

Bullying and Violence in Schools – Review of DECS

By Sara Barila

On February 7, 2011 a student assault was filmed by students at Craigmore High School, and uploaded to the Internet. On February 10, local and national television news services aired video footage of the assault. In light of public questioning of the policies, procedures and processes in DECS, the Minister for Education commissioned a review into DECS' response to the incident. In May 2011 the Cossey report was published, and in July DECS released their response.

The Cossey report states that although the overall incidence of bullying is not increasing, and face to face bullying is in decline, cyber bullying is increasing. More than 80% of students who have bullied or been bullied, have been involved in both face to face and cyber bullying. According to the report, face to face bullying starts in the early years of primary school, peaks at the transition between primary and high school, and then declines. Alternately, cyber bullying gains momentum throughout secondary school. The report estimates that cyber bullying is increasing at a rate of 2% per year, and that bullying involving photographic material is growing at a faster rate than other forms of cyber bullying.

Alarmingly, more than 85% of cyber bullying is witnessed by cyber bystanders.

The report also notes that since the introduction of cyber bullying, exclusion and suspension of students from school may mean that whilst a student is physically isolated from the school environment, they are able to remain in constant contact with their fellow students (and potentially, keep bullying) via mobile phones and the Internet.

Teachers

Students with disabilities are increasingly attending mainstream schools, making up to 10% of DECS school students. The

report states that these students are likely to require "even more vigilance on the part of teaching staff if they are to be relatively free of bullying and harassment." The report mentions that the number and range of students with disabilities is significantly testing both teachers' skills and confidence. The report suggests that teacher training has not equipped teachers with the necessary skills to relate appropriately to students with disabilities and to advise other students on how to relate. Bullying of Aboriginal students also requires sensitive responses, as it is more likely to involve bullying between Aboriginal students.

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Recommendations

The report makes 14 recommendations. In July, Education Minister Jay Weatherill pledged that the State Government would adopt all of the report's recommendations. They include:

- That DECS State Office continue to encourage schools to implement preventative programs aimed at improving the capacity of students to deal with bullying, and to assist funding of such programs.
- That the DECS Duty of Care policy be updated and reissued to emphasise the importance of all schools keeping records of all incidents.
- That SAPOL and DECS continue to maximise the involvement of SAPOL Community Police in the operation of programs aimed to minimise and prevent violence in schools.

It is also recommended that the Minister:

- Request that the topic of bullying behaviour be a standing item on the agenda of each meeting of each school Governing Council.
- Require all schools to develop and publish a specific anti-bullying policy and conduct an annual review in relation to cyber bullying and the school's IT policies.

The report also advises that DECS note the desire of principals to receive media training. ■

