



TASSO SUBMISSION

Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

***We're in this together.
We speak as a proud voice for families within the
Tasmanian State School community to
make sure their needs and ideas are heard.***

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations pays respect to the Palawa people as the Traditional Custodians and first educators of the land in beautiful Lutruwita.

We pay respect to elders past, present, and emerging and acknowledge their deep connection to country.

We also express our gratitude that we share this land today, our sorrow for some of the costs of that sharing, and our hope and belief that we move to a place of equity, justice, and partnership together.

Acknowledging Parents

TASSO acknowledges parents and caregivers as the first educators in their child's life. We celebrate and honour the diversity of families and recognise the vital role family and community play in supporting children and young people throughout their learning journeys.

TASSO prepared this submission with consideration of feedback provided by Tasmanian parents and caregivers. We extend our appreciation to all who have shared their experiences and engaged with our Organisation.

Acknowledging Funding

TASSO is supported by funding provided by the Department for Children and Young People (DECYP).

Background

Who is TASSO?

The Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations (TASSO) is the peak body representing the parents and community who form School Association within Tasmanian public schools.

We work to empower the heart of Tasmanian state schools – their community – by supporting School Associations through their committee.

Our work includes providing essential training, resources, and support to school committees. Most importantly, we help them meet their constitutional requirements, support office-bearers in their roles and facilitate valuable networking opportunities, so together the School Association can do great things.

We represent the School Association Committees from within Tasmania's 125 Primary Schools (Kindergarten to Year 6), 29 High Schools (Year 7 – 12), 25 District Schools (Kindergarten to Year 12), 8 Colleges (Year 11 and 12) and 3 Support Schools.

At TASSO, we believe in the value of government education. We are committed to making sure that state school education in Tasmania delivers the best possible education for Tassie kids. We speak as a proud voice for families to make sure their needs and ideas are heard.

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Introduction

Bullying continues to have serious and lasting impacts on student mental health and wellbeing. It also disrupts attendance, engagement, and learning outcomes across Tasmanian Government schools.

This isn't a new problem, and it isn't just a school problem. Bullying is a complex issue that reflects wider social and systemic challenges. Addressing it requires more than one-off programs. It needs systematic change that should involve a co-designed model involving students, families, teachers, school leaders, and all levels of government.

In its submission¹ to the Tasmanian Government's Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying, TASSO posited, "bullying and discrimination has existed for years in Tasmanian schools. This will continue to exist and escalate while there are system failures. We must do better in addressing these issues effectively and create a safer environment for our children, our teaching staff and the school community."

Despite the having a policy to address bullying in Tasmanian Government schools, many families report that the support offered is inconsistent, focused on the victim, and lacking in clear, practical strategies. This is supported by data that shows that bullying remains widespread in Tasmanian schools, with little meaningful change in the past five years.

This is not just a policy issue, it's a lived experience for too many families. In TASSO's recent surveys¹, families described the lasting impact of bullying on their children:

"My outgoing little girl has constant social anxiety... She was bullied for years and now sees the world differently."

"My daughter has PTSD. She sees a therapist every week. We struggle to get her to leave the house."

"My son was so terrified on the school bus he was shaking. He's now scared of going to school at all."

"It starts in primary school. Name-calling, exclusion, isolation... and the school says, 'it's just kids being kids'."

"I was asked to keep my son home because the school said they couldn't keep him safe."

Parents also shared how the responsibility to act is often pushed back on the victim's family. Some felt forced to change schools or involve police, without the support of the school. Others were disillusioned with restorative practices, saying they only deepened the trauma and allowed the bullying to continue. Some highlighted their students

¹ Note: While our surveys were designed to capture experiences within Tasmanian government schools, a small number of responses referenced bullying incidents in Catholic and independent schools. However, this submission does not specifically examine or respond to bullying issues within non-government school systems.

concerns over retribution from staff and the bully creating a barrier to collaborative problem solving.

Still, there is strong support for change. TASSO's survey found that 82% of families want a statewide anti-bullying program. **Families want change. Families need change.**

"It would need to be a [...] big, strong and impactful program. Bullying is rife and schools are soft in their approach."

