



Jesuit
Social Services
Building a Just Society

Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

Submission from Jesuit Social Services

June 2025

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of all the lands on which Jesuit Social Services operates and pay respect to their Elders past and present. We express our gratitude for their love and care of people, community, land and all life.

Jesuit Social Services: Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services has been working for more than 48 years delivering support services and advocating for improved policies, legislation and resources to achieve strong, cohesive and vibrant communities where every individual can play their role and flourish.

We are a social change organisation working with some of the most marginalised individuals and communities, often experiencing multiple and complex challenges. Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where we have the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference.

Our services span Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory where we support more than 57,000 individuals and families annually.

Our service delivery and advocacy focus on the following key areas:

- **Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – people with multiple and complex needs, including mental illness, trauma, homelessness and complex bereavement
- **Settlement and community building** – recently arrived immigrants and refugees, and disadvantaged communities
- **Education, training and employment** – people with barriers to sustainable employment
- **Gender justice** – providing leadership on the reduction of violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, and building new approaches to improve their wellbeing and keep families and communities safe
- **Ecological justice** – inviting discussion on what practices, policies and actions can be taken by governments, individuals, organisations and the community services sector within Australia, to build an ecologically just society.

Research, advocacy and policy are coordinated across all program and major interest areas of Jesuit Social Services. Our advocacy is grounded in the knowledge, expertise and experiences of program staff and participants, as well as academic research and evidence. We seek to influence policies, practices, legislation and budget investment to positively influence people's lives and improve approaches to address long-term social challenges.

We do this by working collaboratively with governments, business and the community sector to build coalitions and alliances around key issues, and building strong relationships with key decision-makers and the community.

Our Learning and Practice Development Unit builds the capacity of our services through staff development, training and evaluation, as well as by articulating and disseminating information on best practice approaches to working with participants and communities across our programs.

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Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Federal Government's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review and thanks the Review's Board for expressing an interest in our work.

This submission offers insights gained from our work with young people in schools and from our broader work alongside young people and adults across a number of domains over the past 48 years.

Insights from across our programs

Our programs in and relating to schools involve working both with young people who have bullied others, and with young people who are bullied. Often, one person can move from one role to the other, or have both roles in different contexts. This is critical to take into account in contending with bullying in schools.

Our work in restorative practices has grown in size and breadth over the years, and we are currently developing a restorative approach that best suits the school setting. The restorative approach aligns with the core of our approach to all our programs, which is relational. We see restorative work as both prevention and response, and consider such an approach key to addressing harmful behaviours more broadly, being holistic and evidence based.

Jesuit Social Services has a wide range of programs in areas including criminal justice (both youth and adult), gender justice, environmental justice, education, training and employment, settlement and community building, locational disadvantage and place-based approaches, and mental health and complex needs; and we have advocated for reform and systemic change across these spheres for a number of decades.

The work we do across the organisation focuses in particular on people who have multiple and intersecting needs, and on those who are let down by other service systems. This means that we often work with those who fall between the cracks of mainstream services; those whose situations or needs are particularly complex; those on whom other services have given up; and those least popular as participants or recipients of services.

This focus, combined with the breadth of our programs, enables us to see the interactions and reciprocal effects of intersecting issues and failures in different service systems. On this basis, we offer the following reflections on issues relevant to contending with and better understanding bullying in schools.

Perpetrators have often been victims as well

People who engage in harmful behaviour – children and adults alike – tend to be victims of harmful behaviour too. This is true in general, and includes various types of offending, violence, sexual violence and other harmful behaviours like bullying. This means that the prevalent tendency to label a person either a victim or a perpetrator is misleading, and the focus on supporting victims or survivors without either addressing or understanding perpetration is counterproductive.

Jesuit Social Services has been working with cohorts deemed perpetrators for decades, including in the adult and youth justice systems, in family and domestic violence and in child sexual abuse. We do this in part because we know that, in most instances, punitive responses and denial of services exacerbate the problem, in turn putting victims and the community at greater risk.

Participants in our adult and youth justice programs tend to have been victims of abuse, trauma or neglect, and also tend to have or have had challenges with alcohol and other drugs; have disabilities; be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and/or have had experience with child protection or out of home care. Often, participants will belong to a number of these groups at once.

Participants in our Navigator program – addressing disengagement from school – also often and disproportionately belong to these cohorts.

