school. For our Education Equity campaign, we published stories of services and schools working together, highlighting what makes their partnership possible and how it is benefiting them and the young people they are working with.

In assessing the outcome of the Future of Education program, we have been pleased to see some progress on integrating schools and community, however, we see that there is more work to be done before we can move to a genuine bilateral school and community partnership model.<sup>1</sup>

Our consultation on the issue of violence and bullying in ACT schools has shown that it is incredibly important to progress this work. ACTCOSS has been disturbed to hear accounts of breakdowns in communication between schools and parents and community. Overall, we see that the safety and wellbeing of students would strongly benefit from a greater collaborative mindset and openness on the part of schools, principals, and the Directorate.

Figure 1<sup>2</sup>



Student safety and wellbeing cannot be dealt with in a closed-off manner by the school on its own. This is because there are a variety of factors that influence a student's behaviour. According to Zubrick, Williams and Sinburn, we need to use an ecological model to understand the interconnected influences on child and adolescent development.<sup>3</sup> As shown in Figure 1, a student's individual context is shaped by the school; society and community; and family. Joining up schools, communities

- 1 ACTCOSS has advocated for this model extensively. This would look like schools partnering with community agencies to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, and youth and community development. In communities where larger societal and economic factors disadvantage children, community schools provide advantages enjoyed by students in more advantaged areas. For more information, view ACTCOSS' 2017 submission, *Partnerships between schools and community organisations*, <<https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/2017-submission-future-of-education-partnerships-between-schools-and-community-organisations.pdf>>.
- 2 Stott et al, 'Framework for Prevention: Early interventions to address adolescent violence', in *Child and Adolescent Well-being and Violence Prevention in Schools*, Routledge, New York, 2018, p.181.
- 3 Zubrick, Williams and Sinburn, *Indicators of Social and Family Functioning*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra, 2000, p.11.

and families is therefore one of the key tools available to shape effective and meaningful understanding of the causes of violence and bullying, and how best to respond and prevent these in the future.

ACTCOSS hopes this Inquiry will be a mechanism for policy, culture, and procedure change that supports an expectation that all children should be safe from violence and bullying at school. This submission outlines several key issues that we believe the Directorate must address to reduce bullying and violence in ACT schools and build a culture of non-violence and safety that is preventative and inclusive of students, parents, carers, and community agencies.

In developing this submission, ACTCOSS spoke to the Youth Coalition of the ACT, ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Association (the P&C Council), the YWCA of Canberra, and the Australian Education Union ACT. We have also participated in the joint P&C Council and Education Directorate workshop on violence in schools, and attended an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB) community consultation on education. ACTCOSS endorses the submission from the P&C Council, who are strong advocates for the families who have been affected by violence and bullying in schools. We also note that in implementing responses, the Directorate should consult with the YWCA of Canberra on gender-informed understanding of, responses to and future prevention of violence and bullying. We are also keen to know how Aboriginal community-controlled organisations are being involved in ensuring cultural safety for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

While we welcome work on bullying and violence by the Standing Committee, we do note one reservation, which we understand has been voiced by other stakeholders. This is that some people who have experienced violence and bullying but would not be comfortable giving evidence in the public domain on their experiences. ACTCOSS recommends that:

- This Inquiry offers some private hearings
- The Directorate should provide people who do not wish to give evidence at the Inquiry with an opportunity for directly sharing their personal experiences and trauma.

## Issues to address

### Expectations of student safety

While this Inquiry has emerged from some widely reported issues, it is also important to understand the depth and breadth of violence and bullying in ACT schools and whether these reports are indicative of broader issues. These issues may point to cultural and systemic flaws regarding delivering on expectations of student safety.

While discovering the root cause of known incidents is important, it should not override work to strengthen an everyday culture of safety and respect in schools.

The data tells us that in Australia approximately 25% of school students experience bullying at some stage during their time at school.<sup>4</sup>

## **Policy and procedure**

Violence and bullying in schools is currently managed by the Safe and Supportive Schools policy, which requires each ACT public school to develop its own procedure on violence management, including actions to create a safe environment and discipline management. Although the policy provides guidance to schools, it is not prescriptive on the actions that schools should take to achieve a safe and supportive school.

ACTCOSS is concerned that this approach to policy and procedural management settings for violence and bullying in ACT schools is not conducive to creating a culture of safety and respect for students. We are not clear why each school requires individual procedures, and how this is a necessary function of school autonomy.

We recommend the Directorate to implement consistent approaches to policy and procedure on violence and bullying across all ACT schools. This will create consistent expectations of student safety and will benefit students and teachers who move between schools in the ACT.