"If there's no consequence, the bully learns that nothing happens. The victim learns they're on their own."

"We use schools as dumping grounds for violent children and build a system around protecting the bully, not the victim."

The current national review into bullying responses is a critical opportunity to get this right. We must build a system where every child, in every school, is seen, heard and protected from bullying, and just as importantly where the perpetrator of the bullying behaviour has adequate supports to ensure the behaviour changes.

Documented Bullying in Tasmanian Government Schools (2020–2024)

Data from the Student Wellbeing and Engagement Survey (SWES)ⁱⁱ, collected between 2020 and 2024, paints a troubling picture of how widespread and persistent bullying remains in Tasmanian government schools. The survey tracks four types of bullying, physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying, using the absence of bullying as an indicator of student wellbeing. Based on their experiences, students are grouped into three categories: high, medium, or low wellbeing. Those in the "low" wellbeing category are experiencing bullying on a weekly basis or more often. Those in the "medium" wellbeing" category are still experiencing bullying "once or a few times" or "about every month".

We note that while data was also collected at two points in 2020, participation was significantly affected by COVID-19 disruptions we have excluded these points from our trend analysis.

Across all bullying types, between 2,000 and 5,000 students each year report frequent bullying. It an alarming number with a consistency that points to a systemic issue.

Physical Bullying

Rates of frequent physical bullying have remained steady from 2021 to 2024, with around 7–8% of students falling into the Low wellbeing group. Although there's been a small

increase in the number of students reporting high wellbeing, thousands still face physical aggression at school.

In 2024, nearly **11,000 students** reported experiencing some form of physical bullying.

Verbal Bullying

Verbal bullying continues to be the most common, with around 20% of students each year reporting frequent incidents. In 2024, over 5,300 students were placed in the low wellbeing category highlighting the persistent nature of verbal abuse in the school setting.

Approximately **16,700 students** reported experiencing some form of verbal bullying in 2024.

Social Bullying (e.g. exclusion, gossip, and group dynamics)

Social bullying has also shown little change over time. Each year, between 4,000 and 4,500 students report frequent experiences of being socially excluded or isolated. Despite slight positive shifts in the high wellbeing domain between 2021 to 2024, a significant number of students are still impacted.

In 2024, around **14,700 students** reported experiencing social bullying.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying remains consistent across Year 4 to Year 12, with 7 - 8% of students in the low wellbeing category. Cyberbullying is often in the spotlight through media coverage with the devastating effects for students unable to disconnect. The SWES survey continues to show, that digital harassment is a steady presence in students' lives.

In 2024, approximately 2,000 students reported frequent cyberbullying, and around **8,000 students** experienced it at least once.

Despite the Department for Education Children and Young People's (DECYP) Student Behaviour Management Policy (formerly Respectful Student Behaviour Policy and Process) reviewing their approach to bullying in 2022, bullying rates have not significantly declined over the past five years. In some cases, the number of students reporting frequent bullying has increased. The data points to a clear need for stronger, more consistent, and systemic responses that support both those being targeted and those exhibiting bullying behaviours.

There is a need for a shared approach, the removal of blame games, genuine communication, training and resources for staff and families that focus on mitigation, resilience and practical solutions.

We note that there is a significant difference between SWES results from South Australiaⁱⁱⁱ, while we won't compare the results in detail as they are reported differently, students in Tasmania and South Australia are completing similar, if not the same survey, and the South Australian results show slightly more positive results across all bullying domains.

The Role of Connection and Safety

Although the SWES doesn't directly measure bullying through its connectedness and safety data, it provides valuable context about the environments in which bullying is happening. In 2024:

- **32%** of respondents, **or 9,200 students**, said they did not have an important adult at school.
- Only **57%** of students reported feeling connected to an adult at school.
- Just **57%** felt safe at school.

These figures have barely shifted since 2021 and paint a concerning picture. When students don't feel connected to trusted adults, their ability to speak up about bullying or ask for help is severely limited. In schools where students feel unsupported or unheard, bullying can continue unchecked, and the negative impacts on the student wellbeing continues to deepen.

