



## APTA RESPONSE TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE ISSUE OF INCREASING DISRUPTION IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate inquiry into the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms. The Australian Professional Teachers Association is a federation of state and territory joint councils representing teacher associations. These associations represent a network of up to 200,000 teachers from government and non-government schools, early childhood services, universities and centres. The vision of APTA is to provide national leadership that supports and advances the teaching profession.

Our strength as an organisation lies in our ability to directly represent the interests of practicing classroom teachers across Australia. We are a voice for teachers and an effective conduit between decision-making bodies and the classroom.

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We acknowledge, that across the country, many students demonstrate engagement and good behaviour. However, many of our teachers and students are reporting that disruptive behaviour by some students is compromising the quality of teaching, learning and wellbeing. These teachers and students feel unsafe and frustrated by the unacceptable behaviour of some students. The OECD report states that 43% of Australian students reported that their classrooms were disruptive and not conducive to learning. This is ten percent above other OECD countries.

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

The terms of reference to the Senate inquiry highlights that Australian classrooms are among the world's most disorderly, ranking 69 out of 76 jurisdictions worldwide, according to a 2018 Programme for International Assessment analysis. Many of our members have affirmed that they are experiencing increased behaviour issues exacerbated by the failure of many parents and carers, and limiting regulations regarding how schools are to deal with these situations.

According to the South Australian newspaper *The Advertiser* (June, 2022), the number of violent incidents in South Australian schools are at their worst in three years, equating to more than 50 each week. In NSW, a report from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research reveals that school violence is at a 20-year high, and reported that in the past twelve months, there were 1923 reported assaults in schools. While male students accounted for the majority of school assaults, there was a concerning 4.6 per cent spike in cases involving female students.

The situation in NSW is confirmed by the Australian Catholic University (ACU) annual Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey of 2461 principals from across all sectors that reports a concerning rise in threats and violence, mirroring a national trend of worsening behaviour towards school leadership staff. One of the authors and former principal Dr Paul Kidson stated, "The steadily increasing levels of offensive behaviour across the country in schools of all types should give us pause and shame." The

report concludes that NSW principals receiving threats of violence jumped from 28.5 per cent when the survey began in 2011 to 46.2 per cent in 2022. School leaders experiencing actual physical violence has more than doubled from 20 per cent to 43.9 per cent over the same period.<sup>1</sup>

In the Northern Territory, the Positive Behaviour and Occupational Violence in Schools Taskforce report commissioned by Northern Territory Government Schools into student behaviour stated that school staff are experiencing high levels of violence and aggression in government schools, compromising their role and their personal physical and psychological safety. The report referred to the 2020 Australian Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey that similarly to the NSW survey, Principals and school leaders were 5.5 times more likely to be subjected to threats of violence, and 9.4 times more likely to be exposed to physical violence than the general population. Moreover, the report asserts that the Northern Territory has the second highest proportion of principals and school leaders in Australian jurisdictions subjected to physical violence (55%) and the third highest proportion of school leaders exposed to threats of violence (47%).<sup>2</sup> However, the data from the Northern Territory suggests that concerns over student behaviour management are not among the highest priorities for teachers, which find teacher workload, salary and conditions, job security and class sizes are higher priorities (AEU NT Survey, 2021).

Many of our member associations affirmed that aggressive behaviour was on the rise. This is at odds with the purpose of schooling that is about the safety, wellbeing and learning of students. For this to happen, the teaching force and its leaders need to feel safe and supported. Students and staff cannot flourish in an environment where disorderly behaviour is escalating. Perhaps, the declining Naplan and PISA results can be attributed to this escalation.

It is important to consider these findings within the context of broader educational trends negatively impacting on Australian classrooms. For example, higher rates of teachers working out-of-field can contribute to higher rates of challenging classroom behaviours, with the additional pressure placed on teachers lacking confidence or competence in a specific teaching resulting in increased challenges in classroom management.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.healthandwellbeing.org/reports/AU/2022\_ACU\_Principals\_HWB\_Final\_Report.pdf

<sup>2</sup> The Positive Behaviour and Occupational Violence in Schools Taskforce Report, <https://education.nt.gov.au/reviews-and-consultations/report-on-occupational-violence-and-aggression-in-northern-territory-government-schools>

Classrooms where students are engaged and can experience success are less likely to be impacted by challenging behaviours. Teachers need to be confident and competent in implementing the curriculum in ways that best meet student needs. It is incredibly challenging to do this when a teacher is working outside of their areas of expertise. This is where the teaching associations across the states are best equipped to provide pedagogical subject knowledge support. Shulman (1986) defines pedagogical subject knowledge as teachers' interpretations and transformations of subject-matter knowledge in the context of facilitating student learning. He referred to this knowledge as the art and craft of teaching; the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding for students of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organised, represented, and adapted. This is already happening across many teaching associations but is all too often not acknowledged by different jurisdictions.