One effect of dividing people into perpetrators and victims is that the resulting focus on victims (or survivors) means that the drivers of perpetration, and the needs of the ‘perpetrators’, are neither understood nor addressed and, consequently, successful interventions are not developed. This, coupled with the recognition that perpetrators are most often victims themselves, begins to show why punitive responses may in turn exacerbate the problem.

Punitive approaches exacerbate the problem

There is significant evidence that punitive responses to harmful behaviour by young people are counterproductive and can lead to an escalation in harmful behaviour.¹ A punitive response will therefore lead to worse outcomes both for the young person engaged in the behaviour and, subsequently, for anyone impacted by that person’s behaviour.

This is not confined to young people who have engagement with the justice system; it is relevant to circumstances of bullying both in the context of bullying as a driver towards justice involvement, and in the context of bullying in itself.

The tendency to treat ‘perpetrators’ one way and ‘victims’ another is prevalent in schools, too, and means that children and young people deemed ‘bullies’ may be punished by being excluded in various ways – expelled, suspended, removed from certain places or at particular times, removed from certain social settings, excluded from activities and so on. Yet school engagement is a known protective factor from involvement by young people in

¹ Sentencing Advisory Council, *Reoffending by Children and Young People in Victoria 2016*, pp. 25–26, 30–31. [Weblink](#)

the justice system, and school disengagement is a known driver for it.² Removing a child or young person from school means that they lack a structure and community, and may over time exacerbate the harmful behaviour.

One risk associated with addressing bullying punitively is that punitive responses that lead to (directly or indirectly, by contributing to or commencing a path of) disengagement from school may appear to be successful in the sense that the school community may seem safer once the 'bully' has been removed from it, while the child or young person who had engaged in the harmful behaviour may be faring worse, engaging in more harmful behaviour and ultimately causing greater harm elsewhere due in part to their exclusion from the school community. It is crucial that any approach that seeks to tackle bullying see this phenomenon in the broader context and be aware of – and accountable for – consequences that may occur outside the school or which may be reflected in ways other than bullying.

The approach described is one that seeks to externalise risk, with schools increasingly calling in police, seeking intervention orders within the school environment, and excluding students from the school altogether – for their own safety or that of others – in instances where in the past schools would have worked to manage and minimise the risk and continue to include everyone involved. The nature of risk in schools and the environment in which it occurs have undergone substantial change in recent years, and increased awareness of and responsiveness to risk are important and necessary. However, as stated above, exclusionary and punitive responses, while mitigating narrowly defined and short-term risk, ultimately increase risk for those involved and for the broader community, and as a result this approach is ultimately an unhelpful one. There is a role for police and for responsiveness to and accountability for harmful actions; but an approach that makes these as a starting point cannot succeed. More effective, evidence-based interventions should be adopted instead.

As part of the Youth Justice Community Support Service that Jesuit Social Services runs in metropolitan Melbourne, we work with children and young people on Community Correction Orders who have involvement with the youth justice system, and in this context we see the effects of the ways multiple systems have often failed our participants prior to their involvement with the justice system. Our participants are often unable to attend school – often due to concerns for their safety – and may more generally be socially isolated, feel unable to undertake basic everyday activities such as taking public transport or visiting shopping centres due to safety concerns, and may have multiple support workers from various agencies with whom they engage. Preventing and successfully addressing bullying at the early stages can help prevent disengagement from school and, for a certain proportion of this group, subsequent involvement in the justice system and entrenchment in it over many years.

Bullying behaviour is an early sign that a child or young person may have unmet needs and require some specific supports, and provides an early intervention point for supporting the child or young person to stop this behaviour.

² McCarter, S., Venkatasubramanian, K., & Bradshaw, K. (2019). Addressing the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Examining Micro- and Macro-Level Variables that Affect School Disengagement and Subsequent Felonies. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 46(3), 379–393.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2019.1575323>.

Expanded powers for principals in Victoria reinforce a counterproductive approach

Victoria recently expanded the powers of school principals to expel or suspend students on the basis of activity that happens outside the school grounds (either in person or online).³

Jesuit Social Services is concerned about the consequences of these expanded powers. As discussed above, exclusionary responses can in themselves be harmful and can lead to disengagement, which in turn can (among other harms) escalate the severity of harmful behaviours and ultimately drive involvement with the justice system.

