

Making Australian Schools Safer

A Summary Report of the Outcomes from the
National Safe Schools Framework Best Practice
Grants Programme
(2004-2005)

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1: THE NATIONAL SAFE SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK BEST PRACTICE GRANTS PROGRAMME

All children have a right to receive an education in a secure and happy learning environment, free from all forms of bullying, harassment, violence, abuse and neglect. To this end, the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) was endorsed by all Australian Ministers of Education in July 2003. The NSSF represents a social vision of how schools can be when they address the issue of bullying and focus on student safety and wellbeing.

In 2004, legislation was passed which requires the NSSF to be implemented in all Australian schools by 1 January 2006. Education Ministers further agreed that implementation of the NSSF will be reported on annually, through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs' (MCEETYA) *Annual National Report on Schooling in Australia* (ANR).

The NSSF is guided by the social vision that '*All Australian schools are safe and supportive environments*', and provides advice and strategies which schools may use to ensure such environments are in place. The eleven guiding principles of the NSSF are that all Australian schools: These are that Australian schools:

1. affirm the right of all school community members to feel safe at school
2. promote care, respect, and cooperation and value diversity
3. implement policies, programmes and processes to nurture a safe and supportive school environment
4. recognise that quality leadership is an essential element that underpins the creation of a safe and supportive school environment
5. develop and implement policies and programmes through processes that engage the whole school community
6. ensure that the roles and responsibilities of all members of the school community in promoting a safe and supportive environment are explicit, clearly understood and disseminated
7. recognise the critical importance of pre-service and ongoing professional development in creating a safe and supportive school environment
8. have a responsibility to provide opportunities for students to learn through the formal curriculum the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for positive relationships
9. focus on policies that are proactive and oriented towards prevention and intervention
10. regularly monitor and evaluate their policies and programmes so that evidence-based practice
11. take action to protect children from all forms of abuse and neglect.

During 2004–2005, the Australian Government provided a \$4.5 million package of measures to support implementation of the NSSF. As part of this package, \$1 million was dedicated to a Best Practice Grants Programme to support schools in developing and evaluating effective ways of ensuring safe school environments.

The National Coalition Against Bullying (NCAB), through The Alannah and Madeline Foundation (AMF) managed the National Safe Schools Framework Best Practice Grants Programme on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). Some 171 schools (involving 97 projects) received a grant under the National Safe Schools Framework Best

Practice Grants Programme. These schools were a reasonably representative sample of Australian schools in terms of location, size, sector, size of student population, socio-economic backgrounds and special student groups. More schools opted to undertake their projects as part of a cluster than as single schools.

2: WHAT SCHOOLS DID IN THEIR PROJECTS

There was enormous variation in what schools and clusters actually did in their projects to address the concept of Safe Schools. The major focus of most school and cluster projects was on bullying. School projects are discussed in terms of the six **Key Elements** of the NSSF which are:

1. School values, ethos, culture, structures and student welfare
2. Establishment of agreed policies, programmes and procedures
3. Provision of education and training to school staff, students and parents
4. Managing incidents of abuse and victimisation
5. Providing support for students
6. Working closely with parents.

1. School Values, Ethos, Culture, Structures and Student Welfare

School Values and Culture

The main conclusion that can be made from those projects which included some focus on school ethos and culture is that there are many different direct and indirect ways to develop a positive and pro-social school culture. Many schools reported that especially the values of respect, compassion/support and acceptance of differences, was a useful approach. Others found that arranging for students to take part in open discussions about bullying and harassment also contributed to a culture of support and respect. Many schools reported that they believed that their adoption of 'restorative practices' as part of their project had improved their school ethos and encouraged students to develop and act in accordance with values such as compassion and fairness.

School Structures

Secondary schools that used peer support structures and student leadership programmes as a means of empowering students found that these provided very effective processes for improving school cultures and climates.

Links with Student Welfare

Several schools linked their projects with other initiatives in the area of student welfare. Some focused on the early identification of students at risk of anti-social behaviour or not completing school. Others carried out an audit of their current student welfare programmes to identify areas for improvement and change. Whole-school celebrations and events and the use of strategies and structures to enhance staff-student relationships were found by many schools to assist in developing a positive school culture.

2. The Establishment of Policies, Procedures and Programmes

Whole School Approach

Many schools adopted a whole-school approach, and those that did so felt that it had been a major factor in the success of their project. They reported a stronger sense of school ownership of their

Safe Schools policies, procedures and programmes.

Policies

At the start of their projects, 69% of single schools and 48% of cluster schools already had an anti-bullying policy in place and a further 24% of schools developed one during their project. This means that 76% of project schools now have policies. Many of the schools who already had a policy re-developed and refined it. Some took the opportunity to make stronger links between their school's anti-bullying policy, their sexual harassment policy and their behaviour management policy/code of conduct.

Procedures

Changes made by schools in relation to procedures related to the prevention and management of bullying included:

- developing more effective procedures for students to report bullying, such as dedicated email systems
- establishing more effective methods of recording and tracking bullying and harassment in order to identify and address patterns
- improving teacher supervision in the playground, especially in areas identified in student surveys as being more at risk.
- providing more stimulating lunchtime activities and more sporting and games equipment
- using staff meetings to address bullying issues
- enhancing the transition from primary to secondary school to prevent potential bullying situations and student apprehension about bullying

Programmes

Most schools implemented some form of programme to raise awareness of bullying amongst students, teachers and parents. Many of these programmes also focused on developing positive school environments and on teaching social and emotional learning skills (eg social and resilience skills) that are related to Safe Schools. The two most commonly included general approaches to programming across all school types were peer support and the teaching of social skills, followed by values education programmes and restorative practices programmes

Primary schools were more inclined than secondary schools and K-10/K-12 schools to use published broad-based programmes. The two specific published programmes that were most commonly implemented were Bounce Back! (McGrath & Noble, 2003) and Program Achieve / You Can Do It! (Bernard et al, 1995). Although it had only just been published at the time of the project, some schools had started to use the Friendly Schools and Families programme.

