ADDRESSING BULLYING IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS

Submission to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

June 2025

VicSRC Victorian Student Representative Council

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We were created by students to be a voice for all primary and secondary school students at the highest levels of decision making in Victorian education. Our vision is an education system that is student-led, student driven and student-focused.

Acknowledgements
The recommendations in this report were developed in collaboration with members of the Diversity and Representation in Education Stakeholder Group. VicSRC is thankful for the support and expertise of everyone who contributed to this work.

Language
When discussing disability, this submission uses both person-first and identity-first language ("person with disability" and "disabled person" respectively). This reflects diversity of preference in the disability community.

This submission occasionally uses the term 'Queer' to refer to the LGBTIQA+ community, as used by many students consulted. Though historically a slur, the term has been reclaimed by some LGBTQIA+ people to foster a sense of inclusive community.

VicSRC respectfully acknowledges and recognises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the custodians of this land. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria and across the wider continent.

VicSRC VictorianStudent RepresentativeCouncil

INTRODUCTION

Background

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review.

As the peak body for primary and secondary school-aged students in Victoria, VicSRC believes all students deserve the opportunity to engage in education that is meaningful, flexible and relevant to their needs. We recognise the importance of an education system that is tailored to the needs of students, embedding student voice at every level of decision-making to ensure the best possible outcome for students and the broader community.

This submission draws on and amplifies the lived experience of Victorian students through current research drawing on students' experiences across the state and country, with the support of VicSRC's Diversity and Representation in Victorian Education Stakeholder Group. By centring the expertise of these organisations as well as student voice in this submission, VicSRC hopes to highlight the unique perspective students bring to education reform and emphasise the value of embedding student-led practices in policy-making processes.

The submission focuses on how the Australian Government can create a consistent national standard for responding to bullying by incorporating student voice. The submission provides VicSRC's views and recommendations, with a focus on rising discrimination in schools. In lieu of a separate review into discrimination in schools, this submission highlights the closely related issues of discrimination and bullying, given Victorian students' strong perspectives on the matter in recent years.

In considering these recommendations, the overarching feedback from many stakeholders is to find ways for these recommendations to sit within existing mechanisms and interventions, to reduce the burden on schools. By building on the familiarity and existing work of anti-bullying initiatives, the national standard could offer clear, specific guidance on recognising discrimination as distinct from bullying, along with information on where schools can find appropriate support and resources. This would equip schools with the necessary tools to consistently identify and effectively address deeply rooted forms of discrimination that too often go unchallenged.

VicSRC and stakeholders also note the importance of allowing longer timeframes for submissions, especially those that centre around students. It is vital that community organisations have adequate time and resources to support meaningful student voice and participation within their submissions. This can be particularly challenging within a short timeframe, when young people may have education, employment and carer duties to arrange. Providing organisations with longer submission timeframes would result in more nuanced representation, prioritising participation as a human right.

Drivers of bullying in schools and current interventions

Bullying and rising discrimination in schools

While interventions and resources may exist to address bullying, it is clear that **bullying and discrimination are on the rise**.

General trend toward rising discrimination

- New data from the 2024 *Attitudes to School Survey* indicates that around 15% of Victorian students in Years 4 -12 experienced bullying, a one per cent increase from 2023.[1]

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[1] Department of Education (2024), 'Data snapshot: Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS) 2024', *education.vic.gov.au*, accessed 2 June 2025.

- The Youth Affairs Council Victoria's (YACVic) *Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria* also highlights a rise in bullying, cyberbullying, and peer-to-peer discrimination, with some participants specifically noting racism and misogyny.[2]

- A study from University of Melbourne outlines that many Victorian students report experiencing marginalisation and discrimination at school due to their cultural background, gender identity, sexuality, disability, or other factors linked to disadvantage.[3]

Racism at school

- Students at VicSRC's 2024 Congress event have called for stronger efforts to make school environments safe for students from a migrant and refugee background. They reported that racism and ignorance toward their cultural identities are common and often go unchallenged, contributing to frequent experiences of bullying and discrimination.[4]

- The latest *Attitudes to School Survey* indicates that around 17% of students in Years 4–12 have experienced racism, a 2% increase from the previous year.[5] A 2021 study showed that 87% of Melbourne students of African heritage have experienced racial discrimination at school.[6] Another study found that 31% of students in New South Wales and Victorian government schools have experienced racism from peers, while 12% experienced racism from teachers.[7] This suggests that current initiatives are not sufficiently addressing racial discrimination in schools.[8]

- Racism in schools can intensify the trauma experienced by students from refugee backgrounds. These harmful experiences create significant barriers to healing and resettlement by undermining their sense of safety, belonging and justice.

