EDUCATIONECONOMY

Creating the conditions for quality teaching, engaged learning and whole-school wellbeing.

ANTI-BULLYING RAPID REVIEW

This submission responds to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review with a commitment to fostering safer, more inclusive and respectful learning environments for all students in Australian schools.

It acknowledges the critical importance of evidence-based, whole-school approaches to bullying prevention and supports a nationally consistent strategy that is informed by current research, lived experience and culturally responsive practices.

The submission aims to contribute constructively to policy reform that supports schools, engages communities and prioritises student wellbeing and equity.

Date: 16th June 2025

Contact:
Ben Sacco - Managing Director

E: enquiries@educationeconomy.com.au
A: Suite 78/135 Cardigan Street, Carlton Victoria, 3053
W: www.educationeconomy.com.au

Submitted to:
Australian Government | Department of Education
Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

Safe to learn: embedding preventative practice in whole-school culture

Education Economy is a national consultancy working closely with schools, teachers and principals to tackle issues like student behaviour, teacher burnout, retention and school leadership. Our Managing Director, Ben Sacco is an education specialist and Author of "Disruption in Schools: Understand me before you mark me!". Ben has 20years experience working in the education sector including as a teacher, Deputy Principal and Senior Education Office staffer. Ben's expertise lies in helping schools create the conditions for quality teaching, engaged learning and whole-school wellbeing.

Introduction

While current anti-bullying frameworks in Australian schools appropriately focus on whole-school wellbeing, early identification and post-incident support, a critical gap remains in true prevention. To address school-based adversity more effectively, we must embed neurobiology guided practices in early childhood and primary education, recognising how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) shape brain and body development.

A potentially traumatic experience can leave lasting, harmful effects on an individual. For children and young people who endure ongoing or repeated abuse, such as bullying or cyberbullying, the consequences can be especially serious.

These experiences can interfere with healthy development, affect how they relate to others and hinder their ability to succeed in school.

Prioritising preventative responses over behaviour management is essential to the success of any national bullying framework.

As discussed in "Disruption in Schools", most behaviours we observe in children and young people stem from their developmental journey. From early infancy to adolescence, each stage of growth brings new cognitive, emotional, physiological and social changes that influence how they interact with their peers and the world around them.

The earliest interactions and environments play a fundamental role in brain and body development, shaping emotional regulation, social skills and behavioural responses. Though students may not explicitly recall early adversities, the effects can surface in ways that challenge their ability to engage, trust and self-regulate in the classroom and in society.

A closer look at ‘disruptions’ to safe learning environments.

Classroom disruption can take many forms, and the motivations behind such behaviours are often complex and varied.

We identify three key categories that most disruptive behaviours fall into:

- Intentional Choices
- Underlying Personal Challenges and;
- Survival-related Factors.

Bullying, whether it occurs inside or external to the classroom, can be both a ‘cause’ and an ‘outcome’ of these disruptions.

For instance, a student who is bullying others may be acting out intentionally to gain control or attention, while others may display disruptive behaviour as a result of being bullied themselves, reflecting deeper personal struggles or trauma. In some cases, both the bully and the target may be reacting from a place of survival, shaped by difficult environments or unmet emotional needs.

Learning isn’t just about exposure to new information. It’s a neurological process that shapes how students retain, recall, and apply knowledge. The nervous system plays a critical role in this, yet we often overlook it when thinking about how students learn and interact with one another.

Children often don’t have the words or ability to handle stress through talking. Many early childhood adversities never make it to the part of the brain responsible for language, making it difficult to express or even understand these feelings later in life.

This is why we must look at bullying as not simply a behavioural issue. We must take into consideration how the formative years of a child’s development are critical for shaping attitudes, social skills and emotional regulation.

By the time bullying manifests in later years, many behavioural patterns are already deeply ingrained. A ‘preventative’ shift towards how schools plan for and respond to bullying can drastically reduce future incidents.

