Fostering inclusivity in public schools



Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSC) is a national coalition of organisations that aims to reduce homophobia and transphobia in Australian schools, and to create safe and inclusive school environments for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, school staff and families. SSC are dedicated to creating environments where all students, teachers and families can feel safe and be themselves. All students need to feel included at school – only then can they be engaged with school and do well.

SSCA is federally funded by Australian Government Department of Education and Training and convened nationally by Foundation for Young Australians (FYA).

Safe Schools Coalition Western Australia (SSCWA) joined the national coalition in September 2015, with only the Northern Territory to follow before Safe Schools Coalition is operational in each Australian state and territory.

The WA AIDS Council is FYA's partner agency in Western Australia.

Vice President Samantha Schofield said the SSTUWA has already signed a pledge to support the mission of the SSC.

"We believe that schools should provide a safe and inclusive environment for all students, so that they can learn, grow, and reach their full potential – free from bullying and discrimination," she said.

"We pledge to stand up against homophobia and transphobia whenever we see or hear it. We are proud to support Safe Schools Coalition Australia and its work to create positive change for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students and the whole school community."

The creation of the Safe Schools Coalition

Safe Schools Coalition Victoria was founded in 2010. In 2013 FYA was funded by the Federal Government Department of Education and Training to build on the Victorian model to introduce the program Australia-wide from 2014.

It was also tasked with sub-contracting service delivery partners to run the program in every Australian state and territory. The SSC is funded nationally for three years until June 2017.

"SSC is aligned with the vision of the National Safe Schools Framework to ensure that all Australian schools are safe,

supportive and respectful teaching and learning communities that promote student wellbeing," said SSCWA Senior Project Officer Olivia Knowles (pictured on the right in photo).

The coalition works in accordance with national anti-discrimination legislation that provides greater protections for same-sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse people.

"Every school in Australia has same-sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students with around 10 per cent of Australian young people being same sex attracted, 1.7 per cent intersex and 5 per cent gender diverse," Ms Knowles said,

"National and international research shows that a supportive and inclusive school environment is essential for all students to be healthy and happy and achieve their potential."

Australian research involving over 3,000 same sex attracted young people in 2010 found that:

- 75 per cent had experienced some form of homophobic bullying or abuse.
- 61 per cent had experienced verbal abuse.
- 18 per cent had experienced physical abuse, of which 80 per cent reported that this abuse and bullying had been experienced while they were at school.

"As a result of these experiences of homophobia, 21 per cent said they had missed classes or days at school and 8 per cent said they had dropped out of school all together," Ms Knowles said.

"These figures present us with a real and meaningful opportunity to contribute to positive change in schools and existing school bullying policies are not enough.

"Sexual diversity, gender identity and being intersex are not necessarily visible forms of diversity and therefore schools may not find it as easy to meet the needs of these students without specific guidance and actions."

SSCA achievements have included (as of 13 November):

- Over 460 schools across seven states and territories have voluntarily joined the coalition.
- Training has been delivered to over 13 000 school staff
- Over 50,000 resources have been delivered to schools to create safer environments
- Public messages of support have been given by several State and Territory Ministers for Education, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioners.
- 75 organisations have publicly pledged their support for the program including headspace, beyondblue, parent organisations, the Australian Education Union, Wesley Mission, universities and Equal Opportunity Commissions.

What the SSC can provide

SSCA is available to support all Australian schools, staff, students and families. SSC works with schools across the government, independent and Catholic sector, in metropolitan and regional WA.

School membership and engagement with the coalition is voluntary and all the services and resources provided are free and used at the discretion of each school.

Individual schools can have their needs tailored. For example, a school can request:

- Tailored professional development for all or some staff.
- Printed and digital resources for staff and students.
- Guidance on creating supportive and inclusive school policies.
- Assistance in setting up and developing student led activities to create change.
- Tools to better understand their unique school climate and measure the impact of change.
- Guidance on inclusive practice in all teaching and learning areas.
- Support for schools in the process of affirming the gender identity of a transgender or gender diverse student.

"We can provide staff and student surveys prior to training which seek to further understand the needs and experiences of each school," Ms Knowles said.

"These surveys address the staff and student perceptions, knowledge and experiences so that we can get a clearer picture of what is happening within that school environment. The surveys are quick and confidential and administered online.

"All our print resources and training materials have been approved by the Australian Government."

Resources can be viewed online at http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/resources and ordered free through SSCWA.

Joining the SSC in WA

As of 13 November there are 13 member schools in WA and nationally SSCA has 463 member schools.

These schools include primary and secondary schools as well as independent, Catholic and government schools.

To join SSCWA schools need a key contact that is dedicated to the aims of SSCA and supporting diversity within their school.

Schools also require a principal's signature and support to join. Membership forms can be found at: http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/safe-school...

"We are aiming to engage with a diverse range of schools across WA, to understand the needs and support required by schools in both metropolitan settings and also regional and remote settings," Ms Knowles said.

"In September 2015 we participated in training conducted by Safe Schools Coalition Victoria along with other key stakeholders in WA, including the SSTUWA."

For more information

Check out Safe schools do better, an introductory guide to supporting gender diversity, intersex and sexual diversity in schools. It includes definitions, key research that underpins the program, practical information about how to create change, and how to get started. It can be accessed at: http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/safe-school...

Look through Guide to Kickstarting your safe school. It contains practical ideas for schools to take a stand against homophobia and transphobia and actively support gender diversity and sexual diversity. http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/guide-to-ki...

Regularly visit the news and events page of Safe Schools Coalition website and subscribe to the SSCA newsletter to receive monthly updates: http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/news-events

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