- Aboriginal students in Victoria continue to experience bullying at rates of 6.1 to 7.9 percentage points higher than their non-Aboriginal peers, according to the Commission for Children and Young People's *Our Youth Our Way* report.[9] This research, including first-hand accounts from Aboriginal students, describes the prevalence of racism, including being reprimanded by school when standing up to racism[10]. This report also speaks to the importance of schools taking stronger action against racism and bullying, building greater trust and confidence among Aboriginal students and their families.[11]

[2] Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria', yacvic.org.au, accessed 2 June 2025 (link), p.12.

[3] University of Melbourne, 'Causes of disengagement', education.unimelb.edu.au, accessed 2 June 2025, (link)

[4] VicSRC 2024, '2024 Congress Report', p.14.

[5] Department of Education (2024), 'Data snapshot: Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS) 2024', *education.vic.gov.au*, accessed 2 June 2025.

[6] The Ubuntu Project (2021), 'Racism in schools: African Australian students speak up', accessed 12 June 2025 (link), p.12, cited in Victorian Government (2024), 'Victoria's anti-racism strategy 2024-2029', p.31.

[7] Priest, N et al. (2019). 'Summary of findings', Findings from the 2017 Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) student and staff surveys', Centre for Social Research and Methods, Australian National University, p.2, cited in Victorian Government (2024), 'Victoria's anti-racism strategy 2024-2029', p.3.

[8] Department of Education (2024), 'Data snapshot: Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS) 2024', *education.vic.gov.au*, accessed 2 June 2025.

[9] CCYP (2021), 'Our Youth Our Way: Systemic inquiry into the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria's youth justice system', ccyp.vic.gov.au, accessed 5 June 2025 (link), p.393.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, p.391.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, carers, and communities face various forms of racism. Among other forms, these include denial of self-determination, unconscious bias, stereotyping, and derogatory language. These experiences often result in lowered expectations and limited opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Racism in schools can be further intensified by cultural bias and a lack of understanding about the ongoing effects of colonisation and historical injustices. This can contribute to exclusionary practices and environments that are culturally unsafe.[12]

- Cultural safety remains a critical concern for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Research from the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) has highlighted that students feel alienated, belittled, and even bullied by peers and teachers when culturally inaccurate or harmful representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives were taught. [13] VACCA linked this to the absence of culturally responsive and trauma-informed training among staff, which undermines efforts to create inclusive and respectful learning environments. [14]

- Victoria's *Anti-racism Strategy* highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as well as multicultural and multifaith communities do not believe that schools effectively address racism against students. The Strategy highlights that teachers and staff often lack the training or resources to address racism. In many cases, schools respond to racism as general bullying, without acknowledging the systemic nature of racism and the trauma it causes. Schools can also treat the perpetrator and the victim as equally responsible, failing to recognise systemic racism as a deeply rooted issue.[15] By focusing on the interpersonal nature of the behaviour, schools often do not identify and respond to underlying racism. This issue is further exacerbated by the experience of students who emphasise that little follow up occurs when racism is reported at school. This has eroded trust in the efficacy of school reporting standards.

- A report from the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) Australia highlights that on a school level, most school anti-bullying policies fail to adequately address racial discrimination or racism. In many cases, there is an absence of standalone policies specifically targeting racism in school settings.[16]

Queerphobia at school

- Students at Congress in 2023 reported an increase in derogatory and discriminatory language based on identity. This includes the misuse of terms like "gay" and the weaponisation of pronouns.[17] Separate national research found that 94% of LGBTIQA+ secondary students had heard homophobic language at school, with 58% hearing such language daily, highlighting the urgent need for more robust protections and support for queer students. [18] *Writing*

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[12] Department of Education (Victoria) (2025), 'Preventing and Addressing Racism in Schools', education.vic.gov.au, accessed 6 June 2025 (link).

[13] Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) (2023), 'Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria', parliament.vic.gov.au, accessed 2 June 2025 (link), p. 7

[14] Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) (2023), 'Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria', parliament.vic.gov.au, accessed 2 June 2025 (link), p. 7

[15] Victorian Government (2024), 'Victoria's anti-racism strategy 2024-2029', accessed 12 June 2025 (link), p.28.

[16] Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) (2025), 'National Policy Alliance Report', myan.org.au, accessed 5 June 2025 (link), p.12.