Schools have trialled various approaches to address bullying through policy and disciplinary action, with mixed results.

Zero-tolerance policies, while aiming to deter bullying, often fall short as they can discourage reporting and fail to address underlying issues. In contrast, restorative practices and whole-school approaches that promote a positive, inclusive culture tend to be more effective but usually take place as an intervention or post-incident.

We can’t manage human behaviour with a script.

It's unrealistic to expect schools to rely on a rigid set of ‘perfected’ instructions like, ‘When this happens, do that.’

Human behaviour is complex and nuanced, influenced by a wide range of individual, social and contextual factors.

Programs like Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) and the School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework, aim to teach students appropriate behaviour through explicit instruction, modelling and practice.

While these approaches have some value, they often oversimplify the reality of human behaviour.

Additionally, these frameworks tend to focus almost exclusively on student behaviour, with insufficient attention to how teachers execute appropriate, effective responses in real time helping to shape a positive school climate.

Programs that build social-emotional skills and involve student voice also contribute to long-term change.

What doesn’t work is inconsistent implementation of policies, over-reliance on punishment and consequences, and one-off campaigns with no follow-up.

The most successful strategies combine clear, consistently applied policies with preventative community education and support.

> *Effective school bullying prevention efforts must target individual and school processes, such as building relational trust between school staff and students.*

Gizzarelli, E., Burns, S. & Francis, J. Exploring Primary School Staff Responses to Student Reports of Bullying in Australia: A Qualitative Study. Int Journal of Bullying Prevention (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-023-00190-w

1. What policies, models and/or practices (i.e. interventions) do you feel are successful in helping prevent and address bullying in schools?

One of the most common approaches to responding to bullying in schools is a whole-school positive behaviour framework.

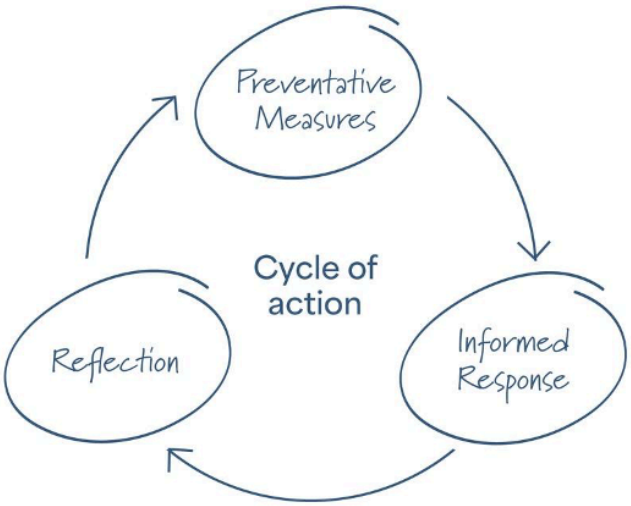
These frameworks aim to create a shared language and consistent expectations for behaviour across all school environments (from classrooms to playgrounds) and support staff in responding proactively rather than reactively to behavioural incidents.

There are a number of frameworks that attempt to promote a culture of positive reinforcement, teaching expected behaviours explicitly, and including a clear system for recognising respectful and inclusive conduct.

The trouble is, the frameworks are often geared towards the 'doing' when the incident has occurred. And it is common to see in schools a shopping list of 'students must' or 'student will' statements with accompanying 'consequences' and 'sanctions', if the 'must' and 'will' statements are not adhered to.

While many schools adopt whole-school positive behaviour frameworks aimed at reinforcing expected behaviours and promoting respectful conduct, these frameworks often focus heavily on reactive responses once an incident has occurred. As a result, student and community involvement in shaping these frameworks is frequently limited or surface-level.

At Education Economy, we are working to shift this through the implementation of the Preventative Measures to Adversity (PMA) framework. The PMA framework is helping schools who often struggle to respond to behaviours of concern because they don't have clear, preventative systems in place.



