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Parents' Voice in Government School Education

March 29, 2023

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT REFERENCE COMMITTEE regarding The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms

Dear Committee Members,

Parents Victoria (PV) is a state wide democratic organisation representing parents of students in Victorian government schools. For further information about us: <https://www.parentsvictoria.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Parents-Victoria-Brochure-download.pdf>

PV supports parents requiring advocacy assistance when dealing with issues involving their children's education. This may involve providing tools for self-advocacy or facilitating the mediation of the issue between the family and the school and/or the Department of Education.

PV advocates the parent/school partnership – encouraging parent engagement, identifying barriers which may prevent participation and strategies to overcome these barriers for child and family.

PV strives for improvements in school education including school facilities and resources, teacher education and curriculum so that students are able to achieve their potential in a safe and supportive learning environment.

PV is a proactive contributor to the development of new Government policy, programs and initiatives via consultation and feedback.

Due to our work with responsive complaints, we work with both parents and schools so we see many examples of disruption to learning and wellbeing for students and school employees due to many contributing factors.

We hope our submission will provide insights and solutions for the Committee for future considerations and implementation.

The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms is not just contributing to poor literacy and numeracy results, it will have long term impact on children, their families and school employees.

a) *the declining ranking of Australia in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) disciplinary climate index, making Australian classrooms amongst the world's most disorderly*

The OECD claims that “PISA adopts a more pragmatic definition according to which the disciplinary climate is measured by the extent to which students miss learning opportunities due to disruptive behaviour in the classroom” and “disciplinary climate also varies according to school characteristics that are largely out of teachers’ control.”

PV believes that having quality relationships is the key to quality education for our children. If this objective was achieved across all Australian schools, then there would be less disruption and disorder in classrooms.

Solution: Relationship based Education - refer

https://www.parentsvictoria.asn.au/issues_category/relationship-based-education/

(b) the impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention

Insights:

- Specific special need behaviours that impact the ability for a teacher to provide instructional learning.
- Demands on behaviour management, putting at risk essential learning time
- Teachers are feeling burnt out having to manage behaviours with little support from leaders – some leaders are handballing issues back to classroom teachers
- Level of blame is sometimes put on the teacher for disorderly classrooms or lack of effective behaviour management
- There appears to be a greater exodus of teachers and a challenge to get casual relief teachers (CRT's)
- Teachers are being hurt due to serious physical behaviours that need addressing and this leads to extended absences and/or work cover

Solution: Governments need to permit employers (schools) to be more transparent about school expectations around workforce safety and consequences if there is a level of misconduct or physical violence that leads to harm and injury of a teacher.

Parents of children with severe behaviour challenges are not aware of work safe PIN notices until their child is engaged in a Behaviour Support and Intervention meetings (BSIM in accordance with Victorian Ministerial Order 1125).

Ignorance is no excuse, but not having the difficult conversations on how actions of others impact on everyone reduces the trust of employees in their employers, who are obliged to keep them safe at work. The school community has a significant role to play in prevention - to know and understand the consequences when students or adults are harmed and what that means for the school, the class, the teachers and students.

(c) teachers' views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them

Insights:

- Teachers do not feel equipped or confident to maintain order in the classroom –current pre-service training does not teach or support managing 'extreme student behaviours'
- There is a significant lack of support and knowledge from leaders in schools to empower teachers to maintain orderly classrooms
- We hear often from school staff, that when there is an issue, there is a change of attitude in recent years, where “parents will always support their students” vs supporting the school.

Solutions:

- Permitting and accepting professional development from external agencies with the specialisation
- Timely external support such as SSS involvement and agency support for school staff and parent/community members
- When necessary, remind families of the obligations when a student enrolls at the school.
- Schools should be empowered to have difficult conversations with their community when required. E.g. When they need families to reinforce at home, the school rules and expectations. This could be facilitated by the school including updates on their school communication platform/s, to advise families that when matters occur, they need family support.