We acknowledge that incidents of bullying and other harmful behaviours which affect a school community may happen outside the school's grounds. However, addressing this through the expansion of powers for punishment and exclusion is counterproductive and highlights a misguided understanding of what works in preventing and responding to harmful behaviours among young people.

Instead, what is needed is greater focus on prevention and earlier intervention, appropriate resourcing of supports and interventions that have been shown to succeed, and investment in building capacity in schools to better address the underlying drivers of bullying and respond to it when it occurs.

Prevention and early intervention should happen more and earlier

There are a number of known protective factors from and drivers of harmful behaviour in children and young people, and a number of opportunities for early intervention. Bullying behaviour is itself an early sign of possible unmet need and an opportunity for intervening early.

There are a number of existing interventions and programs designed both to address and to prevent harmful behaviour in schools, and these programs are often worthwhile and important. However, they are frequently introduced at a point in time by which problems have already persisted and escalated, and supporting children and young people to address them may be a lot more complex than earlier and consequently may be less successful or require a more difficult, protracted and resource-intensive process.

A successful approach to preventing and responding to bullying will properly resource prevention and early intervention work tailored to a series of appropriate points in a trajectory of a child or young person's life, starting from primary prevention work that aims to meet a child's needs and protect and enhance protective factors against harmful behaviour, and spanning across various points in time, including points of transition and possible indications that support or intervention are needed.

Insights from Navigator

Navigator is an outreach-based case management program funded by the Victorian Government for children aged 12–17 years who are disengaged from school. Jesuit Social Services runs the service in Hume–Merri-bek, and also runs a pilot Navigator program for

³ [Weblink](#).

children aged 10 and 11. Children and young people who are eligible to have attended less than 30 per cent of the previous school term or equivalent time period.

As part of this program, a case manager works intensively with the young person, their family, school and support networks to address the underlying issues that drive the young person's disengagement.

In working with a young person, a case manager will examine what the barriers are to the young person's engagement: social, medical, mental health, family, learning or anything else, including whether the young person would benefit from any assessments (such as for neurodivergence or disability). Next, those who have key roles in or are important in the young person's life will be brought together: the school, the young person's external support services (if any), any relevant family members, and anyone else who fulfills an important role, and together a shared understanding of the barriers to engagement are developed. From there, a plan is made for how to overcome the barriers, and responsibility for the relevant tasks or components of the plan are assigned to particular people.

The plan is implemented with ongoing support from the case manager, who also acts as an intermediary between the young person and their school (whether this be the school from which they have become disengaged or a new one), working to build or rebuild a relationship that has often broken down between the young and their family on the one side, and the school on the other.

The aims of the program are to reengage the young person with education, support students to develop greater social and emotional capabilities, and support schools to be better equipped to engage all young people.

Sustained educational reengagement is understood as attendance of 70 per cent or more for two school terms or equivalent. However, children and young people may achieve positive outcomes despite not meeting this definition, including engaging in flexible learning options and other education settings such as TAFEs and Virtual School Victoria, in which approved curriculum is delivered.

Our participants

Our participants in Navigator are frequently children and young people who have or are being bullied; sometimes they are children and young people who have bullied others; and sometimes they have had both experiences.

Our staff tell us that there is often a lack of shared understanding regarding what bullying is, and what counts as bullying among both children and young people and the broader school community. While participants in Navigator may not explicitly say that the reason for their disengagement from school is an experience of bullying, many participants can recount incidents at school that may best be described as bullying. Others may have experienced social exclusion that may not be bullying per se.

Participants in Navigator, as noted above, often belong to vulnerable cohorts: they have often had experience with Child Protection; have experienced family violence; have a disability and/or neurodivergence; have mental health challenges; come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Among participants in the program this year, approximately half have had some experience with Child Protection, and over half have experience family violence.

School processes

Through our work in schools, we have observed that there is a tension within schools' approaches to addressing bullying between providing transparency and protecting privacy. School processes for addressing bullying are often not shared with families when undertaken, including the outcome of a process. As a result, families can feel excluded and blindsided, and this negatively impacts the relationship between the family and the school. At times, they may not be aware at all of processes undertaken by a school that involve or affect their child. At the same time, schools will often seek to protect the privacy of children and young people involved, and may feel that it is inappropriate to share information with families. This applies to Navigator, too – often, schools cannot or are unwilling to share information with case managers that could assist in working with the child or young person. While both sets of demands are valid, finding the optimal balance will require more careful and concerted consideration, and a more uniform approach.