The PMA Framework continued..

This framework encourages genuine participation from students and community members by prioritising prevention, connection and co-designed solutions.

It moves beyond the traditional compliance-based approaches and responds to the underlying causes of behavioural issues taking a neurobiology guided practice approach.

Through a structured cycle of action, reflection and improvement, the PMA framework creates space for meaningful student and community voice, helping schools build environments where members of the school community feel safe, valued and engaged in shaping a positive culture.

The design and logic of the PMA framework is grounded in a structured cycle of action that prioritises **preventative measures, informed responses and reflection.**

This cycle ensures a comprehensive approach to responding to adversity in the school, whilst at the same time, continuously improving practice and outcomes.

> *Evidence suggests a well-managed whole-of-school approach to bullying is likely to result in sustained positive change within the school itself and the wider community.*

A review of literature (2010–2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group. (2015).

The following case studies illustrate how schools have shifted from reactive, compliance-based responses to preventative, student-centred approaches that build safer, more connected learning environments.

Case Study 1: Primary school reduces playground incidents through student-led solutions.

A primary school struggling with frequent bullying and conflict during recess adopted the PMA framework to shift away from punitive, post-incident responses. Instead of relying solely on teacher intervention and sanctions, the school engaged students in co-designing a new set of playground expectations and routines. Students helped identify triggers for conflict and worked with staff to develop proactive strategies, such as peer mediators and calm zones. Over time, staff reported a marked decrease in playground incidents and students expressed feeling more confident, included and heard. By focusing on prevention and student-led solutions, the school moved from reactive discipline to a culture of shared responsibility and respect.

Case Study 2: Secondary school rebuilds trust through connection and reflection.

A secondary school implementing a traditional behaviour policy found that repeated suspensions for bullying had little effect on long-term change. After shifting to the PMA framework, the school introduced structured check-ins and re-connect meetings between staff and students involved in incidents.

One student with a history of aggressive behaviour participated in a re-connect process that explored underlying challenges, including unmet emotional needs and home stressors. Rather than issuing another suspension, the school worked closely with the student and their family to co-create a support plan. Over time, not only did the student's behavioural choices improve, but peer relationships strengthened and the broader student body reported a safer, more connected school climate.

2. What policies, models or practices (i.e. interventions) do you feel are not working?

In the work Education Economy undertakes with Australian schools, a major concern across many of these schools is the inconsistency in the implementation of bullying prevention and response policies. While most schools have anti-bullying guidelines in place, their effectiveness is often undermined by troublesome implementation, lack of staff training, low teacher confidence and a disconnect between policy and practice.

In particular, implementation tends to break down in the following ways:

Inconsistent application between staff members:

Some staff are highly proactive and responsive, while others underplay or overlook incidents, leading to student confusion, mistrust and perceptions of unfairness.

Weak or fragmented communication logs:

Without a robust system for tracking bullying incidents, especially lower-level or repeated behaviours, patterns are missed. Often, documentation is informal or inconsistently maintained, meaning important information does not reach wellbeing teams, school leaders or parents in a timely way.

Lack of clear follow-up:

Even when bullying is reported and addressed initially, schools can struggle to have structured processes for monitoring student wellbeing or checking back with students, families or involved parties. This absence of follow-up can make victims feel unsupported and can allow behaviour to continue unchecked.

Over-reliance on punitive measures:

In some schools, responses still lean too heavily on disciplinary action without addressing the real causes of bullying behaviour or supporting relational repair. This approach may temporarily stop the behaviour but often fails to bring about long-term behavioural change.

To be truly effective, policies and practices need to be consistently applied, transparently communicated and backed by strong data tracking and accountability mechanisms. Without these, even well-intentioned frameworks lose their impact.

3. What changes do you think are needed to improve bullying prevention and response:

From a whole of school perspective?