(d) the robustness, quality and extent of initial teacher education to equip teachers with skills and strategies to manage classrooms

Insights:

- There is limited pre-service, in-service and return to service education for teachers around how to manage severe behaviours and maintain orderly classrooms.
- Some Professional Learning appears to be available however strategies are rare or unhelpful and the currency of content is questionable
- Mentoring for new teachers has improved at a department level however the gap between department expectations and school provision is lacking or not consistent. For example, the department will say teachers require an extra hour per week to mentor/support new teachers however the school is not releasing those teachers to do this work due to budget constraints or other staffing issues. Another example, when specialists are timetabled, the mentor and graduate teacher are not timetabled together

Solutions:

- Professional learning for teachers
 - on parental engagement
 - on restorative practice
 - on Relationship based Education
- Time allocation for mentors/graduate teachers
- Internships for student teachers to be working as learning support advisors/education support in schools while they study (benefits to all parties)
- Universities utilising new technologies to simulate classroom scenarios to better prepare student teachers

- It has been claimed that practicum experiences do aid beginning teachers to be classroom ready, so opportunities for pre-service employment as education support/learning advisor officers at schools would be of great benefit

(e) the loss of instructional teacher because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms

Insights:

- Teachers having to apply seclusion practices i.e. removing the whole class because of specific student behaviour/incident has deemed the classroom high risk/unsafe. The time taken to restore order or relocate the class, debrief the students, without necessary equipment on hand, impacts the learning time greatly.
- Depending on the type of behaviour and/or disruption will depend on how the teacher is able to cope/continue to teach that class soon after or ongoing
- Some teachers take significant time off because of behavioural events, the CRT may not be prepared at short notice or able to deliver the content as required by the usual classroom teacher. This disrupts continuity of learning and they are often not familiar with the students, their needs or previous learning content

Solutions:

- Ideally schools having access to a regular pool of relief teachers known to the students
- More education/learning support officers in the classroom to support the classroom teacher so they are not as fatigued and have additional assistance if an incident occurs

(f) the impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students' learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined

Insights:

- Students in more orderly classrooms appear to be better engaged in their learning if a quality relationship has been established and secured with the student/s
- Teachers with effective communication and conflict management skills (recall a teacher saying once "my students trust me and I sometimes have to choose my battles")
- Classroom expectations are clearly defined and followed
- Disorderly classrooms can be fuelled with fear, anxiety of the unpredictable behaviour of some students if the teacher has not established a relationship with the student and/or is not fully across their learning needs and strengths
- Orderly classrooms will provide a teacher a sense of safety, stability and predictable environment

Solutions:

- Class consensus and understanding of classroom expectations and consequences
- Family engagement on all the above so parents and carers are better informed on how school works. Schools cannot rely on school policies to have been read/understood prior to an incident/s
- Review of school policies and processes on how to induct students and families on "school life" more effectively; reinforce effective communication mechanisms in partnership with families so there are no surprises to reduce reactions (anxiety/angst) when something goes wrong
- Whole school approach to how the school will communicate and apply consequences so everyone takes personal responsibility to do no harm
- Review school policies, rules and regulations to word them in a positive framework, not to provoke negative reactions. E.g. "Please walk slowly" VS "Don't run", "Please wear your hat when outside" VS "No hat no play". Change the negative narrative.

In conclusion, PV continues to advocate for Family Engagement Officers in schools to support schools with an added human resource to build and strengthen relationships between families and school. Many parents, especially those from other cultures, claim to us they do not understand how our education school system works and sometime misinterpret or misunderstand what the school is trying to teach their child and why.

This is why some schools fund multicultural aides in schools for this purpose. Where schools have employed community liaison and/or family engagement staff for that purpose the relationships flourish and assist with improving student learning and wellbeing. It assists with our overarching thrust of our submission, and that is to have quality relationships in schools. This will reduce disruption and disorder as students and teachers will learn to trust each other more.

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