One voice for every child in public education

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AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS LTD

Submission:

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR TEACHING AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

"National Strategy to address teacher, school leader and other staff abuse"

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One voice for every child in public education

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the one voice for every child in public education in Australia. ACSSO represents the voice of families and communities of more than 2.54 million young people in schools across our nation. ACSSO also advocates and supports families with children in early childhood settings and young Australians accessing post compulsory education, which makes ACSSO the largest advocacy group for families in education in Australia.

ACSSO welcomed the opportunity to take part in discussions pertaining to the *National Strategy to address teacher, school leader and other staff abuse* including the opportunity to participate in the sessions of the *AITSL Virtual National Roundtable*, held in the last week of July. ACSSO is committed to working with all other relevant stakeholders in being part of the solution and having our nation's schools a safe place for school staff, students, and community.

In May 2019, ACSSO led the release of a joint statement with the Australian Parents Council and Catholic Parents Australia expressing our concern at the public media coverage regarding school staff abuse. In that release *Parents and Schools Working Together – Better!* *(May 16, 2019)* parents expressed the view that no violence or threatening behaviour should be condoned. However it was the view of parents that issues were unlikely to be resolved and our represented organisations were extremely concerned that parents were being named as the key perpetrators of the abuse and we made it clear to both the Minister and other relevant bodies, including the national principal and teacher organisations, that no amount of media attention would resolve this. Work needed to be done collaboratively. We again offered to be part of the solution and suggested quite strongly that close to 60 years of research, in both Australia and overseas, supports that by engaging in positive family relationships, most of these behaviours (that are perpetrated by parents) could be less common.

The discussion paper *Developing a national strategy to address teacher, school leader and other staff abuse* p. 14 states *teachers who reported working in a positive communal school environment reported lower level of abuse and were more likely to report an intention to remain in the teaching profession.* (Curran et al. 2019; Moon et al. 2020). Also stated on that page under Community related factors (Payne and Gottfredson 2019) *Positive school environments are characterised by supportive relationships between all individuals in the school community, a set of common goals and norms and collaborative relationships……-* they go on to say a lack of this is a risk factor that could be a catalyst for abuse.

Whilst the statistics regarding schools staff abuse recognise that 54% occurs between staff and parents / students; it is disappointing that the National Strategy applies an almost total focus on this with little regard to the abuse and intimidation that school staff suffer as a result of their peers and school leadership. We understand that it was not included in the remit for this project however, the effect this has on their mental health and attitude to their work can have a flow on effect on their relationship with their students and families.

Our concern for the National Strategy, whilst strong in its entirety, is that it is missing key messages from speakers and participants.

We acknowledge a focus on community engagement (Priority Area 3), but we would strongly make the comment that there is extraordinarily little strategy in the action items that adequately deal with improving community engagement. We had expected to see some more solid outcomes on the community engagement actions, particularly after having participated in the Virtual Roundtable and witnessing the commentary by many of the speakers.

There appears to be, and obviously we are pleased to see, "raising awareness" for the public and "sharing experiences" exercises for school leaders (Action 5). However, what is really needed in schools is embedding in their plans and practice the development and formalising of family / community engagement frameworks. It is not something that is an add-on or an event – it should inform and drive much of the agenda.

From the Roundtable there were many relevant take-aways including:

- Andrew Pierpoint, President of the Australian Secondary Principal's Association, talked about building school community relationships using student voice in decision making on school policies. He also elaborated on the importance of developing high levels of communication within the school community, with school community as a whole participating in the school's strategic development and how learning can be improved. This is true community "ownership" – but we caution that communication needs to be accessible, delivered through many mediums and language not in "Edu- speak", but clear and understandable, and it must be two way.

- Andrew Fuller stressed the need to build a culture of belonging for all, including students and families. He stated, and we whole heartedly agree, that education should start and be based on relationships, taking a strength-based approach. The focus should be on investment in positive relationships; building positive relationships has a calming effect on the more difficult conversations you may need to have – a more caring than clinical approach. Where families feel they weren't included, that's when the blame games start – and it comes from both sides. ACSSO has always supported the strengths-based approach, particularly when looking at building cultural wellness, student achievement and family engagement.

