

**Report:
Enhancing Responses to
Bullying in Queensland Schools**

**Dr Ken Rigby
Consultant**

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Report on the Consultancy on Enhancing Responses to Bullying in Queensland Schools

Purpose

The stated purpose of the consultancy as contracted with Queensland Government, was 'to provide current information around recent and current research, agendas and initiatives in the bullying landscape and inform the future development of DET frameworks, policy, approaches and resources'. The consultancy was undertaken between 14 September 2009 and 5 December 2009.

Process

1. Access was provided to published and draft materials written on behalf of the Department of Education and Training (DET) relating to the behaviour of students attending State schools in Queensland. These include a description of the Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) program being implemented in more than 200 schools. The program is directed towards helping schools to create positive learning environments by developing proactive whole-school systems to define, teach and support appropriate student behaviours. This program was introduced in Queensland in 2005. It is concerned broadly with reducing 'problem' behaviour among students, including bullying. It is accompanied by a set of guidelines for schools to follow in developing a Responsible Behaviour Plan for Students.
2. In addition, I was provided with draft materials that addressed in some detail the more specific question of how bullying could best be addressed in Queensland State schools. It was intended these materials be placed on the Web for schools to access.
3. Meetings were arranged to enable me to meet and discuss issues relating to bullying with personnel from Student Services Branch, state representatives from the Queensland Association of State School Principals Inc (QASSP), the Queensland Secondary Principals' Association (QSPA), the Queensland Council of Parents and Citizens Association Inc (QCPCA), Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) and the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC).
4. I attended and discussed issues at a meeting of the Statewide Behaviour Committee attended by the Minister for Education and Training.
5. I made presentations on bullying in schools at a meeting of the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian and at a conference arranged by Independent Schools Queensland attended by teachers and principals.
6. I attended a meeting of teachers and principals from a range of schools, both primary and secondary, at which the issue of how schools should respond to bullying was discussed.
7. I conducted a series of case studies of four schools in Queensland that agreed to discuss in detail what they were doing about bullying. (These include two State schools and two non-State schools (one Catholic, the other Independent)).
8. Finally, I was engaged to provide information on bullying for use by schools through the Web in the form of vodcasts and associated documentation.

Strengths and limitations of the consultancy

Participation in each of these activities enabled me to become informed about the work being undertaken by schools in Queensland in relation to bullying. It was possible for me to talk with a substantial number of stakeholders in a variety of meetings.

However, the limitations of this consultancy should be noted. Especially, the impression of what schools are doing is based upon information obtained from a small sample of schools

and these are not necessarily representative of all Queensland schools. The informants were staff members and not students. Parents of students attending the schools were not interviewed.

Conclusions

1. Guidance currently being provided to State schools in Queensland about bullying and the draft that had been produced to provide further information focussing on bullying need to be revised and supplemented in the light of a better understanding of the nature of bullying and how it can be best addressed, drawing upon mainstream evidence-based studies and improved intervention procedures.
2. The critique of the draft materials has been discussed with the Department of Education and Training (DET) and action will be taken on this advice. The main focus of discussions has been the need to ensure any information provided to schools must reflect the research literature on the subject and be inclusive of the many practices that are being used in schools, including those in many Queensland schools.
3. The Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) program contained some features that are helpful in countering bullying as well as other problem behaviours.
 - a. Importantly it encourages school staff to make clear to all students what is expected of them in their general behaviour and urges teachers to remind students continually of the need to behave responsibly.
 - b. It draws attention to the value of promoting positive bystander behaviour, on the grounds that bullying is often reinforced positively or negatively by how onlookers react.
 - c. It differentiates between what should be done in providing support for students according to their level of student need. It suggests that schools take a 'universal approach' in dealing with most students for whom giving helpful advice is generally sufficient; a more focussed approach to those seen to be 'at risk' - and a more concentrated approach still, for a small proportion of students for whom intensive treatment is needed. This model is also a highly relevant framework for prioritising the allocation of resources for dealing with bullying.
 - d. Finally it emphasises the value of positively reinforcing pro-social actions taken by students. In the area of bullying, encouraging and approving of behaviour that is incompatible with bullying - for example helpful and cooperative behaviour - is strongly recommended.
4. In much of the DET documentation on dealing with problem behaviour the assumption is that behaviour is essentially a consequence of contingencies of reinforcement and can be best modified through the use of reinforcement strategies. Whilst this approach is sometimes seen as necessary in bringing about compliance – and justifies the need for a disciplinary approach in some cases – it can discourage the use of alternative strategies when a different approach is more appropriate, for example in cases suitably treated by an application of restorative practice and the Method of Shared Concern. Many schools are adopting these methods of intervention for appropriate cases. A narrow conception of how behaviour can be influenced discourages their use.
5. There has been a steady growth worldwide among educators in viewing bullying as essentially a problem of relationships that are inappropriate and damaging to one or both parties. The use of reinforcing discrete positive or negative behaviours may in some cases - if surveillance is rigorous enough - prevent some bullying behaviour from continuing. However, it is unlikely to affect covert forms, such as deliberate exclusion and cyber bullying. These latter forms of bullying are now seen as the most damaging of all to the mental health of targeted children. Methods of intervention that seek to transform relationships, such as Circle Time and the Support Group Method do need to be acknowledged and explained to teachers.