[17] Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) (2023), '2023 Congress Report', vicsrc.org.au (link), p. 9; VicSRC 2024, '2024 Congress Report. p.13.

[18] Parker, L., Webb, S., & Chonody, J. M (2022). 'Bullying toward LGBTQI+ students in Australian schools: Understanding teachers' intentions to intervene.' *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 3(20), p.561–584.

Themselves In 4 also revealed that around 60% of secondary school participants had frequently heard negative remarks about sexuality in the previous year, underscoring the prevalence of discrimination at school.[19] This is affirmed by VicSRC survey data, which finds that 63% of LGBTIQA+ students have experienced discrimination at school.[20] Such behaviour is having a harmful impact on LGBTIQA+ students, contributing to feelings of exclusion and unsafety.[21]

- Closely related to issues with language, students in VicSRC's study of queer student experiences reported harmful interactions with peers, including invasive questions and insensitive comments about their identities. Many felt that queerness was treated as an invitation to pry into personal aspects of their lives, contributing to feelings of exposure and dehumanisation. This made LGBTIQA+ students feel belittled, exposed or as though their identity is subject to unwanted discussion[22].

- LGBTIQA+ students consulted by VicSRC also shared that teachers' facilitation of classroom discussions was a key factor in determining student safety and inclusion. Students described instances where fundamental human rights, such as marriage equality or trans rights, were framed as open debates in class. When not carefully managed, these discussions shifted from educational opportunities to platforms for harm, exposing students to further discrimination and bullying. [23]

- Worryingly, data from *Writing Themselves In 4* revealed that fewer than 40% of secondary and tertiary education participants felt their classmates were supportive of their sexuality or gender identity. [24] This aligns with VicSRC findings, where only 25% of queer students agreed or strongly agreed that their peers contributed to a supportive and inclusive school environment. [25]

Misogyny at school

- A 2024 survey from the Victorian Women's trust found that 76.8% of educators believed that sexism and/or sexist abuse was on the rise in classrooms over the last five years., ranging from mild disrespect to physical intimidation and threats.[26]

- Researchers from Monash University have identified a concerning and noticeable shift in gender dynamics within schools. This is being described as a new wave of misogyny and sexism driven by the widespread influence of the "manosphere", which is an online network of communities and identities characterised by overt hostility toward women and feminism.[27]

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[19] Hill, A.O et al. (2020), 'Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report', La Trobe University, p.9.
[20] Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', vicsrc.org.au, (link), p.12.
[21] Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) (2023), '2023 Congress Report', vicsrc.org.au (link), p. 9.
[22] Ibid, pp.15-16.
[23] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.13.
[24] Ibid, p.8.
[25] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.15.
[26] Victorian Women's Trust (2024), 'Sexism at School: Educator Survey Results', www.vwt.org.au, accessed 12 June 2025 (link).
[27] Wescott, S., & Roberts, S. (2024), 'Gendered violence in schools: Urgent need for prevention and intervention amid rising hostilities', lens.monash.edu, accessed 13 June 2025 (link).

- This wave of misogyny is further highlighted by media reports in recent years, which point to teachers' experiences of sexism in the classroom.[28]

Discrimination against students in Out-of-Home care

- Children and young people in care face high levels of stigma, bullying, and discrimination at school. The 2018 CREATE survey found that one in four students in out-of-home care reported being bullied at school 'reasonably often'. Students in care often struggle to make friends and feel uncomfortable disclosing their care status due to fear of stigma and a desire for privacy.[29]

- Research from CCYP also reports problematic behaviours among school staff, including principals, often based on harmful assumptions. These include beliefs that students in care are unwilling to attend school, lack academic potential, require excessive behaviour management, pose safety risks to others, or contribute to teacher burnout.[30]

Ableism at school

- Disabled young people face significantly higher rates of school-based bullying compared to their non-disabled peers. In 2019, 43% of disabled students in Australia reported being bullied, compared to 19% of non-disabled peers.[31]

- Students with disability, who are mostly enrolled in mainstream schools,[32] often encounter ableist attitudes and stereotypes from peers.[33] These challenges are compounded when students face intersecting forms of discrimination such as racism, classism, homophobia, or transphobia.[34]

- In addition, students at VicSRC's 2024 Congress highlighted the stigma associated with being seen in school wellbeing spaces. Students shared that this can sometimes prompt intrusive questions or assumptions from their classmates, which worsen bullying and social exclusion.[35]

Students at Congress in 2024 and across VicSRC engagements have emphasised the need for the government to take a more proactive approach to creating inclusive and welcoming environments. They noted that bullying and discriminatory behaviour are on the rise and must be addressed through systemic and sustained action.[36]

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[28] Kendall, J. & Sanders, O, 'Concerns student sexism towards teachers contributes to gendered violence', *ABC News*, 1 August 2024, (link); Miles, D, 'Teachers warn of sexual harassment, sexism, misogyny in classrooms', *ABC News*, 21 July 2024, (link).