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

According to research (Hattie, 2009; Flores, 2019) teachers are the most important in-school factor contributing to student success, satisfaction, and achievement, regardless of their circumstances, location, or social status. Yet, education is no longer seen as a desirable career, with teacher shortages and a declining workforce contributing to high levels of disruption in the classroom. This in turn makes working conditions more difficult for others which only exacerbates the teacher shortage further. The retention of quality teachers can be partially attributed to declining working conditions and a general disrespect for the profession from the general public. Until education is valued in society, we will continue to see a decline in the Australian Education system.

The Monash University report "Australian Teachers' Perception of their Work 2022" asserts that a large majority of teachers indicated that they were planning to, or would like to, leave the profession, and that quarter of teachers reported feeling unsafe in their workplace.<sup>3</sup> Disruption in classroom has steadily increased over recent years with the current teacher shortage exacerbating the issue. Frequent collapsed classes are leading to high levels of

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Teachers' Perception of their Work 2022 - <https://lens-monash-edu.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/lens.monash.edu/@education/2022/07/11/1384854/initial-teacher-education-dont-waste-the-crisis?amp=1>

disruption and has removed the much-needed structure and routine required by students. Instances across the country have been reported by associations of multiple classes being placed into common areas where students are subject to minimum supervision is commonplace and detrimental to student learning and engagement. Not only do students miss out on vital learning during the lesson, but the lack of structure also makes it difficult for students to focus and engage in other lessons throughout the day. Teachers being asked to provide minimum supervision to multiple classes simultaneously provides a very unsafe working environments, with the lack of engagement in learning leading to undesirable behaviours from students.

Teacher retention is ultimately difficult due to the highly stressful and demanding situations teachers are being placed in, as well as the distinct lack of self-actualisation in the workplace due to not being provided the conditions to perform their roles effectively.

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

Association members reported that in some schools, teachers and school leaders did not have enough support or training in managing student behaviour. Where this was reported the common response was that teachers were not adequately trained or supported to deal with disruptive behaviour in the classroom, which is leading to an increase in the number of students with behavioural issues. Moreover, it was noted that the current behavioural and suspension policies do not support teachers and cause an unacceptable burden in administration and reporting time that impact negatively on teachers' capacity to focus on ways to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Many reported that a teachers' workload has increased, and they are stretched way beyond their capacity resulting in extended work hours to just get the job done. Time taken to manage behaviour is compromising the development and delivery of innovative and creative lessons.

Associations reported that the current discipline policies do not provide teachers with sufficient empowerment to maintain order in the classroom. With student to teacher ratios at 30:1 in some school settings, there is an obvious imbalance of power in the classroom. There is a lot of frustration across the teaching profession, which has led to low rates of staff retention. Many teachers feel powerless and unsafe. Increased levels of support and improved behaviour policies to ensure schools can ensure safe and productive learning environments are needed. Yet, there is not even a common national response to disruptive behaviour.

Many States have different legislative responses to suspension of students whose behaviour is disruptive and potentially threatening. In the NSW DET, the new 2022 Student Behaviour Policy restricts schools to suspending a student no more than three times a year. Each new suspension requires approval from the department. Suspension lengths have been halved. In Queensland, a student can be suspended for up to 20 days; however, in Western Australia, the maximum is 10, and the school needs approval from the education department if it wants to extend it. In Victoria, five days can be given. This can be extended to 15 with departmental approval.

What is evident from the responses received by APTA is that many teachers and leaders who have always cared about their students, especially vulnerable students, have expressed concern that a school's ability to manage disruptive and dangerous behaviour and ensure the safety and wellbeing of its students and teachers, has been severely compromised.

Moreover, in areas where there are significant cultural differences between educators and students (for instance, in remote First Nations' schools) teachers lack significant cross-cultural awareness to manage challenging behaviours. Triggers and antecedents for challenging behaviour in some First Nation's contexts can be highly different from those found in "mainstream" classrooms, and teachers will find strategies they previously found successful are inappropriate in these contexts. While most sites will include some level of cross-cultural awareness training, this is often at a generalised level and not contextualised to the classroom. A greater focus on classroom management in culturally responsive professional learning may provide assistance here.

