



## **The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms**

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FEDERATION OF PARENTS AND CITIZENS ASSOCIATIONS OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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# Introduction

The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is thankful for this opportunity to contribute to this Senate Inquiry into the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms. P&C Federation supports the position of individual educational and developmental needs met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well-planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents<sup>1</sup> and families.

The core belief of P&C Federation is that the education of our children and youth is the most fundamental means of ensuring individual success and success as a nation. Government's primary responsibility is to ensure education is equitable, well resourced and fully funded.

P&C Federation is a representative voice for parents and students in public education in NSW. With over 1800 member associations, 5000 association executive members, and 820,000 public school children and their parents making P&C Associations one of the largest volunteer based organisations within Australia. Our understanding of the issues within education is broad and carries with it the voice of a substantial body of parents and carers.

## Preamble

The P&C Federation canvassed the opinions of NSW government school parents on of disruptive student behaviour. We sought their perspective on the following matters in particular:

1. Their perception of the level of disruption in their children's school classrooms.
2. Whether they believe the level of disruption has improved or worsened since their children started.
3. Whether they think the level of disruption has impacted the results of their children or students at the school generally.
4. What their thoughts are on current behaviour management policies, including if and how they can be improved.

We received 21 responses from parents from a wide diversity of settings across NSW, including from Greater Sydney and from rural, regional and remote areas. Much of this submission is shaped by the feedback we received.

## Terms of Reference

**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;**

While Australia's declining ranking in OECD disciplinary climate index is of concern, this ranking offers little insight into the reasons for this. There are numerous potential reasons behind disruption in classrooms, including (but not limited to):

- **The structure of classroom settings.** If classroom lessons are structured in such a way that students are insufficiently engaged, students may lose focus and the likelihood of poor behaviour increases. Improving the strength and quality of classroom activities would help resolve this.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Parent" refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

<sup>2</sup> Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle. 2010. How can we improve school discipline? *Educational Researcher* vol. 39(1). P. 48-58

- **Poor teacher training:** If teachers lack knowledge of effectively managing classroom behaviour, there is a higher risk of classroom behaviour being unsatisfactory.
- **Inadequate discipline policies.** If discipline policies in a school or in an education system more broadly are inadequate, this will limit schools' ability to address disruptive behaviour.
- **Problems in students' home life.** It is well established that students with dysfunctional home lives – for example, abusive or neglectful homes – are more likely to be disengaged from learning and to be disruptive in school.<sup>3</sup>

In short, there are many possible reasons behind disruptive behaviour, and the solution to disruptive behaviour will often depend on the reasons. It is possible the declining disciplinary climate index ranking reflects that an underlying problem with disruptive behaviour exists, however it does not in itself suggest a remedy.

### **The impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention;**

In NSW, there is a widely perceived problem of teacher shortages due in part to possible low retention rates and difficulty in recruiting new staff to make up for the shortfall. Precise figures are not easily available, however there is general agreement that the shortages are a growing problem in New South Wales.

The NSW Teachers Federation has noted these shortages are contributing to a decline in student discipline and attendance, due to disrupted classes and minimal supervision.<sup>4</sup> This is supported by feedback we received from parents on this issue, several of whom noted that schools commonly struggle to fill teacher roles, which adds to the strain of the existing teachers. Some stated the lack of support has caused teachers to leave due to burnout and “the feeling of helplessness”.

It is worth noting that it was overwhelmingly parents from non-metropolitan schools in NSW who emphasised teacher shortages as a factor behind disruptive student behaviour.

### **The robustness, quality and extent of initial teacher education to equip teachers with skills and strategies to manage classrooms**

In past inquiries, P&C Federation has noted concern that teachers were not required to meet high proficiency levels. While there have been some improvements in this area, we would still consider there to be room for further improvements. For example, there appears to be significant variation across universities as to the length and format of practicums. In our view, practical experience is important as it gives aspiring teachers a clearer idea of the work and whether they are suited to it.