[29] McDowall, J. J. (2018). 'Out-of-home care in Australia: Children and young people's views after five years of National Standards'. *CREATE Foundation*, p. 8. cited in CCYP (2023), p.184.

[30] CCYP 2023, p. 181.

[31] YACVic 2023, p.28.

[32] Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA). 'Time for change: The state of play for inclusion of students with disability: Results from the 2019 CYDA National Education Survey', cited in YACVic (2023) 'Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria'.

[33] Kavanagh A, Priest N, Emerson E, Milner A, King T. Gender, parental education, and experiences of bullying victimisation by Australian adolescents with and without a disability. *Child: Care, Health and Development*. 2018; 44(2): 332–341. https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12545, cited in YACVic (2023) 'Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria'.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Victorian Student Representative Council (2024), '2024 Congress Report', vicsrc.org.au (link), p. 9.

[36] VicSRC 2024, p. 14; VicSRC 2023, p. 8.

Current programs and interventions

- VicSRC has continued involvement in supporting the **Respectful Relationships and Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu** programs in Victoria. The Respectful Relationships program helps schools and early childhood settings foster respect, positive attitudes, and behaviours through a whole of school approach. The Schools Mental Health Fund provides Victorian government schools with access to an evidence-based menu of programs, staffing options, and other supports. The aim is to support schools to improve student mental health and wellbeing in alignment with their identified priorities.

- While investment in both initiatives is welcomed and appreciated, students have expressed areas for improvement.

  - Regarding the Mental Health Fund and Menu, VicSRC has heard from students that it is important to enable greater agency and input from students to inform how schools deliver mental health support, including better consultation and evaluation of existing initiatives.[37]

  - When reflecting on Respectful Relationships, students have expressed the need for a program that is relevant to students, reflecting the classroom's current context. Students have shared that teachers should have the right support to confidently deliver this curriculum.

- The Victorian Department of Education resources **Bully Stoppers**, an online toolkit that aims to support all members of the school community to understand, prevent and respond to bullying. However, the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) note that students in care do not support anti-bullying campaigns targeting them. The Commission instead cites stigma associated with living in care as a focus area.[38]

- The Victorian Department of Education has released the new ***Preventing and Addressing Racism in Schools*** policy.[39] This aims to address racism and religious vilification in Victorian government schools by drawing on the existing child safe standards.
  - The policy outlines how schools should create culturally safe environments, as well as responding to and reporting racism (through the Managing and Reporting School Incidents policy).

  - In addition, the department have provided schools with guidance and a consolidated page of resources to support implementation, including case studies.[40]

  - This policy is built on Victoria's Child Safe Standard 1: Establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued.[41] It also stems from Victoria's

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[37] Victorian Student Representative Council (2024), 'Policy Platform', vicsrc.org.au (link), p.18.

[38] Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) (2023), 'Let us learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care', ccyp.vic.gov.au, accessed 2 June 2025 (link), p. 184.

[39] Department of Education (Victoria) (2025), 'Preventing and Addressing Racism in Schools', education.vic.gov.au, accessed 6 June 2025 (link).

[40] Ibid.

[41] Department of Education (Victoria) (2024), 'Schools - culturally safe environments guidance', education.vic.gov.au, accessed 19 June 2025 (link).

Aboriginal education plan, Marrung[42] and the findings of the Strengthening Aboriginal Self-Determination in Education report.[43]

- o The policy states that all government schools must establish a culturally safe environment, free from racism, for First Nations students, families, carers and communities.[44]

- The **National Anti-Racism Framework** also includes recommendations for the Australian Government to fund comprehensive mandatory professional development to school staff to build schools' capacity to identify, prevent, and manage racism. The framework also recommends that the government and education providers co-design nationally consistent anti-racism materials for staff and students in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as well as non-Indigenous anti-racism experts from communities that experience racism.[45] These are both positive steps towards addressing racism and religious intolerance in schools, and VicSRC hopes to see the policy and framework be embraced by schools with a strong implementation program guided by anti-racism experts.