However, a lot more could also be done prior to these processes being required. First, shared understanding of bullying should be developed across schools to ensure that students and staff alike understand what bullying is, what it means and the ways in which it causes harm. This would help any other measures introduced to address bullying. Education on what bullying is and what its effects are would also itself form the basis of a culture shift in schools that would likely decrease the incidence of bullying.

Second, greater prevention work and early intervention work will decrease the number of instances of bullying, and of serious bullying that can occasion processes by schools like investigations and external assistance.

The children and young people who participate in Navigator have already largely disengaged from school, generally experienced a breakdown in their and their family's relationship with their school, and often have had a number of difficult experiences or faced a range of challenges. The intervention Navigator offers should never be the first effort made to support a child or young person involved in bullying (as a victim or a perpetrator) or facing any other challenges at school.

As described above, our staff work with the child or young person and those around them to develop a shared understanding of the barriers they face to engaging with school. In our experience, the school may at times lack a full understanding of these barriers, because the relationship between the child and the school breaks down when the child disengages. Often, school staff will say that the school could offer the child or young person a number of supports, but that they are unable to help them if they do not attend.

Once a child or young person has started to disengage from school, we have observed that schools will follow up by sending the child's parents or guardians automated messages to ask that they ensure their child attend school. Schools often do not have the capacity to engage more personally and intensively with children or young people not attending or reaching out to engage their families and support the student to return. In time, we see that parents and guardians stop responding to communications from the school, because they are asked why their child is not attending whenever they respond. This in turn sours the relationship and transforms it into a negative, rather than supportive one. A significant amount of work is subsequently required during the period of engagement with Navigator to

reestablish and improve the relationship between the child or young person and their families on the one hand, and the school on the other.

While schools are required to report on attendance data, there are a number of different databases, and schools sometimes report on data in ways that mean non-attendance is not clear. Children and young people who are in the process of becoming disengaged therefore may not receive what support is available, and their disengagement continues or is accelerated. This points to a broader issue relating to the perception of responsibility for the child's engagement and for supporting them to participate in school and meet their needs.

Bullying behaviour can often arise in children and young people who have experienced trauma,⁴ alongside mental health and other challenges. For example, children from refugee backgrounds may have experienced trauma in the country they fled, or in the process of seeking asylum in Australia. Teachers and other school staff should be trained to identify indications of possible challenges or need, and to work in a way that is trauma-informed, and a major focus both of preventing and of responding to bullying in schools should be on capacity-building in schools. This is discussed further below.

Insights from Engage and ReEngage

Restorative practices are used in 'communities of common concern' to address a concern shared by a group of people such as an education setting, workplace, residential community or family. The restorative approach relies on three foundational principles:

1. Cause no further harm
2. Work with (rather than do to or for) those involved
3. Set relations right.⁵

Restorative justice – one form of restorative practice – acts as an alternative to retributive justice. In Australia, restorative justice is most commonly used in the criminal justice system when an offender has admitted to committing an offence.⁶ There is significant evidence that, done well, restorative justice processes can be very successful at decreasing recidivism, alongside other positive impacts that importantly include increased wellbeing of the person who has been harmed, too.⁷

⁴ Lyons K, Schmid KK, Ratnapradipa KL, Tibbits M, Watanabe-Galloway S. Comparing bullying to ACEs in the national survey of children's health: Examining 2016–2019 prevalence trends among children and adolescents. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2024 May;151:106733. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106733>

⁵ Restorative Justice, Australian Association for Restorative Justice, [Weblink](#).

⁶ Australian Institute of Criminology, 'Restorative justice in the Australian criminal justice system', 2014. The use of restorative justice is currently being expanded in Victoria, and the phased introduction of the Youth Justice Bill 2024 will see expanded use of restorative justice processes used prior to criminal proceedings being undertaken.

