

3 November 2020

The Hon Mark Latham MLC
Chair Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education
NSW Parliament
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000



Submitted online at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/lodge-a-submission.aspx?pk=2604>

Dear Chairperson

Re: Inquiry into the Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum

ACON is NSW's leading health organisation specialising in community health, inclusion and HIV responses for people of diverse sexualities and genders. Established in 1985, ACON works to create opportunities for people in our communities to live their healthiest lives.

While we do not work with people under the age of 18 years old, we wish to provide feedback on Section 3(b) and 3(c) of the Terms of Reference, recognising the negative impacts that social environments at a young age may have, longer term, on the health and wellbeing of an individual.

Meta-analyses of research have demonstrated that young people who identify as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Tran, Intersex, Queer or other sexuality or gender diversity) are disproportionately affected by poor mental health and psychological distress, including the onset of depression, PTSD, self-harm and suicide (Knight et al., 2017). Research also indicates this trauma is linked to perceived and experienced discrimination (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009) and can have ongoing impacts for people (Mustanski, Andrews, & Puckett, 2016).

A recent Australian research project (Ullman, 2015) painted a stark picture of our schools. 94% of the students surveyed (N=704) reported homophobic or transphobic language. 58% of those respondents reported hearing such language every day. When this language was heard by adults, it was reported that the adult intervened in less than 5% of instances.

More alarmingly, 45% reported physical abuse in schools based on the perceived or actual sexuality or gender of the victim. For more than 10% of students, physical violence based on sexuality or gender identity happens every week. Data on the experience of transgender students indicates even graver concerns for mental health and wellbeing (Ullman, 2017).

Conversely, the creation of supporting environments reduces the prevalence of such trauma. Studies have shown, for example, that in environments where same sex marriage has been legalised, poor mental health outcomes are reduced. (Knight et al., 2017; Raifman, Moscoe, Austin, & McConnell, 2017). Again, specific research on trans people's experience indicates that support and positivity in the school environment significantly shifts these outcomes (Ullman, 2017).

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It is our belief that school, an environment in which students spend between six and eight hours each weekday, should be an environment which strives to be safe and supportive, and as the arbiters of that safety, teachers, administrators and other school staff have an implicit responsibility to uphold the 'social and emotional development' of students, particularly where research supports that school age children are ready for such instruction (Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013).

Concerning the inclusion of such programs into the curriculum, Ullman (2015) reports that less than half of students knew where to go for information around sexuality and gender diversity, with similar numbers being able to recall teachers engaging in positive conversations about the topic. Only 3% of respondents were sure that they had learnt about sexuality or gender diversity in PDHPE. The study found a correlation between positive attitudes from teachers around sexuality and gender with lower truancy rates and an increased sense of school wellbeing and academic performance.

Research from the United States suggests formal, curriculum based, in school programs have significant benefits to students (GLSEN, 2020; Snapp, Burdge, Licona, Moody, & Russell, 2015) and calls for further research and exploration of efficacy measurement. Australian research has found that parental acceptability of such programs is evident and should be further explored (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2016).

We would also recommend the Committee consider the broader implications of removing this development from the school environment, in situations where parents express views and engage in actions which are not conducive to a harmonious and egalitarian Australia.

Schools are an integral part of the development of citizens of New South Wales. It is a desire shared by the population that our young people emerge from school environments with the necessary knowledge and skills to function successfully, contribute to society and live healthy lives. Schools that aim to create supportive and nurturing environments for all students are the best way to ensure these outcomes. As such, we support programs aimed at increasing social wellbeing for students, believing that these programs are part of this education.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this important issue.

Kind regards

Nicolas Parkhill
Chief Executive Officer

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