To strengthen bullying prevention at the school level, a shift is needed from reactive behaviour management to preventative measures and responsiveness that address the causes of bullying.

Key changes include:

- Embed trauma-informed and neurodevelopmentally-informed practices into daily school life, particularly in early childhood and primary settings, where foundational behaviours are shaped.
- Implement consistent and inclusive whole-school frameworks such as the 'preventative measures to adversity' framework, that goes beyond punitive measures to include mitigating strategies, behaviour change processes and clear, collaborative response pathways.
- Strengthen student voice and peer-led initiatives to ensure students are active participants in shaping safe, inclusive environments.
- Improve communication and follow-up systems so that incidents are not only responded to but used to guide ongoing reflection and preventative planning.
- Invest in staff training and professional learning focused on understanding 'behaviours of concern' and 'disruption'.

From an education system perspective?

At the systemic level, we need policy and structural shifts that support long-term cultural change in schools.

These include:

- Incorporate neurobiology-informed approaches into policy to provide teachers with a deeper understanding of how stress and developmental factors influence the developing body and brain. Education professionals can implement strategies that are both preventative and restorative.

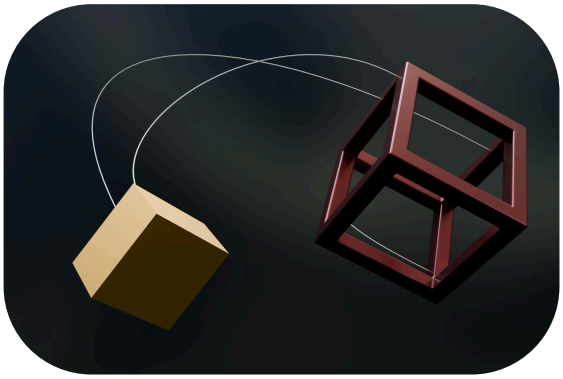
- Develop a national, consistent bullying prevention standard that is trauma-informed and adaptable to diverse school contexts.

- Allocate sustained funding and resources for 'preventative measures programs' and ongoing staff professional development, particularly in areas of high need.

- Ensure data systems support prevention strategies, early identification, transparency and accountability, with consistent reporting mechanisms that drive evidence-informed decision-making.

- Foster stronger partnerships between schools, families, mental health services, and community organisations to ensure a wrap-around approach to student wellbeing.

- Prioritise preventative measure investment to prevent patterns of adversity from becoming entrenched and to support the development of self-regulation, empathy and pro-social skills from the earliest years.



4. What do you think the underlying causes of bullying in schools are?

Bullying is rarely just a behavioural issue. It is often the visible outcome of deeper, unresolved adversity. We must not see 'bullying' behaviours as an isolated act of cruelty but rather as a symptom of dysregulation, unmet developmental needs and environments that fail to support connection, safety and belonging for children and young people.

Some of the potential underlying causes of bullying in schools include:

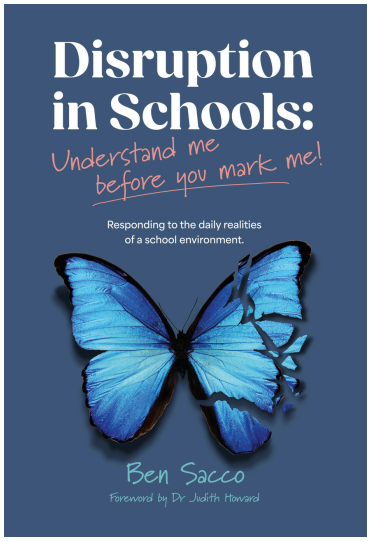
- Unaddressed trauma and adversity in early life, which disrupt the development of emotional regulation, empathy and trust. We know that many students who exhibit bullying behaviours are themselves carrying invisible burdens that influence how they interact with others.