We have also noted what appears to be a lack of consistency across those that mentor new graduates or oversee practicums. In this crucial stage, graduates or practicum students need to be positively supported, given constructive feedback and have their confidence enhanced. There are many mentors within systems capable of doing so but equally many mentors that are abrupt, unsupportive, and overly critical or simply overloaded with work with little time for new graduates or practicums. Depending on the school situation, the mentor may well be a teacher with only a few years' experience or a long-term teacher unwilling to embrace new methods. Training, support and validation of appropriate mentors is essential to support long-term quality of new teachers.

In our consultation with parents, numerous responses cited the absence of support on school grounds to assist teachers navigate students with behavioural issues. One parent of a child with autism in

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. University of Notre Dame. "Children's school performance tied to family 'type'." ScienceDaily. 20 July 2010. <[www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/07/100720162317.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/07/100720162317.htm)>.

<sup>4</sup> AEU NSW Teachers Federation. Submission to Inquiry into Teacher Shortages in NSW. 30 July 2022

supported learning stated that the significant lack of school staff, especially of staff equipped to manage children with complex needs, has led to inconsistent teachers for her child. This has contributed to her child staying home and falling significantly behind other students. Several further suggested a SLSO in every classroom, as an extra pair of hands to provide and to act as a witness to any incident.

### **The loss of instructional teacher time because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms**

### **The impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students' learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined classrooms**

In our consultation with parents, the loss of instructional teacher time and the adverse impact on their children's learning were the most mentioned impacts of disruptive classrooms. A common theme in this feedback was that one or a few students with behavioural problems may consume an inordinate amount of teachers' time, to the detriment of other students' learning. The severity of this varied across schools, and in some cases, parents stated there was great variance between different classes in the same school. Some classes and schools had students with behavioural problems but were able to navigate it well, so that the learning of other students could continue. Others reported that their children's learning is disrupted on a daily basis and in some cases, children feel their safety in class and school is repeatedly threatened.

Below are examples of feedback we received:

- One parent described a combined Kindergarten and Year 1 class experiencing daily disruptions with *"chairs thrown across the classroom and it seems a lot of energy from teaching staff goes into trying to keep the children safe from the 1 or two students with behavioural issues. It's impacting the quality of the teaching, it's impacting my sons perception on school. There are hours each day not spent teaching the class but devoted to training to navigate these kids. My son does not see school as a safe learning environment."*
- Another parent believes classroom disruption *"has negatively impacted the results of both my children's learning. Teacher time is not being divided equally. Children who are quite and well behaved are being left behind academically as there key learning milestones are not being met and they are not getting the attention they need to improve. Teacher are not able to assist the children that are falling behind academically due to time spent trying to keep children safe in the classroom or time devoted to difficult children. I fear we are going to have a cohort of children grow up and not be able to do the basics."*
- On parent gave the P&C Federation the following comment: *Whilst I try to teach my children to be patient and kind with children who can be difficult (especially during key learning times) it is hard (as a parent) because on one hand we are teaching our children to be understanding of the child with special needs/behavior issues but on the other hand we find it difficult when our children are disadvantaged by a child disrupting the class and or lashing out verbally and sometimes physically at them whilst at school. ... I feel that if children can be taught about mental health and conditions like ADHD, Autism, Disability's etc they may be a little more understanding of what triggers a child with these conditions and also learn to be more kind and patient. That said I don't want any child singled out or made to feel different. My children feel that a child with special needs or behavioral issues gets to do whatever they want and they feel as though it is unfair. They also (especially the young ones) start to mimic behaviors that are not acceptable to us at home. Behavior like swearing, hitting, yelling, throwing things and arguing with adults.*
- *"Too often, the disruptive kids are backed by unreasonable and abusive parents. Teachers and principals know that it's a time-wasting effort to confront the issue head-on. The teachers put up with it. Bullied kids are simply removed to private schools or other schools. It's left to slip and slip."*