## **Uniform treatment of violence within schools**

There is a problematic imbalance in commentary on student and teacher violence when in fact neither are acceptable within schools.

ACTCOSS recommends that the same zero-tolerance approach to teachers experiencing workplace violence is applied to violence and consistency of reporting requirements against students at school, including in the recommendations that arise from this Inquiry.

## **Experience of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students**

ACTCOSS believes it is important to consider Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-specific experiences of violence and bullying, and the presence of racism within reported instances of violence.

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4 Relationships Australia, *March 2018: Bullying in Schools*, Relationships Australia, 2018, viewed 22 May 2019, <<https://www.relationships.org.au/what-we-do/research/online-survey/march-2018-bullying-in-schools>>.

At the ATSIEB community consultation on education, we heard an account of an incident where an Aboriginal student was allegedly directed to move schools in response to the racism the student was experiencing. If true, the response does not address the attitudes which may be held by students who remain in the school and puts future Aboriginal students at risk by failing to understand and address the root cause of the issue. Schools should build cultures of anti-racism and celebration of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures, and it is concerning if solutions to racism put the onus on Aboriginal students to find safe schools.

ACTCOSS recommends the Directorate report back on how the experiences of violence and bullying by and against Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students have been documented, analysed, and used to change policies and procedures to improve the safety and wellbeing of students.

## Early intervention

We know that early intervention and prevention is key to ensuring students do not continue to use violence later in life. As the *Blueprint for Youth Justice Taskforce Final Report* notes, 'programs initiated early in life to reduce later risk are generally more effective than later attempts at intervention and remediation'.<sup>5</sup> Teachers, while exercising considerable skills and expertise, are not specified holders of knowledge on violence prevention – which is a specialised field of practice and human rights work.

ACTCOSS recommends that schools bring in support to assist teachers in responding to violence and bullying at an early stage, so teachers can focus on facilitating learning, while external support workers collaborate with school leaders and student wellbeing teams to respond to and prevent future violence.

## Family Safety Hub

ACTCOSS is encouraged by the Family Safety Hub work on training ACT educators to identify family violence impacting on students. However, for the project to be effective, teachers should not feel the onus is on them alone to manage responding to instances of family violence. Ensuring that teachers are supported to progress any concerns about family violence will support the Family Safety Hub work to make a sustainable difference across the matters which form the terms of reference to this Inquiry.

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5 ACT Government Community Services Directorate, *Blueprint for Youth Justice Taskforce Final Report*, ACT Government Community Services Directorate, 2019, p.27, viewed 17 May 2019, <[https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/1361149/Blueprint-for-Youth-Justice-Taskforce-Final-Report-2019.pdf](https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1361149/Blueprint-for-Youth-Justice-Taskforce-Final-Report-2019.pdf)>.



ACTCOSS seeks more information on how teachers will be supported and resourced to progress concerns about students and family violence.

## Respectful relationships education

ACTCOSS supports the YWCA of Canberra's advocacy position that the Directorate should implement mandatory respectful relationships education at a minimum standard across ACT schools, in line with Our Watch guidelines and recommendations.

Respectful relationships education is important to educate students on respectful, safe and consensual interpersonal relationships. We agree that from preschool to year 12 we need a holistic framework that involves everyone in the school and parents and networks outside it. For a range of reasons, including their capacity to bring fresh perspectives from outside a school community, we believe that community services have an important role in helping to deliver this education in schools as an external holder of knowledge and expertise.

## Cross-Directorate collaboration

ACTCOSS believes that the issue of violence in schools needs to be addressed with responses that cut across ACT Directorates.

For example, the *Blueprint for Youth Justice Taskforce Final Report* mentions its focus area to 'enhance support for young people at risk of or who have disengaged from education' is aligned with the Future of Education program.<sup>6</sup> It also states:

Many young people at risk of offending or displaying anti-social behaviour, especially in early adolescence, are likely to still be engaged in mainstream education, providing an opportunity to divert young people from the youth justice system.<sup>7</sup>

It is unclear what this will practically look like, and we would like to see more information from the Education Directorate on how they will ensure they are usefully participating in the goals of responding to anti-social behaviour at the earliest opportunity, to ensure appropriate diversion from youth justice. Not all students who are engaged in bullying at school will be on a trajectory towards youth justice, but for some students this collaboration is a necessary preventative measure.

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6 ACT Government Community Services Directorate, *Blueprint for Youth Justice Taskforce Final Report*, ACT Government Community Services Directorate, 2019, p.27, viewed 17 May 2019, <[https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/1361149/Blueprint-for-Youth-Justice-Taskforce-Final-Report-2019.pdf](https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1361149/Blueprint-for-Youth-Justice-Taskforce-Final-Report-2019.pdf)>.