- School environments that prioritise compliance over relational practice. When behaviour management systems are built on 'control' and 'consequences' without attending to what drives the behaviour, we miss critical opportunities to prevent and intervene early.

- A lack of relational safety and consistency, particularly for students who have experienced disrupted attachments, instability, or marginalisation. Without stable, predictable and emotionally attuned relationships, students are more likely to act out in harmful ways *(intentional choice, underlying personal challenges or a survival-related factor)*. This is a form of self-protection or a bid to regain a sense of control.

5. What resources are available for school staff to support action on bullying? What else would help build capability to support staff to prevent and manage bullying?

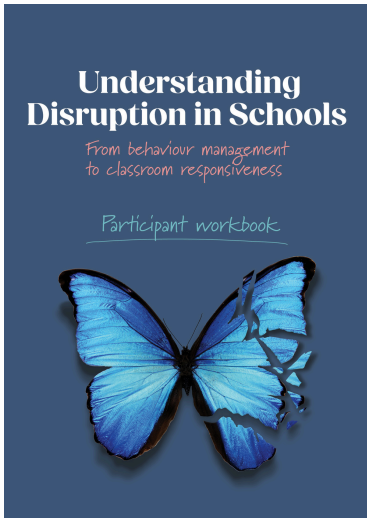
Our “Disruption in Schools” professional learning program, is a whole-school approach to responding to behaviours of concern. It accompanies the book “Disruption in Schools: Understand me before you mark me!”.



It is informed by evidence in cognitive and behavioural science as well as educational and neurobiological research.

Central to the program is our ‘model and coach’ methodology, where behaviour specialists provide in-class modelling and real-time coaching to staff.

This hands-on, contextual support builds teacher confidence, builds systems to ensure consistency in response strategies, and bridges the gap between theory and day-to-day classroom realities.



Education professionals learn to interpret behaviours of concern by understanding childhood development, recognising the signs of underlying adversity and implement regulation-based strategies that reduce escalation and build student connection to increase explicit curriculum instruction and lesson delivery time.

8. What guiding principles or other elements could be helpful in developing a consistent national standard for responding to bullying?

Developing a consistent national standard for responding to bullying requires more than a one-size-fits-all policy. It requires a thoughtful, evidence-informed framework grounded in the realities of a modern world. Effective approaches must recognise the complexity of human behaviour, the developmental needs of children and young people and the vital role of relationships in fostering safe and supportive environments. The following guiding principles outline the foundational elements that would help shape a national standard that is both practical and impactful, supporting schools to prevent bullying, respond effectively when it occurs and prioritise the wellbeing of every student and staff member.

1. Prevention over punishment

Prioritise early, preventative measures that reduce the likelihood of bullying before it starts. This includes embedding neurodevelopmentally-informed, trauma-aware approaches in parenting programs, early childhood and primary settings.

2. Relationship-centred practice

Strong, trusting relationships are foundational to safe learning environments. National standards should emphasise connection, co-regulation and classroom responsiveness over control-based behaviour management.

3. Whole-school responsibility

Bullying prevention is not the job of one staff member. It requires a coordinated effort across leadership, teaching teams, students and families, with shared language and shared expectations.

4. Student voice and agency

Children and young people must be part of the conversation. Their input should guide the development, review and implementation of policies and practices that affect their safety and wellbeing.

5. Partnership and consultation

Principal associations should be active partners in implementing and reviewing the standard, ensuring it supports school leaders to uphold wellbeing, safety and inclusion without adding unnecessary administrative burden.

6. Evidence-informed, practice-driven

Policy must reflect the latest research in neuroscience, neurobiology, psychology, behaviour science and education and it must also be shaped by what works on the ground.

7. Accountability with support

Clear reporting mechanisms and follow-up processes are essential. But these should be designed to support learning and improvement, not blame and focus on restoring safety and trust at all times.

8. Professional learning and capability building

All staff must have access to ongoing, quality professional development that builds their capability to respond to behaviours of concern.