

Respectful relationships education in primary schools pilot



Summary of key findings and opportunities

Schools play an important role in assisting to prevent domestic and family violence. Respectful relationships education (RRE) helps to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to establish and maintain healthy, non-violent, equitable relationships.

Building respectful relationships

From 2017 to 2019, the Department of Education partnered with Our Watch, an independent not-for-profit organisation, to pilot a whole-school approach to respectful relationships education in primary school settings.

A whole-school approach to respectful relationships education includes recognising that schools are not just places of education, but also workplaces and community hubs. Schools have the opportunity to positively impact students, school staff, families and the wider school community.

Currently, state schools provide respectful relationships education through the Australian Curriculum and through school pastoral care programs. Schools may also use the Queensland *Respectful relationships education program* (the Queensland program), external respectful relationships education resources and locally developed respectful relationships education materials.

About the pilot

The focus of the pilot was on implementing and evaluating a whole-school approach to respectful relationships education that aims to prevent gender-based violence, focusing on Years 1 and 2.

The six key components in this whole-school approach involved examining, engaging and building:

- leadership and commitment
- professional learning
- teaching and learning
- families and community
- support for staff and students
- school culture and environment.

The pilot also examined systemic considerations for increasing take-up of respectful relationships education in Queensland.

The pilot was undertaken in 10 south-east Queensland and eight Victorian primary schools. Training and support was provided by the Our Watch project officer to school leaders, school staff and Years 1 and 2 teachers to implement a whole-school approach.

Ten hours of instruction were provided to Years 1 and 2 students. Lesson materials were drawn from the Queensland program and from the Victorian Department of Education and Training *Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships* materials (the Victorian learning materials).

Pilot materials were tailored to be age-appropriate for young children and included examining gender roles and stereotypes. Students were asked questions about what jobs, toys and activities they considered suitable for boys and/or girls.

Pilot evaluation methods

For staff in all 10 pilot schools, pre and post surveys on perceptions of school culture, participation in respectful relationships education and gender

equality were collected. School leaders and Years 1 and 2 teachers were also surveyed on the impact of specialised, professional development.

Two schools were identified as case study schools. Students in the case study schools participated in the *Building Respectful Relationships Student Survey*. This pre and post survey examined students' attitudes towards gender roles and stereotypes.

Researchers observed classroom lesson delivery with Year 2 students in the two case study schools. Case study school staff participated in focus groups to gather reflections on their experiences of implementing respectful relationships education.

Parents of Years 1 and 2 students from the case study schools were provided with the opportunity to participate in an online survey to examine their understanding of respectful relationships education. Unfortunately, completion rates for this survey were limited.

Key findings

In September 2020, the finalised *Respectful relationships education to prevent violence against women: Lessons from a pilot in Queensland primary schools* (the Queensland Report) was provided to the department.

The Queensland Report identified a number of key findings, listed below.

Curriculum

Explicit teaching of age-appropriate, gendered content in Years 1 and 2, within a whole-school approach, correlated with improvements to students' gendered attitudes.

Whole-school approach

A whole-school approach to respectful relationships education requires a long-term commitment to allow schools enough time to pursue all components of this approach, beyond teaching and learning.

Professional learning

Staff saw professional learning as an important enabler to implementing respectful relationships education and in building commitment and knowledge.

Professional learning allowed staff to explore their personal positioning in relation to gender and

applying this lens to their school.

It also helped build teacher confidence in delivering the curriculum.

Supporting student wellbeing and effective community partnerships

While some staff reported confidence in responding to students' disclosures of violence, others requested professional development on the topic.

Parent and family engagement

While limited, the parent data available indicated a high level of support for and interest in respectful relationships education. Staff indicated that parents and families are an important audience for schools to consider in their implementation of respectful relationships education.

Resistance

Schools that participated in the pilot displayed very positive school cultures in relation to respectful relationships education, however, some resistance and misunderstanding about discussing gender roles and the gendered focus of respectful relationships education was evident in the pilot.

Workforce

Data collected from the two case study schools revealed that schools need the support and guidance of a skilled workforce to implement a whole-school approach to respectful relationships education.

School readiness and commitment

Strong commitment of schools and leaders to respectful relationships education was a key enabler.

Beyond the pilot, a planned approach to increasing respectful relationships education take-up and integrating respectful relationships education implementation within school and departmental structures and processes will be important.

Communication and messaging

School and departmental stakeholders noted that media coverage and misinformation about respectful relationships education can have the potential to undermine the implementation and broader take-up of respectful relationships education.

Evaluation and monitoring

While attitude change – particularly in participating Years 1 and 2 students – was evidenced, the pilot timeframes did not allow longer term progress or sustainability of the whole-school approach to be assessed.

Broader prevention of violence against women

School and departmental stakeholders identified that respectful relationships education sits within a broader program of work within communities and systems.

Work to shift gender stereotypical attitudes, norms and structures undertaken by schools and the department must be complemented by work in the public service and broader community.

Key opportunities for strengthening respectful relationships education implementation

The Queensland Report identified 17 opportunities to strengthen respectful relationships education delivery in Queensland state schools.