- *“There is certainly a correlation between the level of disruption and students results; almost to the point that my young adult knows how he/she is going to progress as soon as he/she finds out their teacher at the beginning of the year.”*
- *One parent gave us the following comment: “My children report that there is a lot of disruption in classrooms at school (both primary and high school). Smaller scale disruptions include students heckling other students during class, refusing to do the work assigned and wondering around interfering with those students that are working. Larger scale disruptions are when a student loses their temper and all self control, throwing equipment and being abusive to the teacher or staff. Sometimes the disruption can be from another class where a student that has become so angry they have stormed out and are now viewed as a threat on the school property.”* The parent also stated that their children *“have had to reevaluate where they think is the ‘safest’ place to sit in a classroom - areas if the room being more prone to attracting these distressed students (near the door, the teacher’s desk etc).”*
- *“The management consists on letting the disruptive student out of class , and walk around the school doing whatever they feel like to the point of lock downs sometimes , or they get to walk in and out of class all day which obviously causes massive disruption , or they stay in the classroom and just bother the other students.”*
- One parent stated that *“the police have been frequently called to the high school. Numerous parents have removed their children from the public school and enrolled them in the private school due to the number of fights... My child is in year seven, and I spent much of last year quite distraught at the thought of sending my daughter to the local high school. I met with the principal, and they said that they have put strategies in place to deal with the violence. However, my daughter has told me that there is a fight at least every day.”*
  - o The same parent described an incident at the local primary school where one child *“disrupts the class, gets up, throws pencils around the room. And all the while the teachers are dealing with this, they are not attending to those that want to learn. Also, the ruckus means that my children have stopped what they are doing, are now watching, and not attending to their own work.. He constantly swears and calls them names. There is no consequence, not even an apology. The excuse is “XX is still learning”. “*
- One parent stated *“In Junior years, my daughter had days that she did not go to school due to the anxiety that the behaviour of the disruptive students caused her. She is an academic gifted child, that wants to do well in school to allow further studies to be possible.”*
- One parent said their children *“have had to learn very quickly to ignore and manage severe disruptions and disorderly behaviour in their classrooms from an early age.”* The same parent also stated that *“behaviour in and around the toilets is a massive problem. Many students will not go to the toilets at school.... they hold it in all day! My 14-year-old won't even drink water at school to avoid using the school toilets. One reason is vaping in the toilets and loitering and behaviour that accompanies it and also the door locks are easy to kick in and so there is always a feeling of risk.”*

On whether these problems has worsened over time, the responses were mixed. Some perceived the problems to have worsened over the years, while others perceive them as remaining unchanged but still unsatisfactory.

It is worth noting that such perceptions are not universal, and some parents stated that they did not view classroom discipline as an urgent problem in their school. It is nonetheless the case that the majority of respondents reported challenges with student behaviour as a serious concern in their school.

Some parents also noted the disruptive influence of technology in classrooms:

- One parent stated “*laptop computers & mobile phones are proving to be extremely problematic to engagement, consistently disrupting the learning environment. Year 6 results super high, then as soon as laptop introduced in yr 7 results plummeted from A&B’s to mostly C&D’s. Some children are gaming more than they are learning.*”
- Another parent believed “*much disruption, or certainly distraction, is enabled by connected devices. Particularly when used for classroom assignments. Plenty of stories about video watching, chat, multiplayer gaming etc.*”
- Another parent criticised “*so much use of shared electronic devices that it sounds like 20% of the learning time is spent in transition and setup for devices. Forward thinking high-standard private schools are in the process of banning electronic devices from the classrooms. The evidence is that children dont learn effectively on screens or in 'gamified' apps.*”

Of note is that it was largely parents in metropolitan Sydney areas who raised the role of technology as a factor in classroom disruption.

