

Submission to the Queensland Anti-Cyberbullying Taskforce



About Queensland Independent Schools

Community confidence in the independent schooling sector remains strong with about 120,000 students enrolled in 202 independent schools across Queensland in 2017. These schools educate approximately 15 percent of the state's total school-age population and about 20 percent of all secondary students.

The strength of Queensland's independent schooling sector lies in the rich mix of education choices and opportunities local schools provide families. Independent schools are as diverse as the students and parents who make up their close-knit communities. Of Queensland's 202 independent schools: 183 educate children with disability; 109 cater for students for whom English is a second language or dialect; 184 enrol Indigenous students; 72 offer international education programs; 33 provide boarding services; and 17 cater specifically for students who have disengaged from mainstream education.

Common to all independent schools is their commitment to strong student outcomes, high standards of behaviour, and the welfare and wellbeing of students.

Over the past ten years, enrolments at Queensland independent schools have increased by 21 percent. This growth is a clear indication that parents value an independent education and are prepared to invest their after-tax incomes in their child's schooling.

Context of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is generally defined as "the use of technology to bully a person or group by an individual or group with the intent to harm another person or group" (Office of the eSafety Commissioner).

While prevalence rates of cyberbullying vary, it is estimated that approximately one in five young people under 18 (20%) reported experiencing cyberbullying in any one year. Cyberbullying appears to be related to age (or access to technology), with secondary students more likely to engage in bullying online than primary school students (*Bullying. No way!*).

It is accepted that face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying usually have a high correlation with many school students bullied face-to-face also bullied online, and those bullied online likely to be also bullied face-to-face. However, it is acknowledged that cyberbullying has specific complexities and can have far reaching consequences due to factors such as the potential size of the audience, levels of anonymity, the ability to spread content quickly and easily, and the permanence of online content.

Cyberbullying should also be considered in the context of the range of other potential harms in the online environment. Some potential harms, such as identity theft, may arise from unwanted online contact. Others, such as distribution of images without consent (for example sexting), are a result of young people willingly providing images to others who then misuse those images. Some potential harms, such as access to pornographic content, can simply be a consequence of the ability to search for particular words or phrases on search engines.

In partnership with all Australian education jurisdictions, Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) supports the ongoing work of the national Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group which helps schools to create learning environments where every student and school community member is safe, supported, respected and valued. Specific activities of the Working Group include the national *Bullying. No way!* website and the annual *National Day of Action Against Bullying and Violence* now in its eighth year.

The *National Safe Schools Framework*, currently under review, provides a useful context within which schools should consider responses to bullying and cyberbullying. Supported by all Australian education jurisdictions, it provides a vision and a set of guiding principles for safe, supportive and respectful school communities that promote student wellbeing. The associated website, the *Student Wellbeing Hub* hosted by Education Services Australia, provides a wealth of practical resources to assist schools to implement the Framework.

Queensland independent schools' responses to cyberbullying

All Australian schools are impacted by bullying and cyberbullying at some time. Individual school responses differ depending on various factors, however, a strong focus on student wellbeing and pastoral support is a common feature of the Queensland independent schooling sector.

Queensland independent schools implement a range of strategies to enhance students' online safety and address bullying. In addition to incorporating online safety and anti-bullying messages into curriculum and pastoral care programs, strategies used by independent schools include:

- the use of commercial internet filtering systems on school systems and devices
- implementation of systems and processes for reporting bullying and cyberbullying to the school - these might be designed by an individual school or a commercial portal through which a school receives reports of bullying or cyberbullying
- engaging guest speakers to educate students and parents - these may be private providers sourced by the school or through the Office of the eSafety Commissioner's certified training providers
- professional learning for staff - this may be from private providers or through the Office of the eSafety Commissioner's certified training providers or *Professional Learning Program*
- webinars for students - for example utilising the Office of the eSafety Commissioner's *Virtual Classrooms* platform
- commercial cyber safety and/or wellbeing resources or frameworks such as *eSmart Schools* or *Friendly Kids, Friendly Classrooms*.

In recognition of the differing contexts of independent schools, ISQ provides schools with information about a range of credible resources to enhance their responses to bullying, including cyberbullying, and online safety through the ISQ website and relevant professional learning. The website is regularly reviewed to maintain currency of advice.

ISQ has developed a *Cybersafety Framework and Audit Tool* to assist schools to plan comprehensive cybersafe strategies applicable to their local context. The Tool, available to schools through the ISQ website, complements the *National Safe Schools Framework* and has six interrelated domains:

- leadership, organisation and ethos
- policies and procedures
- professional learning
- whole school positive behaviour management, early intervention and targeted support
- curriculum and teaching
- parent and community engagement.

ISQ has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner to work cooperatively to raise awareness of the Commissioner's cyberbullying complaints scheme and the resources available to schools to address cyberbullying and help protect students from experiencing the effects of negative online behaviour. To this end, ISQ provides regular updates to schools about the Commissioner's resources.

Responses to consultation questions

The impact of cyberbullying is felt well beyond the school. Addressing cyberbullying requires a comprehensive approach and responses to cyberbullying should be evidence-informed and considered in the wider context of student wellbeing, as well as take account of the broad range of potential safety risks in the online environment. With the rapid and continuing changes to technologies, and in the ways various technologies are used, young people need to develop the necessary skills to make the most of these technologies while also knowing how to use them safely to reduce all potential risks from the online environment (cyberbullying representing only one of those risks).

How to prevent or reduce cyberbullying of young people

The benefits of using technology are evident and, for most young people, being online is overwhelmingly positive. Therefore, responses to cyberbullying should focus on educating young people about what to do online to keep themselves safe rather than telling them what not to do. Responses that focus on, or exaggerate, the potential harms risk been seen by young people as not credible because they do not represent their experience in this environment.