6. I was much impressed during my visits to each of the Queensland schools by the industry, dedication and sheer inventiveness of what was being done to address bullying. As described in the accounts of the case studies, a number of features stood out:
 - a. The completeness with which the term bullying was defined - schools noted that it was not simply aggressive behaviour but repeatedly unfair behaviour in the context of an imbalance of power.
 - b. The recognition that other forms of undesirable interpersonal behaviour are often confused with bullying - these included conflict between children of equal power, non-malicious exclusion of some children, and random acts of aggressiveness. Getting staff, students and parents to appreciate these important distinctions and the need to intervene differentially according to the form of behaviour was a particularly important achievement at one school.
 - c. The employment of a range of curriculum activities and programs designed to promote healthy pro-social behaviour - this was a feature of all the schools.
 - d. Continual reaching out and involving parents - this was done in order to obtain their collaboration, for example, in policy development and to keep them informed about what the schools were doing to tackle problems of bullying and to obtain their support.
 - e. Careful record keeping - much attention at the schools was being paid to recording the nature of cases of bullying that came to their attention and who was involved. Record keeping was seen as a very important feature of the work of the schools.
7. The schools were mainly receptive to new ideas; staff were open to considering new ways of dealing with cases of bullying and introducing procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions.
8. Although coordinating activities involving members of staff in order to develop and implement anti-bullying strategies was, in some schools, exemplary, this was not always so.
9. Generally speaking, proactive work through classroom and camp activities was more developed than work on intervening in cases of bullying. Here the almost automatic response was to apply a disciplinary method involving school suspension until the student showed a willingness to take appropriate and acceptable steps to merit another chance. Yet schools were clearly open to learning more about what could be done in working with children who repeatedly bullied someone.
10. Probably the main shortcoming of the schools was the lack of a systematic procedure for evaluating outcomes after interventions in cases had taken place. This needs to be remedied before schools can discover, with confidence, what works at their school.
11. The consultancy focused, for the most part, on four schools. However, it is worth noting that there could be some advantage in schools working together in a cluster to determine some aspects of policy, for instance, in defining bullying. At the one meeting I attended in which representatives from State schools took part, an agreement was reached over what constituted the basic elements of bullying. An exchange and discussion of views from different schools was useful in reaching a consensus in this basic area.
12. Finally, although the number of schools sampled for the case studies was small, the quality of work being undertaken by the State and non-State schools did not appear to differ in their effectiveness. Much positive work to counter bullying, especially proactively, was evident in each of the schools. So too were deficiencies, especially in the inadequacy of evaluating what was being done.

The way forward

On the basis of my experience, over a period of 12 weeks, working with DET on issues related to bullying in schools I believe that improvements can be made in addressing school bullying.

But first I want to make several things clear. Research over the last 20 years or so in examining the effects of anti-bullying programs on the prevalence of bullying in schools has repeatedly shown that reducing bullying is far from easy. Reductions have generally been modest in size. To achieve significant progress in this area requires concentrated and well coordinated effort on the part of schools and informed guidance from educational authorities. I have worked with schools in every State in Australia and it is not my impression that Queensland schools are less dedicated or less effective in dealing with bullying than any other State or Territory. However, I do believe that a good deal of useful advice and guidance can be and should be provided by the Department of Education and Training and by other educational jurisdictions. This requires educators to draw upon the knowledge and experience derived from the research and associated anti-bullying programs that have become available in recent years. Contrary to unsubstantiated and alarmist claims that bullying is getting worse, progress is being made in countries around the world in actually reducing bullying to a significant degree. This can happen in Queensland.

Recommendations

1. Help to educate schools about bullying. Provide a broad framework within which an understanding of bullying and how it can be countered can be effectively addressed. This should be a framework that accommodates mainstream thinking about bullying and the range of intervention strategies that have been developed in recent years.
2. Encourage schools to differentiate between 'bullying' and other forms of undesirable interpersonal behaviour, such as random acts of aggression, conflicts between individuals of equal strength or power and the non-malicious exclusion of individuals. The definition of bullying needs to be made clear in order that appropriate action can be taken.
3. Consistent with the SWPBS require that schools set out the expectations of the school in relation to bullying behaviour and advise students on what steps they can take if they are bullied and what action will be taken by the school if cases of bullying occur.
4. Provide suggestions on what elements or features can usefully be included in a school anti-bullying policy.
5. As in some other Australian States, such as NSW and SA, require schools to produce an anti-bullying policy which must be reported on each year.
6. Suggest steps that may be taken in the development of such a policy to take advantage of feedback from stakeholders including parents. This would help in bringing about necessary positive and committed support for the implementation of policy.
7. Inform and educate school staff so that they become aware of current thinking and practices in addressing bullying, both proactively through working with students in classrooms and by means of interventions when bullying takes place. To this end encourage the use of PD sessions devoted to training staff, especially in the use of the most appropriate intervention method to fit the case. This would involve promoting the six vodcasts and associated resources on school bullying that I helped to develop in collaboration with Education Queensland for use in Queensland schools during 2010.
8. Strongly promote the use of evaluative procedures to discover what has been achieved following interventions in cases.
9. Encourage schools to place their anti-bullying policy on the web, especially for the benefit of parents.

10. Ensure that the best advice on countering bullying in schools is continually available to the Department. Following the South Australian model, this could include representatives from the State, Independent and Catholic sectors in a Coalition to Counter Bullying and Violence in Schools. It could also include, as committee members or guests, individuals with relevant research and/or counselling experience in the area, drawing upon academic institutions and other relevant bodies. Parent representation on the committee should also be considered.
11. Evaluate and report upon the effectiveness of a small sample of selected Queensland schools in reducing the prevalence of bullying following the introduction of specific anti-bullying programs.
12. Urge the Minister of Education and Training to review what is included on addressing bullying in schools in mandatory professional programs for pre-service teachers and make recommendations on what is to be covered.

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