- The Australian Government has passed legislation to set a minimum age of 16 years for **social media use**. The *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024* is a measure that ostensibly aims to deliver greater protections for young people, by requiring social media platforms to prevent those under 16 years of age from having accounts with reasonable measures, with fines for systemic breaches. This legislation was driven by a need to protect young people against harmful social media content, cyberbullying and addictive features that negatively impact sleep, stress and attention.[46] While there is a clear need to address these issues, the youth sector has expressed concern that a ban is not the most effective solution.[47] This is especially pertinent as young people have shared that social media can be a source of wellbeing, connection and friendship-building.[48] There is also concern that young people, including students, were not meaningfully included in consultation while the bill was being drafted and considered.[49] More broadly, this ban emphasises a strong need for schools to be a safe and inclusive space for students, if safe online spaces will no longer be available.

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[42] Department of Education (Victoria) (2024), 'Murrung', education.vic.gov.au, accessed 19 June 2025 (link).

[43] Department of Education (Victoria) (2024), 'Strengthening Aboriginal Self-Determination in Education', education.vic.gov.au, accessed 19 June 2025 (link).

[44] Department of Education (Victoria) (2025), 'Preventing and Addressing Racism in Schools', education.vic.gov.au, accessed 6 June 2025 (link).

[45] Australian Human Rights' Commission (2024), 'The National Anti-Racism Framework', humanrights.gov.au, accessed 12 June 2025 (link), p.19.

[46] Prime Minister of Australia & Minister for Communications (2024), 'Social media reforms to protect our kids online pass Parliament' [media release], pm.gov.au, accessed 11 June 2025 (link).

[47] Youth Affairs Council Victoria (2025), 'Young people have the right to be safe online, not banned', yacvic.org.au, accessed 11 June 2025 (link).

[48] Project Rockit (2024), 'Shaping Our Feeds: Young People's Experiences of Social Media Algorithms', projectrockit.com.au, accessed 11 June 2025 (link), p.12.

[49] Youth Affairs Council Victoria (2025), 'Young people have the right to be safe online, not banned', yacvic.org.au, accessed 11 June 2025 (link).

Additional measures students need from a whole of school perspective

Empowering staff to prevent and support action on bullying

Current issues with school staff and the workforce crisis

- When considering the role school staff play, it is critical to note that the ongoing teacher shortage is having a significant impact on students' experiences. Students at VicSRC's 2024 Congress have shared that this shortage affects classroom consistency, teacher-student relationships, and overall support for their wellbeing. [50] Students expressed hesitation in approaching teachers with personal concerns, citing a perception that teachers lacked the time or resources to recognise and respond to their mental health and wellbeing needs. [51] The strain on teachers is even more extreme for small schools in rural communities, where teachers are expected to maintain a number of duties.

- Students at VicSRC's 2024 Congress event shared that support from teachers and staff was often inconsistent or unavailable, particularly in regional areas that are under increased strain from a lack of staff and services. In some cases, students described teachers as holding unhelpful or even sharing racist views, which further contributed to a school environment that felt exclusionary and unsafe. [52]

- Students at VicSRC's 2023 Congress event highlighted that even when they attempted to raise concerns with teachers, their experiences were frequently dismissed or misunderstood. This lack of sensitivity or awareness contributed to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and a diminished sense of belonging. [53] This is affirmed by a 2023 study, which indicated that some teachers feel unprepared to address issues of discrimination due to a perceived obligation to remain 'neutral' on what are seen as ideological topics. [54]

- Research into queer students' experiences saw students reflect on how teachers' personal beliefs and biases, particularly around gender and sexuality, influenced their responses to bullying. Some teachers took appropriate action, while others failed to intervene at all. [55] This inconsistency mirrors findings from Australian research, which show that teacher attitudes significantly shape how bullying is addressed in schools.[56]

Students' vision for empowering school staff

- To address these issues, students and the youth sector have strongly advocated for improved training for teachers and school staff to better support students.

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[50] VicSRC 2024, p.12.

[51] VicSRC 2024, p.10.

[52] VicSRC 2024, p.14.

[53] VicSRC 2023, p. 9.

[54] Bartulovic, M, Kusevic, B, Siranovic, A (2023), 'From neutrality to engagement: the modalities of understanding secondary teacher professionalism in dealing with LGBT issues', *Multicultural Education Review* 15 (1), 2023, pp. 42-59.