Strengthening relationships between students and trusted adults is a critical part of any strategy to reduce bullying. Without these connections, formal reporting pathways often fall short, and students and families are left to manage distressing experiences on their own.

DECYP Student Behaviour Management Policy

Families who responded to TASSO's survey shared a clear message: there's a serious lack of trust in the Department for Education, Children and Young People's (DECYP) Student Behaviour Management Policy. Many said they didn't even know the policy existed.

"I was not made aware of the DECYP Student Behaviour Management Policy."

Many felt ignored or brushed off when raising concerns about bullying.

“The school didn’t call it bullying until the [physical assault] - then we pressed charges.”

Communication

Over and over, parents pointed to poor communication as a key reason why things escalated. Basic information was not relayed, and families were left out of the loop.

“The school has never contacted me to discuss what my son has witnessed.”

“We don’t hear about lockdowns unless it’s from our kids. The communication is lax because they’re covering their [...].”

Restorative action

Restorative action was described as “the school addressed both parties and put them together more often in a group to get to know each other better, help reduce the bullying.”

Restorative conversations and practices came under heavy criticism. Many parents felt these were used too often, without proper follow-up, and in situations where they weren’t appropriate, especially for younger kids or students with disabilities.

“Restorative practices do not work because kids are immature... It’s a waste of time. There need to be a hard line.”

“The school used restorative practices, and I don’t think the students took it particularly seriously... they knew they’d just end up in a meeting and continue.”

“Current restorative practices can result in more trauma and negative impact on the victim of the bullying, and at times enables the bully to continue.”

“I don’t think the actions used [restorative conversation] worked very well. The bullies still harass my daughter from time to time. My daughter has been forced to change her behaviour to become more resilient and tolerant to bad behaviour aimed at her.”

Staff restraints and training

Many felt that school staff wanted to help but weren’t given the backing or resources to deal with serious behaviour issues.

“I feel like the teachers’ hands are tied and are not able to cope with bullies at school.”

“Teachers are powerless to act and surrounded by apathy.”

“The staff tried, but nothing happened. It was like they had no backup.”

“Teachers should also feel empowered to deal with problem students”.

Culture of victim blaming

Parents said it was their child, the victim, who ended up having to change. Instead of holding the bully accountable, schools often asked the targeted student to adjust: to sit inside at lunch, stay near staff, spend time at the office, move class, or in some cases, suggested a “fresh start” at a different school (off the record). Families described a pattern of their child being blamed, doubted, or punished for reacting, while the student doing the bullying faced little or no consequence.

“Bullies need to be addressed as soon as the behaviour has been detected and THEY should have to change their behaviour, NOT the victim.”

“The school said my son had brought it on himself.”

“They accused my child of lying, even though we had documented incidents.”

“The victim was punished for reacting. Nothing happened to the bully.”

This approach doesn’t protect students it pushes them out. If we want students to feel safe, schools need to stop shifting the responsibility onto the victim and start taking clear, early action when bullying happens.

Consequences for bullying

There was a clear call for real consequences, stronger support for affected students, and better accountability, at every level the schooling system.

“There need to be consequences for the children and teachers that were bullying my children.”

“Discipline the teacher.”

“Support my daughter. Not blame her.”

Staff perception on behaviour management

Annual Staff School Satisfaction^{iv} surveys are conducted in Tasmania. Question eight asks if student behaviour is well managed at this school? In the publicly available data shows the score out of 10 decreasing from 7.2 in 2020, to 6.7 (2021), 6.6 (2022), 6.3 (2023) the downwards trend may be indicative of a policy that isn’t functioning correctly.

Altogether, these stories point to the need for a serious reset of policy and procedure. Families need to know what the behaviour management policy is now, how it works, and that it will actually be followed. That means clear rules, fair consequences, open communication, and a commitment to back teachers and protect students. Not the perceived write a policy that sits on a shelf, that is half followed or followed depending on who the student is and the bully's circumstances.

From a TASSO Operational Perspective

Parents usually contact TASSO about bullying as a last resort. By the time they reach out, they're at breaking point. They're not looking to cause trouble, they just want to be heard and to know what to do next. In almost every case, they've already followed the DECYP grievance process and are apologetic about their frustration. They want their child to have a good school experience, without harm.