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

Most teachers leaving university are equipped with the basics to manage a classroom in a reasonable setting. Teachers need time in the classroom to gain experience in managing classroom behaviour and need to feel supported in what they are doing. While the very basics of classroom management can be taught in a lecture theatre, the classroom is where these skills will be developed. One could argue that there are not many teachers equipped to manage the current level of disruption being seen across many schools and that in some cases the classroom environment is beyond what should be expected of a classroom teacher in a mainstream setting.

Recent reviews suggest that ITE should increase the focus on the practical aspects of teaching over the theoretical (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/mar/23/students-teachers-should-spend-more-time-on-practical-skills-less-time-on-philosophy-of-education>). Support for early career teachers in terms of managing challenging behaviours remains an important consideration.

Consideration could be given to how ITE programs can better support teachers interested/willing to work in more challenging contexts, such as remote communities. Identifying the right teachers for the right context is important. A new graduate who could be highly successful in an urban environment may be completely unsuccessful in a challenging remote location. Being registered is not enough.

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

Disruptions in classes are leading to students receiving less instructional teacher time. With numerous classes being collapsed and/or combined to ensure there is supervision, quality instructional time to students is being lost. Senior classes are losing their specialist teachers to ensure that junior classes are supervised. With Australia's education system falling further and further behind, schools will be unable to lift the standards of achievement, if they are focusing more on behaviour management than teaching and learning. One NSW teaching association reported that they have been informed that during term 1 this year, teachers were taken off senior classes who are perceived as being able to work independently to supervise junior cohorts.

Most teachers understand that classroom management is an essential element of teaching. When teachers have more time to prepare lessons that better suit their students' needs and can adequately cater for mixed ability classes, they are better able to manage behaviour. The impact of student behaviour on instructional time could be lessened if administrative tasks were reduced so teachers can focus on delivering lessons that can promote engagement and success. Research (indicated in the recent National Teacher Workforce Action Plan) notes that teachers spend significant time on administrative tasks. The NT Teacher Wellbeing Strategy noted that two-thirds of teachers spend over 20% of their time on non-teaching related work.

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

**classrooms:**

Students in disruptive classes are undoubtedly negatively impacted in comparison to their peers. Students in a calm structured environment, where high standards can be maintained will more than likely succeed at a higher level. This disproportionately impacts students attending schools in areas with higher levels of teacher shortages. All students have the right to quality education, which may not be achievable with the current level of disruption.

Moreover, this issue is having a significant impact on the social and emotional well-being of students. The constant disruption in some classrooms is causing stress, anxiety, and frustration among students, which is affecting their mental health and motivation to learn.

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

The impact of this issue on students is evident in their poor academic performance in basic foundational skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy. The disruptive behaviour in classrooms is denying students the opportunity to learn and practise these essential skills, which are crucial for their academic success. This is exacerbated in regional schools where there are staffing shortages. Students whose teachers cannot be replaced by casual teachers are often placed in a common area and supervised rather than being taught. Where a school has a reputation for poor student behaviour, this is amplified as casual teachers refuse to come to these schools.

**(h) how relevant Australian state, territory and federal departments and agencies are working to address this growing challenge:**

Although, it is acknowledged that this is happening, it is rarely informed by teachers' voices who experience disruptive behaviours daily. Cooperation between jurisdictions and the Commonwealth (as well in the Workforce Action Plan) are important, but each state/Territory is well-placed to consider approaches to manage issues of violence and challenging behaviour. The Northern Territory will need to place greater attention to supporting teachers with culturally responsive approaches to classroom management.

One area that teaching associations have noted in submissions on educational policies is the lack of attention played to subject-based professional learning. This remains an



important consideration in addressing challenging behaviour – confident, competent and knowledgeable teachers of a subject are best placed to develop engaging programs where their students can find success and can give greater attention to the challenges of meeting the needs of diverse student groups. We cannot continue to focus on professional learning on behaviour management in generalised terms.

**(i) how leading OECD countries with the highest disciplinary climate index rankings are delivering orderly classrooms to provide strategies on how to reduce distraction and disorder in Australian classrooms:**

The best OECD schools are generally perceived to be those such as Sweden and Singapore. In these countries, students start schooling at an older age when they are ready to learn. Teachers and schools are treated with respect by parents and community and receive higher salaries. Parents support teachers in discipline. Students are expected to have a strong work ethic and be respectful of their teachers.

However, it is acknowledged that this problem is not restricted to Australia. The United Kingdom and the United States have reported that classroom behaviour has deteriorated in recent years.