[55] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.12.

[56] Parker, L., Webb, S., & Chonody, J. M (2022). 'Bullying toward LGBTQI+ students in Australian schools: Understanding teachers' intentions to intervene.' *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 3/20, p.561–584.

- YACVic has advocated for the importance of co-designing teacher training and resources with young people from priority groups. This ensures the development of responsive, relevant approaches that reduce bullying and harassment. [57]

- This is also supported by MYAN, who have recommended the implementation of mandatory professional development for all school staff to build the knowledge and skills required to identify, prevent, and respond to racism. MYAN emphasise that training should be comprehensive and continuous, incorporating workshops, seminars, and role-playing exercises to prepare staff for real scenarios. [58] Additional training is also supported by research from the University of Melbourne, which highlights the importance of equipping educators with the cultural awareness and skills needed to foster inclusive learning environments. [59]

- The Centre for Multicultural Youth's *Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria* also notes that school leadership teams play a central role in creating environments where racism and discrimination are proactively addressed. While whole-of-school frameworks like the Schools Standing Up to Racism (SSUR) model promote collective responsibility, the ultimate accountability lies with school leaders. They must demonstrate a clear commitment to anti-racism through targeted education, effective policy implementation, and systemic responses to discriminatory behaviour. [60]

Empowering students to prevent and support action on bullying

Given the issues outlined with peer-to-peer bullying, it is important to focus on empowering students to act against bullying and foster inclusive school environments. This requires a multifaceted approach, guided by the voice of students.

- YACVic's *Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria* voices a strong preference for schools to move away from punitive responses like suspension and expulsion. They stressed the importance of trauma-informed, student-centred approaches that address the underlying causes of behaviour. YACVic also stressed that emotional regulation support should begin in early education to be most effective. [61] Moving away from expulsion is especially important as students who encounter barriers to education are at a higher risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system. In 2019, 68% of children in custody had a history of being suspended or expelled from school. [62]

- To address incidents of discrimination, LGBTIQA+ students consulted by VicSRC called for clearly defined reporting pathways and appropriate, proportionate responses from wellbeing staff and school leadership. Safe and respectful peer interactions, along with responsive support systems, are essential for building an inclusive school climate. [63]

- These reporting pathways should be supported by anti-bullying policies. Of students surveyed as part of the national *Queer Youth Now* survey, 56% said anti-bullying school policies would make them feel accepted and included at school.[64] Victorian students consistently advocate

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[57] YACVic 2023, p.1.

[58] MYAN 2025, p.13

[59] University of Melbourne, n.d.

[60] Centre for Multicultural Youth (2023), 'Submission to the inquiry into state education system in Victoria', accessed 13 June 2025 (link), p. 19.

[61] YACVic 2023, p.12

[62] Westjustice (2023), 'Action Plan to End the Over-Representation of Particular Groups of Young People in the Criminal Justice System', westjustice.org.au, accessed 13 June 2025 (link), p.61.

[63] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.16.

[64] Minus18 Foundation (2025). 'Queer Youth Now: The national survey of LGBTQIA+ youth voice in Australia', minus18.org.au, accessed 12 June 2025 (link), p.17.

for a seat at the table around school level-decision making. [65] While existing student representative bodies exist, students deserve to have genuine input into school-level anti-bullying policies, as the people who these measures aim to serve. Student voice is critical to ensure anti-bullying policies meet students' needs.

- Queer students have also suggested establishing mentoring groups where older students guide and support younger peers, while encouraging the creation of identity-based student-led clubs and societies (e.g., Pride or Queer-Straight Alliance groups).[66] Despite students' interest in this, both *Writing Themselves In 4* and the *Queer Youth Now* survey found that less than 50% of secondary students were aware of such an alliance at their school.[67]

- Students also want to see early education to tackle discriminatory behaviours among their peers.

  - Queer students have emphasised the need for promoting active allyship among peers, highlighting that a lack of education fosters discriminatory behaviours. Students recommended that education interventions begin in the primary years to encourage inclusive attitudes early on. This education should be age-appropriate and tailored by year level to ensure relevance and effectiveness. [68]

  - MYAN has previously advocated for the integration of respect and anti-racism education into national programs, such as the Respectful Relationships curriculum. These programs should foster empathy, respect, and cross-cultural understanding among students from diverse backgrounds.[69] In addition, YACVic has called for the integration of disability inclusion and neurodiversity principles into this curriculum, to foster a meaningful, whole-of-school response to disability-based exclusion. [70]

As bullying prevention and response through an anti-discrimination lens is such a complex issue, a multifaceted approach is necessary to empower students to act against bullying and foster inclusive school environments.

