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Dear Review Co-chairs,

APS response to the Department of Education Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Education Anti-Bullying Rapid Review. We commend the Australian Government's commitment to establishing and funding this important initiative, which seeks to identify what is working well and what needs strengthening in current responses to bullying in schools. The review's purpose, to inform the development of a consistent national standard for responding to bullying and addressing its underlying causes, is a critical step toward ensuring that all children and young people, regardless of where they go to school, are supported in environments that are safe, inclusive and equipped to help prevent and respond to harm.

About the APS

The APS is the leading professional association for psychologists in Australia. We are committed to advancing the science, ethical practice and application of psychology to promote health and wellbeing, empowering individuals, organisations and communities to reach their full potential. Our work is informed by United Nations human rights treaties and conventions¹ and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)². We advocate for a fair, inclusive and environmentally sustainable world, recognising the evidence that national and global prosperity, now and in the future, hinges on prioritising the wellbeing of people and planet³.

Psychologists are highly trained, regulated health professionals known for their evidence-based, person-centred approach. They work across diverse health and community settings, including primary care, community mental health, hospitals, justice settings, workplaces, and importantly for this Rapid Review, schools. In school settings, psychologists play a vital role in preventing and intervening early in bullying and related harms. They support students directly, while also advising staff about safe, inclusive learning environments and evidenced-based programs. Beyond their roles within schools, psychologists also contribute to research, education and policy leadership—ensuring that anti-bullying efforts are grounded in evidence to drive meaningful, lasting improvements in school culture and student wellbeing.

Turning Investment into Impact: Strengthening the School Psychologist Workforce for Anti-Bullying Success

Bullying has serious and lasting impacts on young people's mental health, learning and wellbeing, affecting not only those directly involved but also peers, families and broader school communities, as highlighted in the Rapid Review consultation paper⁴. Yet, despite the breadth of programs, resources and funding currently in place (as discussed in the accompanying terms of reference paper⁵), students, families and educators often find existing anti-bullying supports overwhelming, inconsistent and difficult to navigate. This suggests an urgent need for a more coordinated and embedded approach to anti-bullying prevention and response within school communities.

National data and research further indicate that reports of bullying continue to rise, with some cohorts being especially vulnerable, such as First Nations students, and students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or have disabilities⁶⁻⁸, suggesting that current approaches are not reaching all students effectively or equitably^{4,5}.

The critical need for a more impactful approach is further underscored by a recent systematic review and meta-analysis estimating that over 8% of Australia's annual mental health expenditure is attributable to bullying victimisation during childhood and adolescence⁹—highlighting the substantial and ongoing societal cost of inaction.

Psychologists in schools provide precisely the kind of support and professional expertise needed to translate investment into meaningful outcomes. Psychologists bring expertise into the heart of school communities, helping to integrate, co-ordinate, tailor and deliver evidence-based anti-bullying strategies that are developmentally appropriate, context-sensitive and accessible for students, staff and families. They bring value not only through direct support to students, but also as system-level change agents—strengthening school-wide capacity for anti-bullying prevention, early intervention and sustained cultural change.

At the system level, which is an often under-recognised aspect of their role, school psychologists are well placed to support whole-school anti-bullying approaches^{10,11} by:

- **Guiding whole-school policy and wellbeing strategies**, ensuring that anti-bullying approaches are evidence-informed, co-ordinated and aligned with the unique context of each school community, and tailored to meet the needs of students, including students with disabilities and those who identify as First Nations, LGBTIQ+, culturally and linguistically diverse or who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.
- **Providing expert guidance about evidence-based programs** that build social-emotional skills, mental health literacy, respectful relationship skills, and help-seeking behaviours—all of which are protective factors that reduce the likelihood of bullying and strengthen students' capacity to navigate conflict and seek support.
- **Building staff capability** through consultation, coaching and professional learning, particularly in trauma-informed practice, inclusive behaviour support, creating psychologically safe environments, and responding effectively to bullying-related issues.
- **Using data to monitor** wellbeing trends, evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies, and support the co-ordination of whole-school approaches, ensuring continuous improvement at the student, school and system level.
- **Partnering with families and communities** to strengthen protective factors, promote inclusion and create consistent messages that discourage bullying and support respectful behaviour across school, home and community environments.

At the individual level, the more widely recognised aspect of their role, school psychologists provide direct support to students by:

- **Developing and delivering targeted interventions** for students who have experienced bullying, those engaging in bullying and bystanders—addressing the psychosocial drivers and impacts across all groups.
- **Identifying and responding early to signs of psychological distress**, including those experienced by victims of bullying, perpetrators and bystanders, to prevent the escalation of distress into more serious mental health concerns, behavioural issues, school disengagement or longer-term harm.
- **Providing trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate care and referral** that is culturally safe and non-stigmatising, supporting students affected by bullying, whether as targets, perpetrators or bystanders, to recover, re-engage and build resilience.
- **Conducting comprehensive assessments** to identify learning, behavioural and emotional needs that may increase vulnerability to, or involvement in, bullying, and to inform tailored support that reduces risk and promotes wellbeing.

Despite this vital role, there remains a significant shortfall in the number of school psychologists across Australian jurisdictions, with limited data, and reports from our members, indicating that many schools are operating well above the recommended student-to-psychologist ratio one psychologist for every 500 students¹². This shortage is particularly pronounced in rural, regional and disadvantaged communities. This shortfall persists even though the Productivity Commission in 2020 recommended a benchmark of one school psychologist for every 500 students¹³— a standard the APS has long advocated for to ensure equitable and timely access to psychological support in schools (see our [Psychologists in Schools](#) position statement).

Recommendations

To ensure anti-bullying efforts are co-ordinated, accessible and effective, the APS urges the adoption of the Productivity Commission's 2020 recommendation of one school psychologist for every 500 students and recommends that this benchmark be embedded as a core component of the proposed national anti-bullying standard.

To support the development and implementation of a national standard, jurisdictions must also commit to fully resourcing an expanded school psychology workforce to ensure that the national approach is not only well designed but effectively implemented in every school community. The APS recommends:

- Embedding psychologists in all primary and secondary schools, funded to meet the 1:500 benchmark, to ensure consistent, proactive and responsive support for bullying prevention, as well as continuing to provide ongoing support for other student mental health, behaviour and learning concerns.
- Improving national data collection and transparency, including consistent reporting on the number and distribution of school psychologists, access to support from a psychologist, and student wellbeing outcomes, to inform continuous improvement and workforce planning.
- Expanding training and supervision pathways, including school-based placements for provisional and early-career psychologists, particularly in partnership with regional universities to build a sustainable workforce.
- Ensuring high-quality professional support for school psychologists, with particular emphasis on access to professional supervision to support ethical, safe and effective practice, manage workload demands, and reduce the risk of professional isolation—especially in smaller or remote school settings.

Investment in school psychologists is not only a sound education and health strategy—it is a vital anti-bullying measure. Expanding the school psychology workforce is a practical, scalable and high-impact way to strengthen the coherence and impact of existing investments and efforts to reduce bullying and its long-term effects, enhance whole-school culture and ensure that wherever a child goes to school, they are supported to feel safe, included and able to thrive.

We consent to this letter and our response being made publicly available. Further, we would welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with the Rapid Review team and the Department of Education to support the process towards the development and implementation of a national anti-bullying standard. The APS is well placed to contribute to this work, drawing on the psychological expertise of our members and our strong track record in evidence-based prevention and intervention.

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.

Yours sincerely



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Chief Executive Officer

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