

Queensland Teachers' Union of Employees

Submission to the Queensland Anti-Cyberbullying Taskforce

June 2018



Preface

The QTU congratulates the Queensland Government for the establishment of the Anti-Cyberbullying Taskforce and its strong commitment to addressing this serious issue. Cyberbullying is increasing in prevalence in our society. This is an issue of significance to everyone and it is critical that all stakeholders from across the community work together to address it.

The rise of smartphones and mobile apps has made cyberbullying easier and created more accessible forms of cyberbullying. Australian research puts the proportion of children affected by cyberbullying as high as one in five. The vast majority of children bullied online are also bullied in person.

Cyberbullying is public, it spreads quickly, the bully can be anonymous, and it can happen at all hours with no safe place to escape. Bullies can attack from a distance so there are generally no immediate consequences for them. The impact of this type of bullying on our young people is immense. The *Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* reports critical impacts in adolescent victims of cyberbullying, including lower self-esteem, loneliness, disillusionment, and distrust of people. The more extreme effects of cyberbullying include self-harm and suicide.

The Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU) is committed to ensuring the safety, health and happiness of our students and our members. As such we are also committed to maintaining a zero-tolerance position for all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying, an issue that has become more significant in our schools and broader communities and is impacting the wellbeing of our students and staff.

Current approach in schools

The current approach to addressing cyberbullying in Queensland schools has been somewhat disjointed to date. Schools fully acknowledge the need to address this issue, however there is not a clear recommended approach. There are many commercial enterprises aggressively competing to provide programs in this space, and quality assurance can be complicated.

When cyberbullying occurs between students, even outside the school, it is often school leaders and teachers who are approached to support students and resolve these issues. Parents regularly approach schools to request consequences for bullies and action to resolve disputes that have occurred between students online. Another complication can be parent sensitivity to various programs. The QTU is aware of situations where schools have received complaints from parents after embedding teaching programs that target particular forms of cyberbullying. A more consistent, endorsed approach would resolve many of these issues.

There have been some targeted grants to support particular schools in implementing programs relating to cyber safety and cyberbullying. While these have been welcomed, a more consistent approach across the state would ensure programs in every school.

School leaders who were consulted are committed to addressing this important issue. They described the enormous impact of cyberbullying on students in our schools and are seeking a cohesive, funded response which can be implemented within the curriculum.

Unfortunately, many schools and school leaders report facing cyberbullying themselves as a consequence of the antibullying programs they have implemented. Just one such example is the recent media furore and political campaign regarding the “Safe Schools” program, which led to many schools being targeted online by aggressive community members. An endorsed state-wide approach would address these issues.

While the QTU supports local solutions and professional autonomy to address local issues, cyberbullying is so prevalent and wide-reaching that it would be best to provide all state schools and their communities with an effective, coherent approach.

Moving forward

What is bullying?

A simple program that teaches children from a young age what bullying is would develop a common language and understanding within and across schools. This would be of great assistance in prevention of bullying and on focusing support on managing genuine issues. This program needs to be fully developed, resourced and distributed to all schools. It is critical that it is appropriately embedded within the health curriculum so it is delivered to all students as a core part of their learning. There is general acknowledgement that the current curriculum is overcrowded. To give this program the time and priority it requires, it should replace existing units rather than supplementing them, and be embedded within the Australian Curriculum framework.

One particular feature of cyberbullying is that it follows children wherever they are. For this reason, parents and the wider community should also be part of any educational initiative on bullying. The school based program should be accompanied with resources for parents to support them in understanding this complex issue.

Recommendations

1. *Develop an educational program that is resourced and freely distributed to all schools, develops common language and addresses what bullying is.*
2. *Identify particular junctures where this program is implemented state-wide as a component of the existing health curriculum.*
3. *Support school based educational programs with resources for parents and the wider community.*

Banning of devices in schools

The QTU does not support a position whereby access to digital technology is banned in schools. Such an approach does not address how students use social media outside of school and in the home. We believe in taking a responsible, educational approach that teaches students:

- respect for others, regardless of gender, sexuality, race or cultural background
- safe behaviour online
- what constitutes bullying
- how to recognise cyberbullying
- how to manage and report cyberbullying toward themselves
- how to manage and report cyberbullying toward another person.

Recommendation

4. *Any response to cyberbullying in schools should focus on comprehensive and cohesive educational programs, rather than banning of particular devices*

Bullying related to key demographics

LGBTIQ+ students

Research shows that 74 per cent of trans students have experienced bullying and almost one in two trans students (48.1 per cent) attempts suicide at some time. Young lesbian, gay and bisexual students report school as the place they feel most unsafe and state that 80 per cent of homophobic abuse takes place at school. 21 per cent have experienced physical abuse and 65 per cent have experienced verbal abuse related to their gender identity, sexuality or expression. Much of this abuse starts online. It is therefore critical that we have in place programs that address the needs of this specific group of students.

Unlike children from other groups who are cyberbullied, LGBTIQ+ students are often not accepted by their family members, so have no safe place to go and no means of achieving comfort or understanding when cyberbullying occurs.