Improving representation in the school curriculum to address bullying

In addition to early anti-discrimination education, Victorian students want the school curriculum to better represent all students. As students have reflected, when education is not sufficient, it leaves room for misinformation to run unchecked, fuelling further instances of discrimination.[71]

- Many students reported that the current curriculum does not reflect or include LGBTIQA+ identities and experiences. Australian research highlights that the curriculum tends to prioritise heterosexuality, leaving queer students feeling erased. [72] This is supported by data from *Writing Themselves in 4*, which found that 23% of participants reported never having any aspect of LGBTIQA+ people mentioned in a supportive or inclusive way during their secondary

[65] VicSRC Congress, p.15.

[66] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.16.

[67] Hill, A.O et al. (2020), 'Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report', La Trobe University, p.9; Minus18 Foundation (2025), p.18.

[68] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.17.

[69] MYAN 2025, p.16.

[70] YACVic 2023, p.2.

[71] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.19.

[72] Vicars, M & Van Toledo., S (2021), 'Walking the Talk: LGBTQ Allies in Australian Secondary Schools', *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, pp. 1–13.

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or tertiary education.[73] Survey data from VicSRC showed that 75% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed that LGBTIQA+ histories and stories were included in their learning.

- Students also shared concerns that LGBTIQA+ content within sex education is either excluded or presented in a narrow and tokenistic manner.[74] Australian research supports this, showing that fewer than 10% of students reported coverage of topics like homophobia, the gender binary, same sex sexual expression, and same-sex families.[75] Content specifically about trans people was reported by fewer than 3% of students.[76]

- Students consulted by VicSRC stressed that LGBTIQA+ stories and histories should be embedded across all areas of the curriculum, instead of being limited to sex education. Confining queer education to specific subjects can reinforce stereotypes and prevent a broader understanding of queer identities in society.[77]

- The *National Anti-Racism Framework* Report also finds that the school curriculum does not include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and experiences. Furthermore, participants raised issues with how the history of colonisation and genocide of First Peoples is minimised.[78] Research from VACCA also finds that students are feeling alienated, belittled, or bullied by peers and staff, especially when inaccurate representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are in the curriculum.[79]

- MYAN's *National Policy Alliance Report* suggests partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to embed First Nations knowledges across all subject areas. This should include regular consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators to ensure accurate and genuine representation.[80]

- MYAN's *National Policy Alliance Report* also highlights that the curriculum often fails to reflect the histories and contributions of migrant and refugee communities, resulting in these students feeling invisible at school.[81]

Though this research refers to the perspectives of a few groups of students, it is clear that overall students need their school curriculum to better represent the broader population. Steps toward better representation will lead to a safer school environment and less misinformation-fuelled discrimination.

Empowering parents and carers to prevent and support action on bullying

Parents and carers are often left out of the conversation when it comes to addressing bullying and discrimination in schools, particularly at a high school level. It is clear that parents and carers must be involved to deliver a successful whole of school approach.

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[73] Hill, A.O et al. (2020), 'Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report', La Trobe University, p.27.
[74] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.18.
[75] Shannon, B. (2022). 'Trans Youth Perspectives on Formal Sex Education', in: *Sex(uality) Education for Trans and Gender Diverse Youth in Australia* (Camden: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 81–10.
[76] Ibid.
[77] VicSRC (2024), 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.18.
[78] Victorian Government (2024), 'Victoria's anti-racism strategy 2024-2029', accessed 12 June 2025 (link), p.31.
[79] VACCA 2023, p. 7.
[80] MYAN National Policy Alliance Report, p.13.
[81] MYAN 2025, p.12.

- CCYP's *Let Us Learn* report highlights that children and young people in out-of-home care often experience stigma within school environments. Notably, this stigma can even come from members of the broader school community, including other parents.[82]

- The importance of engaging parents and carers is further affirmed by VicSRC's research into queer students' experiences. This research emphasises that schools should be adequately resourced to help parents and carers understand and engage positively with school-based LGBTIQA+ programs. Providing this support can empower families to have open, affirming conversations with their children about queer identities.[83]

- More broadly, YACVic's *Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria* highlights the critical role of parental and carer engagement in supporting student wellbeing and school engagement. Consultation found that the entire ecosystem surrounding a child must be supported. However, engagement from parents and carers often declines during the transition from primary to secondary school. Despite this, schools often lack the dedicated funding and resources needed to build meaningful relationships and provide accessible education opportunities for parents and carers.[84]

- This is especially important as students experiencing discrimination and bullying do not always have the language and resources to independently report and navigate this at school. Parents, guardians and carers can offer critical support as trusted adults, if a strong relationship with the school exists.