### **The stagnant and declining results across fundamental disciplines as tested through National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) attributing to poorer school-leaving results and post-school attainment;**

It is doubtful that there is currently any valid way to correlate NAPLAN results with the level of disruption in school classrooms. NAPLAN only measures a narrow (albeit important) range of parameters and NAPLAN results can vary for any number of reasons, such as inadequate technology and supporting infrastructure in many schools, which renders online testing difficult and undermines the credibility of results. NAPLAN results may also reflect random individual variation (which may impact individual NAPLAN results by as much as  $\pm 12\%$ <sup>5</sup>) and the size of schools (as smaller schools may show more significant natural variation in their scores than larger schools). Given all this, we would not consider it appropriate to use NAPLAN results as a measure of classroom disruption.

We note that in our consultation with parents on this inquiry, only one parent mentioned NAPLAN at all in relation to classroom disruption, and it was to argue that NAPLAN itself is disruptive: “*the entirety of Term 1 in year 3 in our public school was spent preparing for the online NAPLAN test. The kids weren’t learning any content. It was more about HOW to sit an online multiple choice test. If the inquiry is looking at the full gambit of distractions, this should be a big focus. No one tells the truth about how much time NAPLAN wastes.*” This parent argued that “*NAPLAN should be scrapped in its entirety and replaced with smaller weekly or monthly battery testing (like the type used at Reddam house and private primary schools in the UK) administered by teachers.*”

### **How relevant Australian state, territory and federal departments and agencies are working to address this growing challenge;**

The NSW Department of Education has recently revamped its student behaviour strategy by via the new Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools package. This policy package is in its early stages, and it is therefore difficult to have a clear judgement. The P&C Federation is in close and regular contact with the Department, and intends to closely monitor the implementation and effectiveness of these policies.

Nonetheless, many parents did raise concerns about their perceptions of current policies. A common perception is that teachers and the school system generally often appears powerless to stop students with behavioural issues from disrupting classrooms. Numerous parents also expressed concern that

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<sup>5</sup> Wu. 2009. *Interpreting NAPLAN Results for the Layperson*. Retrieved from [https://numeracy4schools.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/naplan\\_for\\_lay\\_person.pdf](https://numeracy4schools.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/naplan_for_lay_person.pdf)

current policies are geared towards including children with complex needs in mainstream classes, when they may be better placed getting additional support. They perceived this as doing no favours to either students with complex needs, who may be better served in a more specialist class, nor to more mainstream students whose learning is repeatedly disrupted.

Some examples of parents comments are below:

- One parent expressed deep scepticism of the Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools policy, with the concern that it *“was going to tie principals in knots”* and *“the losers would be kids who can’t protect themselves”*.
- Another parent from a small rural community in NSW stated there is *“a small group of re-offenders which cause violence in our schools and with the current restrictive practices in place creates havoc in our school community. The ridiculous amount of protocols to be followed and the complexity to deal with these situations is just another reason to add to the growing problem of “our hands are tied” or having these re-offenders continuously returning back to school and causing harm to our children.”*
- *“I think the current process takes too long to see action. I think that there will be some serious injury inflicted on children in schools as nothing seems to be being done. Children can throw other children to the ground again and again and keep coming back. Children can keep disrupting classrooms but keep coming back.”*
- One parent expressed concern that the Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools policy is not supported by adequate resourcing, and that the policy *“is of a government wanting to be seen to be complying with legislation but is unwilling to follow up with the commitment to make it work, in other words setting it up to fail. This disproportionately affects the public education system as it bears the majority of enrolments of students with a disability.”*. This parent even wondered if the policy was *“part of an agenda to kill the public education system in favour of a private one”*.

### **Other Matters**

The previous sections of this submission cover the main points raised in parents’ feedback on this inquiry to the P&C Federation, however other parents also raised the below concerns:

- One parent criticised the NSW policy of not allowing students to do curriculum-related work while Special Religious Education (SRE) is occurring, as it leads to her children *“wasting so much valuable school time in nonscripture doing nothing... My child does her band practice and dance class before school - we don’t expect other kids to stop learning while she pursues her extra curricular activities.”*
- One parent was concerned that the lack of COVID mitigation strategies in schools would cause student and teacher absenteeism to become a chronic issue, risking long-term disruption of the education system.