One of the most common things we hear is that schools explain away the bullying by referring to the bully's socio-economic background. Parents are told, either directly or implied, "if you understood their situation, you'd understand why we can't do anything." That response is incredibly hard for parents to hear, especially when their own child is refusing to go to school, crying every morning, or coming home distressed day after day. Many of these families have no choice but to send their child back into an environment where they feel unsafe, just so they can go to work and keep things going. It's heartbreaking.

*TASSO asked parents how they would rate the school's response to the bullying of their child, and in general out of 10 and the response on average for both was **4 out of 10**.*

DECYP Out of Area Enrolment Policy and Tasmanian eSchool

While not directly related to bully, the Out of Area Enrolment Policy and transference of students to the Tasmanian eSchool was raised as a concern. Parents felt that there are barriers to their students ongoing education.

"The Department makes it impossible for victimised children to change school to solve bullying problems other than going to an independent school."

"The hoops to jump through for access to online learning were almost a full-time job. That on top of managing the impacts of the bullying my daughter experienced."

The way forward

Getting the basics right

Preventing and responding to bullying starts with getting the basics right which includes educating everyone in the school community.

Staff need regular, practical training on how to recognise, respond to, and follow up on bullying in a way that puts student safety first. This training should include how to engage with families, support affected students, and step in early with those displaying concerning behaviours. Schools also need access to clear, user-friendly resources that are not just for staff, but for parents and students too. Resources that use consistent language to ensure everyone knows what bullying is, what to do when it happens, and what support is available.

Having simple, transparent processes in place: clear flow charts that map out what happens when an incident is reported, who is involved, what communication families can expect, and how follow-up will be managed. Families should never be left chasing information or feeling shut out.

Ensuring that there is adequate pastoral care available to assist and take the load of classroom educators who should have a focus on education not behaviour management (outside of minor, non-disruptive classroom behaviours).

When schools get the foundations right: education, tools, communication, and real accountability, they will be better placed to build safe, respectful environments where bullying isn't ignored, excused, or repeated.

TASSO believes to get the basics right we need:

- Training and resources for staff, students and families
- Clear processes/flowcharts with embedded parent communication
- Early intervention that avoids suspension
- Off classroom support in the form of pastoral care (social workers, psychologists, nurses etc)
- Accountability, clear reporting mechanisms

Student Education Programs

If we want real change, we need to start with early education of students. Respect and acceptance of others shouldn't be a one-off lesson; it should be part of everyday learning from the early years. Student should be taught to respect differences, whether that's personality, culture, religion, gender, or neurodivergence, and taught to understand the harm caused when those differences are used as targets. Schools could run team-

building and role-playing sessions that help kids practise empathy, not just talk about it. Student voice matters too, children should be encouraged and supported to speak up when they see bullying, not stay silent.

It's time we shifted the story. Too often, we ask the victim to adapt, change or toughen up. Instead, we should be giving students the tools and language to get help for the person doing the bullying, because it's their behaviour that needs to change.

“Peer discussion on everything from race to religion. Teaching importance of self-respect and respect for others, no matter the differences. Because when you become an adult, it doesn't matter anymore, everyone is different.”

TASSO believes that effective student education programs should include:

- Teaching respect for differences (personality, culture, religion, gender, neurodivergence)
- Team-building and role-playing sessions to practise empathy
- Starting respectful relationship and bullying education in the early years
- Encouraging and supporting student voice to safely speak up
- Shifting the narrative to getting help for those doing harm, not just managing those affected

Student Voice Mechanisms

Currently in Tasmania, students are mostly expected to raise concerns of anti-social behaviours directly with teachers or school staff, but for many, especially those without a trusted adult at school, that's a major barrier. To close this gap, there's a clear need for a safe, accessible way for students to speak up. One promising solution is an anonymous online reporting tool where students can report bullying, discrimination, or any unsafe behaviour without fear of backlash. A tool like this would help students feel heard and could give schools better visibility of issues that often go unseen, and the ability to act quickly.