  Andrew also made useful suggestions for building these relationships and spoke about taking family meetings outside the school, to a place where they feel comfortable. Andrew is a fantastic resource when examining student engagement, and the point of young people needing a sense of belonging and owning their destiny.

- Robyn Cottrill from McKillop Family Services questioned if there are more abusive incidents or just better reporting? Challenges within families and difference in culture between home and school can be the basis of the student's behaviour. Inappropriate and "acting out" behaviours by students may be in response to a school culture which is bullying, racist or homophobic. It can also be in response to previous or current trauma in the student's life or because the school fails to be culturally responsive.

  Robyn suggested again basic family engagement practices e.g. principal welcomes each parent individually to the school talking about the school's expectations and discussing their expectations of the school for their child. She, like Andrew Fuller and so many others, talks about meetings being offsite. She alluded to language barriers, interpreters and the need for translation. She also discussed building context, connectedness and embedding two-way learning and engagement e.g. using Indigenous and community languages, learning on country.

There was considerably more discussed than that identified above, and ACSSO's participants are unsure why little of the discussion and issues raised, have been reflected in the Draft National Strategy. None of the issues raised however, is news to ACSSO, but the discussion did appear to reinforce and/or support ACSSO developed material. There is a wealth of information and evidence available on strategies relating to Family Engagement both in Australia and across the globe. ACSSO has produced quite a suite of resources that we are more than happy to share and discuss and would be keen to support development of additional ones.

Abuse of school staff by students and families is due to a relationship breakdown. No amount of building the status of the profession (as important as this is) will build relationships or repair damaged ones.

Raising the status of the teaching profession, can only happen when there is mutual respect and strong community relationships. We firmly believe that whilst communities are marginalised or disenfranchised you will not eradicate staff abuse. It is a bit of the old adage "we don't care what you know until we know you care".

We strongly support and advocate for the inclusion and investment of professional learning for school staff regarding engaging with families, engaging with students, strengths-based development, and de-escalation techniques.

We applaud the notion of building a resilient workforce and note the comments (P. 14) with regard to it *being critical for schools, systems and sectors to examine the root cause* of the abuse. This will be the catalyst for a strength-based approach to the response.

ACSSO, along with other national parent organisations and groups such as ARACY have strongly advocated for engaging with families, working in partnership, to be included in pre-service training for teaching. Evidence collected by the Family-School Partnerships Bureau in 2011 supported the notion that only 1 out of every 100 teachers surveyed had any content regarding this vital area in their pre-service training. Whilst there has been some movement in that area, it is often optional and definitely doesn't represent the importance of those skills and knowledge needed in a beginning teacher's tool kit.

We support the priority area of collecting evidence. We know that there is already a bank of evidence with regard to these areas to tap into but continuing to collect evidence of both good practice and the diversity of challenges is an excellent strategy we fully support.

There needs to be a clear definition of what constitutes being labelled as abuse – our anecdotal evidence informs us that it can vary quite considerably from school to school, from staff member to staff member. The consequences appear also to differ in severity – many quite punitive, not addressing the issue just the action – unproductive at best.

ACSSO feels this Strategy placed most of its focus on teachers and we believe that whilst aspects could apply to all areas of the school community; it should be noted that this inclusion in most of the discussion was minimal.

It should also be noted that the school environment is also the workplace of students – in fact, the law compels them to attend. Consideration should be made in the roll out of this strategy, although not in the remit, for their occupational health and safety. Victimisation and abuse are sometimes a two-way event.

ACSSO would like to re-iterate that we wish to continue to work with all involved to be part of the solution. It is vital for the well-being of school staff and the work, health and safety of staff, students and community that all stakeholders embrace the opportunity to engage in this process so our young people can become the best they can be.