

## Inquiry into disruption in Australian school classrooms

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is pleased to provide a response to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee (the Committee) inquiry into disruption in Australian school classrooms.

### Background

NCEC is the peak body for Catholic Education in Australia and is responsible for the national coordination and representation of Catholic schools and school authorities.

Working collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, NCEC advocates through effective liaison with the federal, state and territory governments, and key national education bodies. Our role is to ensure the needs of Catholic schools are served through funding, legislation, and policy.

Our work is to foster a thriving Catholic education sector that offers parents a choice of, and affordable access to, faith-based education for their children. Catholic education continues to advocate for fair and inclusive funding that sustains both government and accessible faith-based schools across Australia.

Catholic schools are universal in reach and open to all families who seek a Catholic education. Australia's 1,759 Catholic schools educate one in five, or over 794,000 students and employ over 104,500 Australians. This makes Catholic schools the nation's largest provider of education outside government.

Catholic schools make a significant contribution to the educational, moral, and social fabric of this nation. Our schools ensure that parents can choose an affordable education that is consistent with Catholic beliefs, values, and teachings.

Our schools welcome students from a range of backgrounds including an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (up 195% since 2000). Students with disability represent almost 21% of Catholic school enrolment, and 42% of students experience socio-educational disadvantage. Almost 40% of Catholic schools are in regional and remote areas.

### Introduction

As the Terms of Reference for the current inquiry highlight, the issue of disruption in Australian school classrooms is one of increasing concern to teachers, school leaders, and school communities.

Disruption to teaching and learning has significant impact on students with the result of disadvantaging their ability to develop essential foundational skills to reach their full educational, economic, and social potential. Research recently undertaken by Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA), and submitted to this inquiry, indicates that the serious impact of disruption on student learning and wellbeing also has significant broader flow-on effects for parents and families.

This submission will focus on the following Terms of Reference:

- (b) the impacts, demands and experiences of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention*
- (e) the loss of instructional teacher time because of disorder and distraction in Australian school classrooms*
- (f) the impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students' learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined classrooms*

While the issue of disruption may be addressed in many ways, this submission primarily focuses on disruption through student behaviours that are not conducive to positive learning environments.

NCEC notes that other recent and current social and educational challenges, such as teacher shortages and retention, student wellbeing, and COVID 19, may also have a significant impact leading to the disruption of teaching and learning.

#### Response to Particular Terms of Reference

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

Teachers and other school staff need to feel safe and supported to undertake their role of teaching and supporting students academically, socially, and emotionally. When confronted with disruptive behaviours, aggression, or violence from students, this is compromised.

All teachers and school leaders need to have sufficient support to be able to manage disruptive behaviour. In NCEC's consultation, it was identified that support for schools in dealing with such challenging behaviour is insufficient with research and data showing that the need for such support is on the increase.

While recent studies have indicated that 80% of teachers feel a clear sense of belonging to the profession, only 3 in 10 teachers plan to remain in the profession.<sup>1</sup> This research revealed that two of the key concerns for Australian teachers were a lack of respect for the profession and the need for school communities to create a safe work environment.

These concerns are understandable given that almost 25% of respondents indicated they did not feel safe in their workplace; an increase from 19% over a 3-year period. Two significant reasons for feeling unsafe at work were student disruptive, disrespectful, and violent behaviours, parental abuse, bullying and harassment. Behaviours that were abusive, aggressive, violent, and threatening were all specifically named.

Another study suggests educators are at higher risk of assault injuries than other workers and were at elevated risk of mental health conditions, particularly in secondary education and special education. This analysis of Australian workers' compensation claims showed that educators claims were **2 ½ times** more likely to be for assault than those for non-educators.<sup>2</sup>

Further research indicates that school principals are **11 times** more likely to be subject to physical violence than the average Australian, with over half at risk of serious mental health concerns.<sup>3</sup>

Taken together, these research findings are deeply concerning for the safety, health, and wellbeing of educators. A common theme is that health and wellbeing concerns and their consequences are one of the main reasons for teachers and school leaders wanting to leave the profession.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Longmuir, F., Gallo Cordoba, B., Phillips, M., Allen, K. A., & Moharami, M. (2022) *Australian Teachers' Perceptions of their Work in 2022* [https://www.monash.edu/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/3061169/Teachers-Perceptions-of-their-Work-2022.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3061169/Teachers-Perceptions-of-their-Work-2022.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Al Afreed, F.M., Lane, T.J., Gray, S.E. (2022) *Work-related injuries in the Australian education sector: A retrospective cohort study* [https://www.injuryjournal.com/article/S0020-1383\(22\)00714-8/fulltext](https://www.injuryjournal.com/article/S0020-1383(22)00714-8/fulltext)