7 *ibid.*

ACTCOSS states its strong support for this collaboration but we seek more information on how the collaboration between the Blueprint for Youth Justice and the Education Directorate will be practically instituted.

## Engaging with parents and community

ACTCOSS agrees with the P&C Council that 'violence is a community problem, not just a school problem. This means a community approach is needed to find better ways to deal with violence'.<sup>8</sup>

### Communication with parents

At the P&C Council and Education Directorate workshop on violence in schools, ACTCOSS heard accounts of parents not feeling fully informed about violence experienced by their children, until the situation had reached crisis point. If true, it is unacceptable that parents are not informed of behaviour below the threshold of reportable bullying and violence that is negatively impacting their children. This includes situations where their child may be the one using violence.

Wherever possible, parents must be privy to issues occurring in schools that involve their family members and, where appropriate, they should be partners in reaching a resolution. This should occur concurrently with work with professionals such as social workers and community workers.

At the workshop, we also heard accounts from parents that some principals do not openly communicate with parents. Parents felt that the problem of violence is seen as a reputation risk to their school. If true and widespread, then this is a problematic way to view violence at a school community level and we would urge the Directorate to ensure that principals feel able to acknowledge, and supported to confront and culturally address violence at a school level as well as contributing to broader work to improve the systemic policy and procedural issues behind violence.

### Community partnerships

ACTCOSS has been clear in our advocacy around the need for stronger school and community partnerships, including planned, long-term investment for whole-of-community schools. We would like to see the Education Directorate commit to bringing in the community sector to ensure the community can share their expertise and relationships. This should be adequately resourced, including staffing levels of community services, to engage with schools

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8 ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, *Addressing school violence*, ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, 2019, viewed 21 May 2019, <<https://www.actparents.org.au/index.php/news/1/media-releases/item/399-addressing-school-violence>>.

This is an ask we have been progressing since 2014, where we asked that the Directorate increase support for preventative and frontline health, mental health and social support programs in schools such as the work undertaken by:

- School nurses
- School-based youth workers
- Pastoral care teams.

Most recently, we repeated this ask in our recent *Submission on ACT Budget Priorities 2019-20*, where we stressed that measures in the 2018-19 to employ a dedicated Parental Engagement Officer within schools and parent groups is not adequate genuine parental engagement.<sup>9</sup> Adequately resourcing community organisations to work effectively within schools – rather than only funding engagement officers within the school gate, would more effectively support ACT children and families who are disengaged, or at risk of disengagement, from the education system.<sup>10</sup>

We also ask that community-based specialist youth services are properly resourced to be able to engage with and provide service within schools.

ACTCOSS recommends that funding for school psychologists should not be tied to individual schools and should not be tied to school terms. ACTCOSS would like students to be able to access psychologists and social workers across the entire year – including school holidays – and have continuity of care in case they change schools. This is particularly important for students in the transition from primary to high school, or if students move schools following experiences of violence and bullying.

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9 ACT Council of Social Service, *Submission on ACT Budget Priorities 2019-20: Community Sector Priorities*, ACT Council of Social Service, 2018, p.32, viewed 20 May 2019, <<https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/2018-submission-act-budget-priorities-2019-20-community-sector-priorities.pdf>>.

10 *ibid.*

## Recommendations

- This Inquiry offers some private hearings
- Provide people who do not wish to give evidence at the Inquiry with an opportunity to share their personal experiences and trauma
- Implement consistent approaches to policy and procedure on violence and bullying across all ACT schools
- Apply the same zero-tolerance approach to teachers experiencing workplace violence to violence and consistency of reporting requirements against students at school
- Report back on how the experiences of violence and bullying by and against Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students have been documented, analysed, and used to change policies and procedures to improve the safety and wellbeing of students
- Bring support into schools to assist teachers in responding to violence and bullying at an early stage, so teachers can focus on facilitating learning, while external support workers collaborate with school leaders and student wellbeing teams to respond to and prevent future violence
- Provide more information on how teachers will be supported and resourced to progress concerns about students and family violence
- Implement mandatory respectful relationships education at a minimum standard across ACT schools, in line with Our Watch guidelines and recommendations
- Provide more information on how the collaboration between the Blueprint for Youth Justice and the Education Directorate will be practically instituted
- Ensure funding for school psychologists is not tied to individual schools and not tied to school terms. ACTCOSS would like students to be able to access psychologists and social workers across the entire year – including school holidays – and have continuity of care in the case they change schools.