The QTU firmly believes that there is a need for specific bullying programs to target the needs of LGBTIQ+ students. Homophobic and transphobic bullying differs from many other forms of bullying in that many students are not able to share and disclose the bullying at home, which is often not a safe space. Further, the research into the specific needs of LGBTIQ+ students show that the health impacts of this form of bullying can be extremely damaging and these students are most at risk of self-harm, and also school avoidance.

Recommendation

5. *Any suite of programs developed to address cyberbullying must contain specific anti-bullying programs that address the needs of LGBTIQ+ students*

Sexualised and gendered cyberbullying

One common and very damaging forms of cyberbullying is the targeting of young people in a sexually abusive way. This includes “slut-shaming”, sharing of personal images or “revenge porn”, and online sexual harassment and abuse. This type of abuse occurs particularly towards females and minority groups. Two years ago, the Guardian newspaper analysed abusive online comments posted on their published articles. Of the top ten most abused, eight were women journalists and two were black men. Of the ten least abused, all were men.

Although sexual abuse can happen to anyone, women and LGBTIQ+ groups experience more sexualised abuse, and men are much more likely to be the perpetrators. There is some evidence that perceived non-adherence to rigid gender norms is one factor associated with perpetration of these forms of online gender-based abuse.

Recommendation

6. *Any cyberbullying program implemented in schools must specifically address issues relating to consent, misogyny and sexual harassment.*

Other issues

Programs in schools

The QTU acknowledges that cyberbullying is a significant issue that undermines the health and wellbeing of our students, teachers and school leaders. While many of these issues are interpersonal, between students, they often originate as a result of interactions within our

schools. We therefore believe it is appropriate and necessary to implement a cohesive strategy across all state schools in Queensland to address this issue.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that our schools are already managing a curriculum that is overcrowded. In order to give priority and importance to programs that address cyberbullying, it is critical to create space for them in the curriculum. Teachers need to be supported through professional development to understand issues relating to cyberbullying. Programs should be embedded within the core curriculum to ensure they are delivered to all students. Resources need to be developed to support effective delivery of these programs within all schools.

Recommendations

7. *Educational programs to address the broad range of issues relating to cyberbullying should:*
 - a) *be fully funded and resourced*
 - b) *be accompanied by professional development to ensure programs are appropriately implemented*
 - c) *be embedded within the core curriculum to ensure they are delivered to all students*
 - d) *be prioritised by creating space in the curriculum through replacement or removal of less important items*
 - e) *involve classroom teachers in their development to ensure they are educationally sound and engaging for students*
 - f) *be distributed state-wide to ensure a cohesive and consistent approach*

Support for victims of cyberbullying

As outlined previously, cyberbullying can have a significant impact on young victims. Educational programs alone do not address the isolation, humiliation, anxiety and fear experienced by victims of cyberbullying. Often victims are embarrassed and don't seek support from parents and friends.

Comprehensive support for students within our schools is critical to address the impact of cyberbullying on students. It is imperative that this support is provided by qualified staff who are seen by students as accessible and empathetic to their particular needs.

The QTU acknowledges and commends recent initiatives by the Queensland Government to increase the number of qualified guidance officers in schools. With one in five children experiencing cyberbullying, increasing access to guidance officers, and the employment of other support staff such as secular youth workers, is a vital component of any state-wide plan to address cyberbullying.

Recommendation

8. *Increase access in schools to appropriately trained support staff, such as guidance officers and secular youth workers, to assist students dealing with the negative impacts of cyberbullying.*

Cyberbullying of teachers and school leaders

The QTU fields calls on an almost daily basis from distressed members who have experienced vicious cyberbullying from parents, students or community members. Many parents post aggressive comments on community groups when they are unhappy with an issue at the school.

These comments are frequently personal, unfounded and shared widely within the community, damaging the reputation of the teacher or school concerned. This is a very real issue for our educators and can be immensely damaging. QTU members surveyed acknowledge the work of the Cybersafety and Reputation team within the department, however believe more can be done to support educators and protect them from cyberbullying.

The QTU believes this is a serious workplace health and safety issue that is harming our members. We recommend two strategies to support our members and protect them from cyberbullying.

Recommendations

- 9. Implement an extensive, centrally funded, community education campaign to raise awareness of the issue of cyberbullying of school staff.*
- 10. Establish a centralised specialist Cyberbullying Support Centre to which affected Department of Education staff can refer these matters for swift action. These actions should include immediate steps to have the material removed, a range of support for the staff concerned, and engagement of legal action where appropriate.*
- 11. Amend the Education (General Provisions) Act (2006) to extend the provisions of trespass and abuse of employees to include online.*

Conclusion

The QTU again thank the Anti-Cyberbullying Taskforce for the opportunity to provide a submission. The issue of cyberbullying is a societal issue that affects many people. As such, this issue requires commitment from everyone to identify community driven strategies and initiatives that address the complex causes of bullying and cyberbullying. The QTU is proud to be one of many stakeholders working together across Queensland to support our young people and address the issue of cyberbullying.