Your safety is paramount

In November 2022, the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms was referred to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee to inquire and report on a range of matters, including:

- The declining ranking of Australia in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) disciplinary climate index, making Australian classrooms amongst the world's most disorderly.
- The impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention.
- Teachers' views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them.
- The robustness, quality and extent of initial teacher education to equip teachers with skills and strategies to manage classrooms.
- The impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students' learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined classrooms.
- How leading OECD countries with the highest disciplinary climate index rankings are delivering orderly classrooms to provide strategies on how to reduce distraction and disorder in Australian classrooms.

The final report noted the impact of challenging behaviours on teachers maintaining order in the classroom, the impact on teacher safety, work satisfactions and retention.

The report also included a survey conducted of 5,000 teachers in 2022 by Monash University and found that there was an increase in teachers feeling unsafe at work mainly due to student behaviour. It found:

"Disorderly classrooms that are characterised by abuse, aggression, or threatening student behaviours, can impact teacher work satisfaction and retention, particularly when teachers feel unsupported in managing these challenging situations. Teachers also felt pressure from needing to make difficult decisions about protecting other students impacted by other student behaviour. Often, this involves potentially putting themselves at risk and exposing themselves to abuse from parents."

Findings from the report addressed the lack of adequate preparation for early career teachers.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) noted that beginner teachers with three or less years' experience have consistently told the AEU that they do not believe their initial teacher education (ITE) sufficiently prepared them for the complex realities of the classroom:

"In our 2021 survey the main areas where new educators were underprepared were teaching students whose first language is not English (62 per cent), dealing with difficult behaviour (55 per cent), teaching students with disability (47 per cent) and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (43 per cent). More than a third (35 per cent) of new educators said that their ITE was not helpful in preparing them to manage classroom activities, and in under resourced schools this increased to 41 per cent."

Furthermore, in its submission to the inquiry, the AEU recommended the importance of teacher autonomy and "reversing the drive towards explicit instruction and undifferentiated national assessment."

More support was needed for professional autonomy, curriculum development and assessment.

While many of the recommendations in the final report failed to address some of the key issues experienced in classrooms, the SSTUWA agreed and supported Recommendation 6: "The committee recommends that state and territory governments explore more effective integration between education and healthcare services so schools can have timely access to student support services, including psychologists, social workers, and behaviour specialists, to help identify and manage disruptive behaviour."

The SSTUWA's recently commissioned report *Facing the Facts* referred to the impact of disruptive behaviours to learning and overall student outcome.

Facing the Facts also stressed the rise of anti-social behaviour with the e-safety commissioner's warning that "teachers are experiencing growing levels of abuse from students, including students taking photos of teachers, rating their physical appearance, initiating campaigns to have them removed, and making unsubstantiated and damaging allegations about them."

Facing the Facts made similar recommendations to the Senate inquiry's recommendation on tackling disruptive behaviours in a classroom:

Recommendation 6: The WA Department of Education should redesign support services to ensure they are more accessible, more responsive to local needs and better resourced to support schools' administrative and educational needs.

Recommendation 7: In conjunction with education authorities, the WA Government should design, and fund dedicated, cross portfolio services to support the learning of children with special needs.

Recommendation 16: Where a student with complex needs requires a Documented Plan, that student should "count" for two or three students when determining class size, thus reducing the numbers in the class.

Recommendation 22: The loadings in the Student-Centred Funding Model (SCFM) for disadvantage and concentrations of disadvantage should be increased to better reflect the additional work required of teachers in these schools and to improve student outcomes.

Recommendation 24: To reduce teacher workloads and improve student outcomes, class sizes in WA public schools should be reduced, with the most substantial reductions to be made in the early years of schooling and in schools with significant proportions of students who are educationally disadvantaged.

Recommendation 25: Small group tutoring run by experienced teachers provided with appropriate training and support should be considered to assist in improving student outcomes for disadvantaged students. These would be in addition to the normal staff complement.

At the SSTUWA, we have seen a growing number of disruptive behaviours being reported through our "Violence: Report it" strategy.

We encourage all members to continue to use this platform to report incidents of violence.

To date, our data shows that violence towards a staff member and violent behaviours between students to be the two areas that are frequently reported.

The SSTUWA's work health and safety representative Antony Pearson, organisers and Member Assist Team should be commended on their ongoing work to help members in schools and TAFE navigate the complexities of disruptive behaviours in educational settings.

It is important to keep check of the updated *Know Your Rights* sheets on the SSTUWA website, which includes an information sheet on gendered violence.

Every member has the right to a safe workplace. We are committed to ensuring that you have an environment that allows you to come to work without fear.

If you need support, fill out a Violence: Report it form at sstuwa.org.au/report, speak to your union representative or contact Member Assist on 9210 6060.



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