But it can't stand alone, it needs to be backed by strong systems for follow-up and support, where every report is taken seriously and handled with care. Building student trust starts with giving them safe ways to be heard and showing them that speaking up leads to action.

TASSO believes to genuinely elevate student voice we need:

- Anonymous online reporting tools for students (and parents)
- Clear follow-up and response systems
- Trauma-informed, compassionate handling of reports
- Promotion and education so students know how to access and use the tool

- Mechanisms for ongoing student feedback and input

The role of School Culture

A safe school culture goes beyond policies, it relies on strong leadership, clear values, and real accountability. While bullying is often seen as student-to-student, many families reported harm caused by staff or a wider culture of intimidation and denial. Some children were bullied by teachers, others were blamed or ignored when they spoke up. In these environments, even supportive staff felt powerless.

“My son has been bullied by his teacher which triggered severe anxiety and self-harming behaviours.”

“Teachers are bullied and are bullies. The problem comes from the top down.”

When schools minimise or dismiss concerns, they protect the problem instead of solving it. Culture change starts with honest conversations, visible leadership, and a commitment to back students and staff who speak out. Trust can only grow where safety is real, and consistent.

TASSO believes that building a safe and respectful school culture requires:

- Strong leadership
- Accountability for all involved
- Safe ways to raise concerns, for students, parents, and staff

Supports for Parents

Families often feel isolated and unsure of where to turn when their child is being bullied. Many report being left out of the loop, dismissed, or forced to chase information from schools. To genuinely support students, we must also support their parents and carers. This means clear, timely communication from schools, regular check-ins during and after incidents, and access to practical guidance on how to navigate the system. Parents need to understand their rights, the school’s responsibilities, and what steps are being taken. Beyond school-level responses, a centralised, statewide support service separate from DECYP, offering advice, advocacy, and emotional support, could help families feel less alone and more empowered to act. When schools work in partnership with parents, outcomes improve. But that partnership only works when parents are listened to, informed, and backed, not blamed or ignored.

“As a parent I have no idea what I'm doing here anymore than the school it would seem.”

TASSO believes that to properly support students, we must also support their families through:

- Clear communication with regular check-ins and follow-up
- Easy-to-understand guidance, on rights and responsibilities
- A central, independent support service, like an ombudsman
- Schools working in partnership with parents

Support and Targeted Intervention for Perpetrators

Addressing bullying also means supporting the students who cause harm. Many of these children are struggling with trauma, unmet learning needs, or difficult home environments. Simply punishing or excluding them doesn't address the root issues or stop the behaviour from recurring.

What's needed is targeted, early intervention. Including access to school-based social workers, psychologists, youth workers, and family therapy. These supports should be proactive, not just reactive, and embedded within the school system. As one parent put it, *"I think children shouldn't be removed from education entirely, but there needs to be more avenues to support these kids away from the mainstream and give them one-on-one attention they so desperately require."* Providing structured, therapeutic alternatives to mainstream classrooms can reduce harm for everyone involved, giving vulnerable students the help they need, while making school safer for their peers.

TASSO believes that to break the cycle of harm, schools must provide:

- Early, targeted intervention
- Access to social workers and psychologists
- Support from youth and family services
- Therapeutic alternatives to mainstream classrooms
- One-on-one support for high-needs students
- Proactive approaches, not just reactive responses
- Invest time to understand the root cause of the behaviour for longer lasting change

When considering approaches that could be developed nationally:

- Consistent, expert lead, processes for bullying
- National Student Wellbeing Engagement Surveys
- National template for reporting bullying
- National respect in school education program/resources
- An Ombudsman for Education

- Universal education platform for communication, student reports, student data – a one stop education platform consistent across the country

ⁱ <https://www.tasso.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Submission-Inquiry-into-discrimination-and-bullying-in-Tasmanian-Schools-TASSO-2024.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.decyp.tas.gov.au/wellbeing/student-wellbeing-and-engagement-survey/student-wellbeing-data/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/docs/system-performance/data-reports/wec-results-report-2024.pdf>

^{iv} <https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/RTI-Disclosure-Log.7-Wellbeing-and-Satisfaction-Surveys.pdf>