

13 April 2023

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**Australian Psychological Society submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry about the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms**

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Parliamentary inquiry about the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms.

The APS is the peak professional body for psychologists in Australia, representing over 28,000 members nationally. Working to improve the lives of all Australians is our core business. The APS advocates on behalf of our members and the community for the implementation of evidence-informed prevention, early intervention and treatment approaches and systemic reforms that promote health and wellbeing for all.

As noted in the Terms of Reference (TOR) (a), a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report<sup>1</sup> has highlighted the declining ranking of Australia in the disciplinary climate index, making Australian classrooms amongst the world's most disorderly. For most OECD countries, classroom discipline improved between 2009 and 2018, whereas Australia was one of a minority of countries where discipline deteriorated.

As per TORs (b), (c), (d) (e), (f) and (g), OECD and other research data have identified concerning impacts of disruptive classrooms for teachers and students including<sup>1-3</sup>:

- Compared to other OECD countries, a higher proportion of Australian students report that the teacher has to wait a long time for students to settle down, that students cannot work well and that they do not start learning for a long time after the lesson begins.
- Compared to their OECD peers, Australian teachers report feeling less prepared for, or capable of, managing disruptive classroom behaviour,
- New graduate teachers find it especially challenging to manage classrooms and disruptive behaviour, and
- Disruptive behaviour is one of the reasons associated with teacher attrition.

Disruptive behaviour in classrooms is the result of numerous factors, including individual, systemic and sociocultural issues. Tackling disruptive behaviour in Australian classrooms will, therefore, require a sustained, multi-pronged and cross-jurisdictional approach that includes, but extends beyond a focus on teachers and classrooms. We highlight below evidence-informed approaches that can begin to address the increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms in the short to medium term.

## **Resource the sustained implementation of evidence-informed whole school approaches**

Revising initial teacher education and models of ongoing professional learning and the development of national teacher guidelines can help to better equip all teachers to develop the preventive and intervention skills needed to effectively manage classrooms and disruptive behaviour<sup>2,4-7</sup>. However, teachers alone should not be expected to solve the growing problem of disruptive behaviour in Australian classrooms.

The APS is a strong advocate for the implementation of evidence-informed whole school, multi-tiered approaches to addressing disruptive behaviour and other learning, mental health and wellbeing concerns in schools that are often comorbid with disruptive behaviour problems. Improved educational outcomes are associated with sustained whole school approaches that have internally coordinated tiers of health promotion, targeted prevention, and early intervention support and connect with external and community support systems<sup>8-11</sup>. Whole school approaches also prompt schools to address policies, procedures and practices that can help to prevent disruptive behaviour occurring in schools and classrooms.

However, educators face a confusing and disjointed proliferation of poorly evaluated approaches, programs and services, and often lack the resources and supports to select effective options suitable for their school context<sup>12,13</sup>. There are numerous toolkits, planning templates and program databases across the various federal and state jurisdictions and educational sectors, which add to the confusion.

Cross-jurisdictional collaboration and investment is urgently needed to develop a national approach to:

- Providing resources and access to supports that guide all Australian schools towards selecting and implementing evidence-informed approaches, programs and practices for addressing disruptive behaviour and associated learning, mental health and wellbeing issues, and
- implementing a system for ensuring school funding is directed towards evidence-informed programs and practices and supports and services with high levels of expertise.

## **Improve literacy levels as a preventive approach to managing disruptive behaviours in classrooms and schools**

Poor literacy and learning difficulties are associated with academic struggles, learner disengagement and disruptive behaviour<sup>14-16</sup>. The OECD has flagged the declining literacy levels of Australian students over the last two decades finding that in 2018, 59% of Australian students attained reading proficiency, down from 69% in 2000<sup>17</sup>. Other research and NAPLAN data indicates that nearly 25% of Year 7 students do not have the required numeracy and literacy skills<sup>18</sup>, while about one in four Indigenous children in Years 5, 7 and 9, and one in five in Year 3 do not reach national minimum standards in reading<sup>19</sup>.

Literacy learning practices and support varies across jurisdictions throughout Australia. Concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of literacy instruction practices in some jurisdictions and lack of identification and supports for students with learning difficulties<sup>20-22</sup>.

Given the clear link between literacy, learner disengagement and disruptive behaviour, and the cascade of poor outcomes associated with poor literacy throughout the school years and into adulthood, the APS calls for urgent cross-jurisdictional collaboration and investment to improve the literacy levels of Australian school students by:

- delivering a nationally consistent evidenced-informed approach to improving the literacy of Australian school students in primary and secondary schools, and
- implementing a robust system of identification and support for students with learning difficulties, including effective national screening and assessment tools, access to supports with expertise in learning difficulties and resources and training for teachers and schools.

## **Increase access to a highly skilled psychology workforce within schools**

Psychologists have training and skills that enable them to partner with and coach school leaders and teachers in the design, implementation, and evaluation of effective, evidence-based, whole school for managing disruptive behaviour, and comorbid mental health, wellbeing and learning concerns, as raised above<sup>23</sup>. Psychologists also have specific skills in assessment and intervention and can provide direct support to students and their families when indicated.

Although ratios vary across Australian educational jurisdictions, estimates are that there is only about one school psychologist to every 1500 students<sup>24</sup>. This workforce ratio prevents many psychologists based in schools from working to their full scope of practice as described. With high numbers of students to serve, school psychologists' work must often focus on the more complex cases.

The number of fully trained psychologists available to work in and with schools could be scaled up within a short time frame of 2-3 years – with the right investment in postgraduate university training, sponsored school placements (particularly in rural and remote areas) and quality professional supervision. Dedicated university places and scholarships to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in school psychology roles is a priority. Investing in psychologists in schools will deliver immediate benefits for addressing disruptive behaviour in schools and classrooms and ensure future workforce supply of psychologists with school experience<sup>23</sup>.

There are some state-based models that have seen increased investment in the school psychology workforce. But more government funding is needed now to ensure expert advice and support is available to all Australian schools as they tackle the issue of increasing levels of disruption in the classroom.

If any further information is required from the APS, I would be happy to be contacted through the national office on (03) 8662 3300 or by email at [z.burgess@psychology.org.au](mailto:z.burgess@psychology.org.au)

Kind regards,

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*The APS would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank the members who so kindly contributed their time and evidence-informed knowledge, experience and research to this submission.*

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