⁷ A meta-study of restorative justice in the UK found that it was a cost-effective and successful method for preventing crime. H. Strang et al., 'Restorative Justice Conferencing (RJC) Using Face-to-Face Meetings of Offenders and Victims: Effects on Offender Recidivism and Victim Satisfaction. A Systematic Review', *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 2013. In Victorian youth, restorative justice has been shown to reduce recidivism rates by 20– 40%. R. Bonnet, Doctoral Thesis, 'Group Conferencing Effects on Youth Recidivism and Elements of Effective Conferences', Swinburne University of

Restorative practice has been introduced in schools and other educational settings in various ways and to various degrees of rigour and fidelity to the practice. These often do not meet the requirements for what constitutes a successful restorative process, and accordingly may not have the desired results. However, this practice has not been sufficiently developed for and tested in schools to become a widespread and integral part of the education system. Schools tend to have time-poor teachers and staff, who are often unable to fully learn about, train in and implement restorative approaches in the classroom. There is therefore a need for further development of a practice that successfully tailors the restorative approach to schools and translates the lessons and skills from the justice system into the educational system in a way that preserves the effects that restorative justice has already demonstrated.

Engage

For 12 months in 2018–2019, Jesuit Social Services ran a small pilot project in collaboration with the North-Western Victoria Region of the then-Department of Education and Training to introduce restorative practice to four schools in the region. The program introduced restorative practice to schools in order to restore relationships and reduce harm caused by disruptive or negative behaviours in school.

An evaluation conducted by PhillipsKPA found very positive results, noting that it was a positive and beneficial experience for all schools and contributed to improvements in management and student behaviour; increased empathy; and provided skills to staff that enabled them to use restorative language and practice.

The evaluation noted that the program became wider in impact by constituting a positive disruption that gave staff skills applicable more widely in conflict management, and stated that its biggest impact was supporting a cultural shift in the school, enabling a focus on the issues behind harmful behaviours. Due to the size and duration of the pilot, quantitative information is limited. Where there is quantitative information, it is not possible to definitively separate the effect of Engage from that of the School-wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) program. Noting this, the schools nonetheless reported a precipitous decline in external suspensions, external suspension days, internal suspensions and exits (referrals).

The evaluation recommended that a program to embed restorative practice be embedded in all schools.

ReEngage

In early 2025, Jesuit Social Services secured funding from the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner to run a three-year project to build on the experience of Engage. The funding was granted on the basis that school disengagement is a driver of justice system involvement among children and young people, and restorative practice can help decrease disengagement from school.

Technology, 2022. The group conferencing program studied was at the time, and continues to be, delivered by Jesuit Social Services.

This project seeks to develop a comprehensive restorative approach suitable to the school setting through co-design with schools; embed restorative practice in a number of schools in Melbourne by working with schools to build their capacity in restorative practice and offer training to staff through the Australian Association for Restorative Justice; and translate this into policy and a feasible plan that will be promoted to the Victorian Department of Education for adoption across the state.

The project is in its first year and is currently commencing the co-design phase with participating schools.

Restorative practice as an approach to addressing bullying in schools

Restorative practice acts as both prevention and response to harmful behaviour, increasing the capacity and skills of those who take part to better manage conflict, better understand their own motivations and those of others, better collaborate with others and take accountability and responsibility for their actions and for what they can do to support others. It is a relational and holistic approach that understands specific events and behaviours within a wider context.

This means that, in schools, embedding restorative practice can help address some of the drivers of bullying and in turn prevent it from occurring, while also offering an effective response to it when it does occur. A restorative practice approach is flexible to the circumstances and nature of a situation, and different formats and processes will be appropriate in different instances. Embedding a restorative approach importantly involves building capacity in the relevant setting, including training staff in restorative practice – it is an approach that informs and is embedded in the setting as a whole, not a separate activity undertaken in isolation.

Embedding restorative practice can help effect a cultural shift in schools that will see both students and staff better able to understand both their own motivations and others', and better manage and mitigate conflict and harmful behaviours like bullying. This shift will in turn help minimise the incidence of bullying and harmful behaviours more generally in schools.

Restorative practice works by holding people accountable for their actions while bringing everyone involved or impacted together, including people who can provide insight, support and oversight, and keeping communities together wherever appropriate. A well-run restorative process will address the needs not just of those deemed victims and perpetrators, but also of everyone else impacted. This creates an environment in which everyone is accountable to everyone else, and everyone cares about the wellbeing and success of everyone else.

A restorative approach sees a harmful behaviour as an opportunity to respond and set relations right by addressing what has happened and how people have been affected, and then considering what can be done to improve things for the future. This often involves all participants in negotiating a plan. It does not exclude anyone, and does not divide participants into perpetrators and victims.

While a comprehensive restorative practice approach to the school setting has yet to be fully developed, it is nonetheless arguably the most promising new approach to tackling the prevention and response to bullying in Australian schools.