<sup>3</sup> Australian Catholic University. (2023) *Acute warning signs for Australian school principals' health, wellbeing, and longevity – ACU research* <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/news/2023/february/acute-warning-signs-for-australian-school-principals-health-wellbeing-and-longevity--acu-research>

<sup>4</sup> Longmuir, F., Gallo Cordoba, B., Phillips, M., Allen, K. A., & Moharami, M. (2022) *Australian Teachers' Perceptions of their Work in 2022* [https://www.monash.edu/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/3061169/Teachers-Perceptions-of-their-Work-2022.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3061169/Teachers-Perceptions-of-their-Work-2022.pdf)

The work strongly suggests that the impacts, demands and experiences of disorderly classrooms have a significant negative effect on teacher safety, work satisfaction, and workforce retention. The resultant staff turnover in turn can create significant disruption to teaching and learning in Australian classrooms.

The dignity of the human person and the right to safety at work are central principles in Catholic social teaching and have implications for the education provided in Catholic schools. Every human person has inherent dignity and worth.

Catholic education affirms the right of workers to safe and healthy working conditions and NCEC strongly supports comments by Education Ministers that any violence against school staff in any sector, at any time, is unacceptable.

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

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

As noted above, a safe and supportive work environment is widely recognised as a basic right,<sup>5</sup> and a poor working environment, potentially caused by poor order and behaviour in classrooms, has a significant impact on teachers and school leaders.

It is important to further note that a poor learning environment can also have a significant and long-lasting impact on the educational outcomes of students. An engaged and orderly classroom is necessary to ensure the best outcomes for all students. Disorder and distraction in the classroom leads to a loss of focus on teaching, which in turn has a consequent negative effect on student learning.

As the Terms of Reference highlight, international tests indicate that Australian teachers and students report disruptive and distracting behaviour to be a challenge. The results of the 2015 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that 43% of Australian students surveyed reported that their classrooms were noisy and disruptive. This was well above the average of 33% for other OECD countries.<sup>6</sup>

Disruption and distraction to classroom teaching and learning may come in many forms. In one recent study of South Australian educators, only 12.7% of teachers indicated that they could focus on educating students with minimal interruptions.<sup>7</sup>

Data from PISA also indicates that there has been a long-term decline in Australia's student learning outcomes. While the reasons for the decline in Australia's PISA results are complex, there is evidence that consistent and clear approaches to classroom behaviour support learning and positive student educational outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission. *Right to work and rights in work* <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/right-work-and-rights-work>

<sup>6</sup> Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., & Underwood, C. (2017) *PISA 2015: Reporting Australia's results*. Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). <https://research.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/22>

<sup>7</sup> Windle, J., Morrison, A., Sellar, S., Squires, R., Kennedy, J.P. & Murray, C. (2022) *Teachers at breaking point: Why working in South Australian schools is getting tougher* <https://www.unisa.edu.au/contentassets/f84cdb683dbb42a09ae08abc55bd9347/teachers-at-breaking-point-full-report.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Evidence for Learning. (2023) *Effective Behaviour Supports in Schools* <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/education-evidence/guidance-reports/effective-behaviour-supports-in-schools>

Initial teacher education and in-service teacher professional learning can play a significant role in ensuring that Australia's educators are equipped with the appropriate tools to address classroom management and behaviour in support of student learning outcomes.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has published a guide of evidence informed teaching practices for managing the classroom to maximise learning.<sup>9</sup> AERO's evidence guide provides the following Key Practices:

- Establish a system of rules and routines from day one.
- Explicitly teach and model appropriate behaviour.
- Hold all students to high standards.
- Actively engage students in their learning.

Maximising the use of evidence informed responses will equip teachers and schools with skills and strategies to manage classrooms and create learning environments best suited to equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to make meaningful contributions to their communities and the nation as a whole.

### Conclusion

High quality teaching and learning activities which support student outcomes and help them reach their full educational, economic, and social potential are the core business of Australia's schools. NCEC welcomes the focus of the Committee on this important area of education.

The issue of disruption in Australian school classrooms is one of increasing concern to teachers, school leaders, and school communities. Disruption to teaching and learning has significant impacts on students with the result of disadvantaging their ability to develop essential foundational skills.

Educators who are appropriately equipped with the skills to manage classroom behaviour will be in a good position to reduce distraction and disruption and focus on teaching and learning, which will support student learning and broader educational outcomes.

NCEC supports the Australian Government's intent to strengthen initial teacher education programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates who are well-equipped to deal with classroom behaviour. NCEC looks forward to working with the Australian and state and territory governments to develop and implement these initiatives.

Should you have any further questions in relation to this submission, please contact me via phone 02 8229 0808 or via email [jacinta.collins@ncec.catholic.edu.au](mailto:jacinta.collins@ncec.catholic.edu.au).

Yours faithfully



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Executive Director

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Education Research Organisation. (2021) *Managing the classroom to maximise learning* <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/focused-classrooms-practice-guide-full-publication>