



Parliamentary Submission

To: Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

Date: 27 June 2025

About Catholic School Parents Australia

Catholic School Parents Australia is recognised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference through the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education as the national body representing and advocating for the parents and guardians of over 765,000 children and young people who attend 1737 Catholic schools across Australia. CSPA works in collaboration and consultation with the National Catholic Education Commission.

Catholic School Parents Australia

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) is the peak national body representing the parents and carers of over 820,000 children in 1759 Australian Catholic schools. This represents over 20% of all Australian students. Notably there are over ten remote areas in Australia where the only school is a Catholic school.

CSPA's membership is made up of the Catholic school parent associations of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, Northern Territory and the ACT.

In turn, each member parent body plays an advocacy role for all parents and carers through their local school parent bodies. CSPA Member State and Territory bodies also work in liaison with their Catholic education authorities at diocesan level and with their State Catholic education commissions.

Introduction

This submission reflects the collective insights and experiences of Catholic school families nationwide. It outlines key recommendations to strengthen anti-bullying policies and practices through a unified national approach, grounded in evidence and community engagement.

CSPA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Federal Government's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review. We believe this review is a vital step toward ensuring safe, respectful, and supportive learning environments for all Australian students, their families, and school staff.

CSPA believes that addressing bullying requires a whole-school, whole-community strategy—one that empowers students, supports educators, and actively involves parents and carers.

We look forward to working collaboratively with government and education stakeholders to ensure that every Australian student can learn and thrive in a school environment free from bullying and harm.

National Definition of Bullying in Schools

CSPA strongly supports the establishment and widespread dissemination of a nationally and universally accepted definition of bullying. This definition should be well understood and accessible to all members of the school community, including students, parents, teachers, and support staff.

We endorse the definition provided in the consultation paper by **Bullying No Way**. However, CSPA encourages the Review to begin by establishing a clear, nationally accepted definition of the term ‘bullying’. At present, there is wide variation in public understanding of what constitutes bullying. Inconsistent use of the term across schools, families, communities, and media hinder effective responses.

A clear, evidence-informed definition is essential to ensure consistent application in policy, practice, and public discourse. It would also help distinguish between bullying, conflict, and unkind behaviour, all of which require different interventions.

We believe it is vital to clearly distinguish bullying from common, age-appropriate unkind behaviour, ensuring appropriate responses and expectations are maintained.

Bullying Policies, Models, and Practices

We believe that schools that actively implement strong anti-bullying prevention programs, articulate clear behaviour expectations, and apply effective mediation and consequences are best equipped to foster a safe and respectful learning environment. We recommend a review of all current practices, across all jurisdictions to gain an understanding of best practice and develop a unified model of anti-bullying strategies.

CSPA acknowledges the diversity of anti-bullying programs currently in place across Australian jurisdictions. Rather than creating entirely new programs, CSPA recommends the development of a national auditing framework to assess existing approaches, identify effective models, and promote evidence-based practice.

This audit should include:

- Whole of school community level implementation strategies.
- Assessment of student outcomes and wellbeing data.
- Consideration of long-term impacts of programs.
- Identification of gaps or areas of inconsistency.

Building on what is already working will maximise effectiveness and ensure efficient use of resources.

Prevention Strategies – A Community Approach:

At CSPA, we believe that prevention is the key to reducing and minimising the incidence of bullying nationally. A whole school approach that embeds social and emotional learning (SEL) from an early age is essential in fostering empathy, emotional intelligence, and a strong foundation for respectful relationships.

In our experience, structured programs such as the STAR behaviour framework, and Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), promotes positive reinforcement and rewards to encourage desirable behaviours while reducing challenging ones, have been particularly effective. These approaches not only support individual growth but also contribute to a positive school culture by promoting consistency and clarity around behavioural expectations. Importantly, they empower students with a sense of agency and ownership in shaping a respectful and inclusive school community.

To complement Social and Emotional Learning programs, we support the integration of targeted, evidence-based education programs; however, it is important to note that we do not feel targeted education programs alone are effective in reducing incidences of bullying.

At CSPA, we advocate for schools to be viewed as a hub where authentic partnerships between students, families, and school staff. In this spirit, we believe that education around bullying prevention must extend beyond students to also include parents and educators. Establishing a shared understanding of expected behaviours across the entire school community is essential.

In our experience, parents are most effectively engaged through a variety of initiatives, such as regular information sessions, workshops, and webinars focused on respectful relationships, online safety, and school policies. Providing accessible reading materials, plain-language guides, and regular updates through school newsletters and apps also helps to keep families informed, connected, and empowered and will assist schools in effectively minimising incidences of bullying.

Policy and Communication:

At CSPA, we believe that a crucial step in the prevention of bullying is the establishment of clear behavioural expectations for all members of the school community. This involves schools explicitly defining both desired and unacceptable behaviours. To be effective, these expectations must be clearly communicated, regularly reinforced, and easily accessible, alongside a transparent complaints process.

Our experience shows that parents are too often not sufficiently informed about the roles, responsibilities, and behavioural expectations of students, staff, and themselves within the school context. Improving this communication is essential for fostering a cohesive, respectful, and proactive school culture that prevents bullying before it occurs.

