



NSW Public Education Deals With Student Behaviour – Déjà vu All Over Again

🌐 sosaustralia / 📅 February 28, 2022 / 📌 Equity in education

The release of the new Student Behaviour Strategy again demonstrates the disconnect between public schools, where teaching takes place and the accepted authorities the education bureaucracy and academia. This current ‘policy’ is one of successive attempts to deal with severely disruptive student behaviour in schools. Historically all have failed and, despite the best intentions nothing in this proposal is new and there is no reason to believe the outcome of this attempt will be any different.

This new strategy is contained in another glossy document complete with the usual motherhood statements asserting the Department’s commitment to providing support for these damaged children and promises of increased resources. It even has the obligatory illustration of the complex interactions of the promises as shown below. Hanging a collection of these diagrams from all previous policies would have as much impact on changing the plight of these students as constructing a ‘dream-catcher’ of these to hang over their beds. In this latest model, shown below the ten strategies at the core of the policy are not in dispute, they are motherhood statements but any experienced teacher who deals with the problems dysfunctional behaviour creates finds these pretty pictures quite hurtful, they are denied the resources to implement them. Of course, no one can deny the importance of the ten strategies, they are stating the obvious but these promises are never kept.



However as always, this all-encompassing policy is to conceal its real intention and that is to reduce the rates of suspension. This is at the heart of the upcoming dispute between the Teachers Federation and the Department.

The Teachers Federation came out quickly lamenting the lack of meaningful collaboration in the production of this policy. They point out that the weakening of the ability to suspend dangerous and abusive students puts teachers, and more importantly fellow students in danger. This is not an example of schools wanting to get rid of these students. As a teacher for over 40 years and a principal for 27 years I can ensure the public that, apart from a few miscarriages of justice, no school takes a suspension lightly. Teachers are never happy ‘punishing’ kids and they understand that most of these kids that are subjected to multiple and long suspensions are a product of a dysfunctional early childhood. It is just that schools cannot continue to accommodate these children when their disability puts all other students at risk, not to mention the loss of learning opportunities when the teacher addresses the behaviours. Equity works both ways, evidence from Professor John Hattie confirms that students who share a classroom with one or more dysfunctional students will have their education significantly compromised.

As well as the student’s right to be taught in a calm and safe environment, teachers working conditions are outlined by Safe Work NSW which defines workplace violence in the ‘*Violence in the Workplace Guide 2002*) as follows:

- “Violence and aggression include: Verbal and emotional abuse of threats and physical attack to an individual or to property by another individual or group. The impact of violence on a victim depends on the severity of the violence, his or her own experiences, skills and personality”.

By insisting teachers have to deal with these children the Department fails to satisfy its own employment standards. However, schools are compelled to use suspension as a last resort given the resources they have to deal with these kids at school.

Apart from the compassion teachers have for all students placing a child on suspension produces a significant increase in the school’s workload. In my research I have found that each suspension, on average creates 3.2 hours of extra work. On current data that means in 2017 schools spent 87,187 hours dealing with suspensions. This has increased to 130,074 in 2021, this is extra work that has to be carried out to protect the school. And, it must be acknowledged that these extra hours of work are not equally distributed across the state but reflect the socio-economic profile of the school’s community. In Northern NSW 5.3% of students received a short suspension and 2.1% a long suspension while in North Sydney less than 1% of student were suspended. The resulting disparity in the school’s actual teaching students rather than managing these behaviours is obvious.

Critics of the school’s position take the view that schools just don’t try hard enough. Vocal children’s advocates are quick to take the side of the suspended student. The sentiments of these supporters of reductions of suspension numbers are echoed below:

- Zoe Robinson, Advocate for Young People who welcomes the policy – “there is a link between suspension and youth justice”
- Associate Professor, Louise Kuchel – Square Peg in Round Whole Podcast, who states “we’re not improving the outcomes for young neuro-divergent people when we keep excluding them”
- Professor Mark Dadds who insists that sending kids home on suspension risked encouraging the behaviour, “schools are saying that children are to blame, and parents are increasingly saying the school is not managing the child’s rights”
- Anne Hollonds, the Australian Children’s Commissioner who acknowledges that “we’re quite hands-off until there’s a crisis and then we come in, in a punitive way”

It impossible to argue against all of these sentiments. Of course, there is a link between behaviour at school and future delinquent activities and of course there will be no improvement by exclusion alone. I personally resent the comment by Dadds, who implies schools blame these children. The perceived connection between suspension and punishment as cited by Anne Hollonds implies the schools are punishing the child. The sadness is these critics, along with so many others have no concept of the lack of specific resources schools have to implement any other consequence for these extreme behaviours.

It would be fair to say that most critics of schools who are forced to suspend have no concept of the severity of the disabilities that drive the dysfunctional behaviours. Until it is accepted that these children are as physically and psychologically disabled, some tragically born with a neurological incapacity, others who have acquired an impairment from an injury or those who have suffered the permanent brain damage as a result of abuse and early, persistent childhood trauma. It is the last group that society fails to identify as a the cause of the issue we are all trying to address. It is estimated that between 1% and 11% of the population will suffer PTSD resulting from childhood trauma and in some areas, the proportion can be up to 26%. This is reflected in the suspension data. This abuse results in permanent brain damage that has been put onto these children by adults. In every case it is not the child’s fault and teachers know this.

If the disability was of another kind, such as blindness, physical or intellectual impairment resources would be forthcoming, these problems are easily recognised and attract compassion. However, children with serious behaviour disabilities have no readily recognised indication of the damage they have suffered, the expression of their disability, severe behaviours do not initiate compassion and so they will not receive the attention they deserve.

Any attempt to reduce the availability of what is effectively the only consequence schools can deliver for physical and psychologically dangerous behaviours before all the other recommendations of the new policy have been fully implemented will be met with realistic resentment by schools and teaching staff who are already working in an environment accurately, and accepted unmanageable demands. It is not cynical to dismiss this latest attempt to address the problem children with severe dysfunctional behaviours; this is a problem that is increasingly one for the schools that serve the lowest socio-economic communities. The fact we are still discussing the issue is a national shame.

It is without doubt a question of resources and those resources should be targeted to those areas most in need of the support if any change is to occur. Comprehensive Public Schools, are becoming residualised as parents choose to send their children to private schools who do not enrol students with severe behaviours.

The Liberal/National Parties have funded this exodus. The new figures published in the 2022 Report on Government Services show that government (Commonwealth and state) funding of private schools, adjusted for inflation, increased by \$3,338 per student between 2009-10 and 2019-20 compared to \$703 per student for public schools. The contrast is even worse in percentage terms. Funding per private school student increased by 34% compared to only 5% for public schools, that is, nearly seven times the increase for public schools. Trevor Cobbold, of the Save our Schools points out the growth of the private school system provides an easy alternative for parents who can afford to buy their way out of this problem.

The introduction of this latest behaviour policy produced by another ‘consultancy’ firm, ‘The Telethon Kids Institute’ never addresses the lack of financial resources required to effectively implement their recommendations; failure is inevitable. It is ironic that we are discussing this lack of public-school resourcing on the tenth anniversary of the eminent Gonski Report.

John Frew.

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