Curriculum

1. Consider adopting the teaching and learning materials, developed as part of the Years 1 and 2 pilot, that address the drivers of gender-based violence.
2. With support from prevention experts, regularly review respectful relationships education curriculum materials to ensure they reflect best-practice prevention of gender-based violence. While this pilot suggests the Victorian learning materials were effective (specifically units on gender and identity), it may be necessary to pilot and tailor these to a wider range of Queensland schools.
3. To ensure the greatest impact on students' attitudes and beliefs, it is recommended that age-appropriate teaching and learning materials that address the drivers of gender-based violence are delivered every year, in each classroom, across each year level, on a regular and consistent basis by the classroom teacher.

Whole-school approach

4. Consideration be given to resourcing schools to establish implementation teams who can lead a whole-school approach to respectful relationships education.

Professional learning

5. With support from departmental staff, schools develop an ongoing professional learning strategy for teaching and non-teaching staff that addresses:
 - key concepts such as gender, the gender lens, gender equality/inequality, gender-based violence, and how these concepts translate in a school and workplace context
 - a whole-school approach to respectful relationships education, including an implementation cycle that facilitates continual improvement and measurement of intended outcomes
 - support for dealing with staff, student and family disclosure of domestic and family violence that involves domestic and family violence service expertise. Professional development on responding to student disclosure is delivered prior to respectful relationships education program delivery
 - systematic sharing of good-practice approaches between schools.
6. Prior to classroom delivery, where possible, provide comprehensive professional learning to teaching staff to enable them to deliver respectful relationships education curriculum materials in a safe and supportive environment, with the support of their peers.

Supporting student wellbeing and effective community partnerships

7. Noting that discussion or disclosure of domestic and family violence can impact staff, ensure mechanisms, including access to employee assistance programs, domestic violence services and family support services, are in place to support staff outside the school setting.
8. Schools are encouraged to engage, where necessary, with external organisations and

agencies to support professional learning about respectful relationships education and responses to staff or student disclosures.

Parent and family engagement

9. Support schools to engage with families and community groups as part of their whole-school approach to respectful relationships education. This could be by developing:
 - resources to engage those stakeholders at the school readiness stage of implementation
 - a communications strategy and templates for schools with clear messages for internal and external stakeholders at key points.

Resistance

10. Support schools to develop their understanding of resistance and integrate a response plan into their whole-school approach as part of the school readiness stage of implementing respectful relationships education.

Workforce

11. Develop respectful relationships education implementation knowledge and skills in regional offices. Consideration may be given to employing respectful relationships education and prevention experts to support professional development and respectful relationships education implementation in every region.

School readiness and commitment

12. Develop an implementation strategy to increase respectful relationships education take-up that has a staged approach and allows for schools to opt in. Assessing school readiness and planning for respectful relationships education can take up to a year.
13. Provide school leaders with support to plan for the implementation of respectful relationships education. This could include budgeting, staff resourcing, professional development, curriculum mapping and providing evidence-based tools and resources to assist in self-assessment and action planning.
14. School leaders are encouraged to use processes such as school strategic and annual implementation plans to articulate outcome

measures and goals for respectful relationships education.

Communications and messaging

15. Develop a communications strategy for government, media and broader community stakeholders on respectful relationships education. Engage in dialogue with key stakeholders on why schools implement respectful relationships education, what's involved and with what results.

Evaluation and monitoring

16. Establish school-level and state-wide evaluation mechanisms to monitor uptake of respectful relationships education, measure outcomes and longitudinal change.

Broader prevention of violence against women work

17. Government departments implement strategies for staff and the broader community to address the gendered drivers of violence against women and reinforce and support the work of schools. Strategies could include:
 - a whole-of-government program to deliver messaging to the community on preventing violence against women
 - providing professional development, particularly to staff supporting schools, on preventing violence against women.

Key outcomes in response to the pilot

- In 2019, the department specified that Queensland state schools were required to provide health and wellbeing education, including respectful relationships education, as part of the Australian Curriculum or as part of the school's pastoral care program.
- Communications to principals and school staff reinforcing the requirement to provide respectful relationships education and promotion of the Queensland program.
- In 2020, the department established a Respectful Relationships Education Advisory Group of key stakeholders to consider and respond to opportunities within the Queensland Report.

- Development of an online training program that provides a model for implementing a whole-school approach to respectful relationships education and addresses the gendered-drivers of domestic and family violence.

Next steps underway

- Reviewing the Queensland program to enhance and align this resource with best-practice respectful relationships education teaching and learning materials.
- Examining the Queensland program with a view to strengthening content on sexual consent and reporting of sexual assault.
- Consulting with key state and non-government education and other stakeholders to determine whether Queensland's existing educational materials adequately address sexual consent and reporting and to identify opportunities to strengthen these resources.
- Seeking advice on sexual consent and reporting education from students through the Ministerial Student Advisory Council.
- Consulting with the Respectful Relationships Education Advisory Group on actions to enhance respectful relationships, sexual consent and reporting education.
- Planning for the provision of professional development to key regional staff to support implementation of respectful relationships education in schools.
- Developing resources and tools to support schools with enhancing respectful relationships education.
- Identifying mechanisms and gathering data indicating respectful, safe and equitable school communities and quality respectful relationships education delivery.

For more information about the Government's reform agenda on ending domestic, family and sexual violence visit www.qld.gov.au/enddomesticandfamilyviolence

A copy of Our Watch's *Respectful relationships education to prevent gender-based violence – Lessons from a multi-year pilot in primary schools* evaluation report can be found on Our Watch's website (<https://education.ourwatch.org.au/resource/rre-final-evaluation-report/>).