Furthermore, we believe that these expectations should explicitly reference the national definition of bullying, and we recommend mandating the inclusion and endorsement of a school's bullying and behaviour policies in the school enrolment process. In doing so, all members of the school community will be well informed on positive behaviour and relationship expectations.

To ensure accountability, we propose that compliance with these measures be incorporated into

school accreditation standards. For example, Catholic schools could be evaluated through Non-State School Accreditation Authority audits to ensure alignment with best practices in bullying prevention and response.

In May 2023, CSPA commissioned a research study titled **Family School Communication: How to Build and Maintain It**. The study was initiated to understand the importance of effective communication between schools and families, particularly in the context of student outcomes.

- The report can be found here:
https://cspa.schoolzineplus.com/_file/media/809/family_school.pdf

In addition, CSPA developed the **Gearing up for Parent Engagement in Student Learning** toolkit which has been developed for families and schools to help make the transition into primary and secondary school a great experience for children and young people.

This information guides the unique relationship between parent and child to flourish into a meaningful partnership between home and school towards improving the learning and wellbeing of students. Two modules that assist in building communication between schools and families, are:

- <https://www.parentengagementcspa.edu.au/When-should-you-talk-with-someone-at-school-primary>
- <https://www.parentengagementcspa.edu.au/When-should-you-talk-with-someone-at-school>

Bullying Incidences & Strategies:

In our experience at CSPA, parents report the highest levels of satisfaction with the school's response to bullying incidents when a consistent, transparent, and restorative approach is applied. This includes ensuring that there are clear and proportionate consequences for behaviours that breach the school's behaviour policy, and that meaningful steps are taken to repair relationships, often through strategies such as restorative justice. Families and students feel most supported when schools provide timely and ongoing communication, including face-to-face meetings, follow-up conversations, regular check-ins, and access to formal support services such as counselling.

We also recognise the importance of de-escalating heightened emotions, both for students and parents. Allowing time to process an incident, such as holding a formal meeting the following day, can lead to more constructive and solution-focused discussions. Additionally, it is vital that all students involved in a bullying incident, whether as targets, bystanders, or those who engaged in the behaviour, feel safe, respected, and supported. This includes having the opportunity to speak with a trusted teacher, mentor, or wellbeing staff member within the school.

Creating a safe and supportive school environment requires a whole-school approach where communication, consistency, and compassion guide every step of the response to bullying.

Minority Groups and Individuals

CSPA acknowledges that many schools already have support staff in place to assist students who may be more susceptible to bullying. Most notably, these include Wellbeing Leaders, Learning Diversity Leaders and other Pastoral Care staff, who provide direct emotional and social support to students, helping to foster a safe and caring school environment.

In addition, many Catholic schools employ Cultural Liaison Officers who are instrumental in bridging the gap between families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the school community. These staff members help parents and carers understand school policies, behavioural expectations, and available support services.

While the presence of these roles is highly valuable, a consistent national framework on bullying would ensure a more equitable and effective approach across all schools. Such a framework should mandate specific support strategies, professional learning, and training for all staff, including those already working in wellbeing and inclusion roles. This would not only improve the quality of support available but also strengthen the confidence and satisfaction of parents and students from minority and vulnerable groups when bullying incidents occur. National consistency would reinforce a shared commitment to dignity, inclusion, and respect in every Australian school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

CSPA reaffirms its commitment to fostering safe, inclusive, and respectful school environments for all students. Bullying in any form undermines the wellbeing and dignity of young people, and addressing it requires a unified, evidence-based, and community-driven approach.

To support meaningful and lasting change, CSPA recommends the following key actions:

- 1. Establish a National Definition of Bullying**
Adopt and promote a clear, consistent, and evidence-informed definition of bullying to guide policy, practice, and public understanding across all Australian schools.
- 2. Audit and Align Existing Programs**
Conduct a national audit of current anti-bullying strategies to identify best practices, assess outcomes, and develop a unified framework that builds on what is already working.
- 3. Embed Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**
Mandate the integration of SEL programs across all year levels to cultivate empathy, resilience, and respectful relationships from an early age and ensuring families have access to resources and assistance to support this approach in the home.
- 4. Strengthen Parent and Community Engagement**
Provide accessible resources, workshops, and communication channels to ensure parents and carers are informed, empowered, and actively involved in bullying prevention efforts.
- 5. Mandate Policy Transparency and Accountability**
Require schools to clearly communicate behavioural expectations and anti-bullying policies at enrolment and incorporate compliance into school accreditation processes, to ensure that proactive efforts are made within the school community to reduce occurrences of bullying.
- 6. Support Vulnerable and Minority Students**
Ensure consistent national standards for staff training and support services, particularly for students from diverse, minority, or vulnerable backgrounds.
- 7. Promote Restorative and Inclusive Practices**
Encourage schools to adopt restorative justice approaches and ensure all students involved in bullying incidents receive appropriate support and follow-up.

By implementing these actions, we can work together to create school communities where every child feels safe, valued, and supported.