The more digital platforms that a young person uses, the more opportunities there are for being exposed to potential harm. The range of devices with internet connectivity, combined with the portability of these devices, also presents a challenge for parents and teachers by reducing their ability to monitor young people's online activities or detect when they are experiencing difficulties or are at risk.

Preventing or reducing cyberbullying, and other risks associated with being online, requires parents, schools and other agencies, such as police, to work together. ISQ offers some suggested actions to address the issues discussed in this submission.

Guidance for schools

Development of a guiding framework

ISQ supports the provision of a guiding framework to schools which describes the broad range of strategies they should implement to address bullying and cyberbullying within a wider student wellbeing context. Such a framework could build on existing frameworks and other tools already available free of charge to schools. ISQ acknowledges that commercial frameworks are also available to schools at a cost. In addition to ISQ's *Cybersafety Framework and Audit Tool*, the Taskforce may wish to consider other free tools such as:

- The eSafety Commissioner's [eSafety Checklist for schools](#)
- The National Safe Schools Framework [School Audit Tool](#), available through the national Student Wellbeing Hub.

Guidance on selecting appropriate resources and training

All schools are different. Therefore, no single resource will be suitable for the broad range of school contexts and characteristics. There is a plethora of existing bullying, cyberbullying and online safety resources currently available to schools. Due to the sheer volume of available resources, it can be difficult for schools to select those based on research and likely to be effective in their context.

ISQ supports the strengthening of advice to schools about selecting appropriate resources to complement curriculum and pastoral care programs. For example, the *STEPS Framework*, supported by all education jurisdictions and published on the national *Bullying. No way!* website, outlines a robust, transparent and comprehensive process for selecting evidence-based anti-bullying approaches appropriate for individual schools.

ISQ also acknowledges the significant array of high quality resources available through the Office of the eSafety Commissioner to support schools in enhancing online safety. The Office provides resources for parents, teachers and students and face-to-face and online training for students, teachers and parents about online safety.

Guidance on the use of personal mobile devices in schools

There is confusion about whether students should be allowed to use personal mobile phones and devices at school and there is a wide variety of policies and practices being implemented. Schools would appreciate some guidance on the best approach to managing this issue. The Taskforce may wish to review the existing evidence and provide advice on what might be considered acceptable use of personal mobile devices at school and good practice for managing these devices effectively.

Engagement of parents

Parents play an important role in both modelling appropriate online practices and establishing expectations for their children in relation to what they do online and how long they stay online. This includes expectations about the use of social media sites and chat rooms, apps, online gaming and privacy settings on personal devices.

Discovering your child is being bullied, whether face-to-face or online, is very distressing to most parents. However, the way parents respond is very important. Some young people appear reluctant to report bullying, cyberbullying or other unwanted online contact to their parents or other adults out of fear of possible negative consequences. For example, they may not be confident that reporting will make the situation better or they may be concerned that their devices will be confiscated.

ISQ acknowledges the important work of the Office of the eSafety Commissioner in developing the *iParent* portal. This portal contains comprehensive resources for parents about online risks and provides expert advice about how to respond to many different online concerns including cyberbullying. It is recommended that this material not be duplicated but that the resources be more widely promoted to Queensland parents. The Taskforce may wish to consider the most appropriate mechanisms to facilitate this.

How to support people affected by the cyberbullying of young people

Young people affected by cyberbullying, or other online harm, require two types of support:

- Assistance with the timely removal of offensive content, and
- Emotional support.

Assistance with the timely removal of offensive content

When young people, or their parents, become aware of offensive material online, the highest priority is the removal of the material from the internet. There are several ways they can commonly endeavour to do this. They may report to the school, report to the police or report to the Office of the eSafety Commissioner. Each of these organisations has different processes for managing any issues reported but there is no guarantee that the material will be removed as quickly as the student or their parents would like. It is also possible that, despite agencies' best efforts, the material reappears elsewhere on the web.

ISQ acknowledges that the Department of Education has a dedicated Cybersafety and Reputation Management team able to work directly with appropriate agencies to remove offensive online material quickly and provide consistent advice to schools about the management of these issues. Independent schools do not have access to such a service although they may make a report directly to the Office of the eSafety Commissioner if the matter meets the criteria for reporting to the Commissioner.

While the Commissioner's role and processes are clear and publicly available, the interactions between schools and police in relation to possible criminal matters are less well defined and may vary from school to school and between police districts. It is suggested that consideration be given to the development of a guideline for schools and police that outlines the actions schools should take to remove offensive online material, when a referral should be made to police for the investigation of a possible criminal offence and what actions a school can expect police to take in relation to a report. Such advice could promote greater consistency in responses by schools and local police.

Emotional support

In seeking a resolution or redress for those students and families affected by cyberbullying or other online harm, there can be limits to the role of schools especially where the person engaging in the behaviour is not enrolled at the school and has no relationship with the school. However, all schools recognise their role in supporting students affected by cyberbullying, and their families. This support may be short term or, in cases where bullying or cyberbullying is ongoing or where material is not successfully removed from the internet, over a longer term.

For some students and their families, schools may contact services in the community to provide more specialist support. ISQ acknowledges the many government and non-government services which provide counselling and support to children and young people, and their families, experiencing distress for many reasons. ISQ notes that many organisations complement their face-to-face services with online support. These online services are welcomed and greatly appreciated by schools in regional and remote locations where on the ground services can be limited.

ISQ does not wish to make specific suggestions in relation to this matter.

Further information

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