Given the discrimination and lack of understanding that can come from parents and carers who lack information, as well as the real benefit these trusted adults can provide when bullying occurs, it is vital that they be included as part of a whole of school approach to addressing bullying.

What students need from an education system perspective

Student voice mechanisms in a national standard for responding to bullying

Across all areas of VicSRC's work, it is clear that Victorian students want to be active collaborators in shaping education reform.[85]

- As the largest stakeholder in the education sector, students have thoughtful and valuable expertise to share. Furthermore, bringing student voice into governance and decision-making leads to relevant and effective policy.[86] When executed well, student voice consultative and governance bodies are highly successful, as demonstrated by the Victorian Department of Education's Senior Secondary Reform Student Advisory Panel, and VicSRC's own governance structure.

- Students offer unique lived-experience perspectives that no other stakeholder group can provide, making their inclusion in governance and decision-making essential. Many research pieces in this submission from a range of organisations are centred on the voices of young people, demonstrating students' readiness to collaborate with government to address systemic challenges.

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[82] CCYP 2023, p. 181.
[83] VicSRC 2024, 'Inclusion and Safety in Victorian Schools: A Vision from LGBTIQA+ Students', p.17.
[84] YACVic 2023, p.25.
[85] VicSRC 2024, '2024 Congress Report'.
[86] Victorian Student Representative Council (2024), 'Policy Platform', vicsrc.org.au (link), p.13.

- Beyond strong policy, student voice contributes to greater student engagement and satisfaction, as young people feel heard and empowered to shape their own educational experiences. [87]

- Despite the demonstrated value of student voice, there is currently a lack of consistent and meaningful implementation across the education system.

This lack of student voice must be addressed through a sector-wide commitment to embed robust, inclusive, and ongoing student voice structures at all levels of governance and decision-making. [88] The development of a national standard to address bullying in schools is a key piece of work that would benefit greatly from student voice mechanisms.

Recommendations

The Australian Government should collaborate with states and territories to:

1. Support school staff, including leadership, to address bullying by investing in co-designed training on creating a safe school environment and responding to discrimination in all its forms.

2. Mandate trauma-informed training for all teachers, and ensure it features as part of teachers' pre-service training.

3. Prioritise the implementation of the National Anti-Racism Framework to inform a national approach to cultural safety and anti-racism in education, ensuring consistency and equity across all states and territories. Implementation should:

   a) Deliver on students' recommendation that schools are provided with additional resources to make their schools safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive places of learning.

   b) Further ensure that culturally responsive training is delivered effectively to school staff and Department of Education officials.

   c) Provide additional support to community organisations to offer cultural awareness and anti-racism modules included in the Victorian Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu. This should also include support to deliver a comprehensive implementation program around existing anti-racism frameworks and policies.

   d) Ensure that the Framework is implemented with targeted and community-led measures to lift outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

4. Draw from the Victorian Respectful Relationships program to inform a national approach that aims to address misogyny and negatives attitudes towards women and girls.

5. Address discrimination among students through early education interventions.

6. Expand representation within the school curriculum to ensure that diverse stories, histories, and literature are represented across the width and breadth of a student's education.

7. Support students to address bullying and discrimination through providing clear and accessible complaints procedures, with genuine outcomes and means for escalation. When

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[87] Department of Education (Victoria) (2019), 'Amplify: empowering students through voice, agency and leadership', Victorian Government, p. 8.
[88] Victorian Student Representative Council (2024), 'Policy Platform', vicsrc.org.au (link), p.14.

discrimination occurs, it should be addressed along with the social and institutional power structures it exists within, which perpetuate inequitable opportunities and outcomes.

8. Encourage schools to incorporate ongoing student voice at school-level decision-making around anti-discrimination and bullying prevention.

9. Support parents, guardians and carers to address bullying by creating better connections between schools and families, through funding Family Engagement Officer roles.

10. Incorporate ongoing student voice into policymaking around bullying prevention. This mechanism should be genuinely committed to meaningful student voice practice and continuous improvement. The mechanism should also involve a diverse range of students, including students who the education system has struggled to engage, to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to shape the future of their education.