Customising

Many schools customised what they did in their project to suit their school's needs by developing their own programmes, adapting or combining published programmes or adding compatible programme components such as values education or restorative practices. Some made adaptations and additions to cater for the perceived distinctive needs of boys and girls in relation to bullying. Project schools that customised their programme strongly endorsed this approach.

Involvement with the Local Community

Involvement with the local community was an aspect in several projects, with some project schools becoming involved, for example, with senior citizen groups, the police force, local dance competitions and the local council. They developed anti-bullying resources, multi-media kits, drama and dance performances and competitions. Schools that involved the community in this

way reported that this had produced many benefits such as the communication of consistent messages about bullying between the school and the broader community. A few schools found that collaborating with community agencies and youth organisations had helped them to deliver more effective safe schools programmes.

3. Education and Training

Nearly every project contained a significant component of education and training for teachers, students and/or staff. A few schools taught proactive bystander skills to students and reported that bystander support for victimised students had increased. A wide range of educational activities for students were incorporated including activities inspired by BullyingNoWay! and MindMatters, a book club unit on bullying, a round-robin awareness day, drama-based curriculum units that culminated in community performances, and activities that led to the creation of anti-bullying resources such as resource kits, DVDs, badges and fridge magnets. Some schools organised performances about bullying for students that were delivered by commercial theatre groups. Special schools found that appropriate rule-based programmes were effective with their students.

Student Engagement with Safe Schools Education

Many schools focused on ensuring that engaging activities and approaches were used in anti-bullying education initiatives. A number of schools found that one effective way in which engagement was enhanced was through student ownership. Students initiated and developed their own approaches, materials and campaigns to educate other students, their teachers and parents about bullying and other safety issues. Many schools used a peer tutoring approach whereby students from the local high school ran bullying awareness and education sessions for students at the primary school, usually based around drama. In one secondary school students collected data and developed case studies around bullying to promote empathy and understanding amongst their teachers.

Training for Non-teaching Staff

Two schools also involved school bus drivers and other non-teaching staff in their anti-bullying education programmes.

Professional Learning

Professional learning opportunities were provided for teachers as part of most schools' projects. The most common professional learning activities focused on understanding and managing bullying. Another significant focus was on strategies for teaching social skills and/or resilience. Restorative practices were also a common focus for professional learning.

4. Managing Incidents of Victimisation

Most of the project schools that incorporated the element of management of incidents of victimisation took one of the following three approaches:

- The development of more consistent and effective teacher responses to bullying situations
- The implementation or refinement of a non-punitive approach to bullying (eg the no-blame or shared concern approach)
- The implementation of a restorative approach to bullying.

Teacher Consistency

Schools that had worked towards developing teacher consistency reported satisfaction with the short-term outcomes but recognised that it would take time and ongoing training to achieve longer-term outcomes.

Non-punitive Approaches to Management

Schools that had adopted a non-punitive approach were guardedly positive about the outcomes but noted that there had been some parent resistance to the approach and that back-up procedures were also needed in case the non-punitive approach didn't work.

The Restorative Approach to Management

The most commonly implemented initiative was the restorative approach. Although there was great variation between schools in terms of which aspects of a restorative approach they adopted, most were very satisfied with the outcomes and planned to continue with the approach. However schools also reported some concerns with the restorative approach. Some teachers found it a difficult approach to use and they preferred to refer students to a small number of trained staff for restorative discussions and conferences rather than using the approach themselves. A restorative approach to management was perceived to be very time-consuming. A small number of students declined to take part in restorative groups and conferences and some parents did not agree with the direction taken.

5. Support for Students

Extra Teacher and Peer Support

In a few project schools, extra teacher support was given to vulnerable students in the form of teacher mentoring. Students provided support to other students in many project schools through, for example, peer mediation, peer counselling, the establishment of Safe Schools Monitors, and buddy systems. All schools that included peer support schemes reported very positive outcomes but did not make direct links between these programmes and reductions in bullying.

Early intervention

Early intervention for students 'at risk' for anti-social behaviour was a component of a few projects. Small-group social skills/pro-social values programmes were the most common form of intervention, either before school entry or during the first year of school entry. The primary schools that adopted this early intervention approach reported that the majority of students who took part had not become involved in aggressive behaviour or bullying during their first year at the school.

6. Working Closely with Parents

Most schools involved parents to some degree in their projects (e.g. by asking them to complete surveys, take part in focus groups or attend parent information sessions) but a small number focused *strongly* on parent involvement.

How Parents Were Involved

Parents were involved in the process of developing safe schools in a range of different ways, such as:

- being parent representatives on student wellbeing committees
- working with teachers and students in the development or refinement of policy and procedures
- attending workshops and forums on bullying and related areas
- providing feedback on draft school policies and school initiatives.

Some took part in workshops to improve their own social skills. Schools that did work closely with parents reported a new understanding of the importance of involving parents in their development of Safe Schools and giving them a 'voice'.

Difficulties in Involving Parents

A significant number of the schools that focused on working with parents, as well as many of the schools for whom it was a minor focus, reported that they had found it difficult to engage parents in anti-bullying education, activities and policy-making, and that they had been disappointed with parent responses to surveys and their attendance at organised sessions. Some had also encountered parental resistance to some new initiatives. One of the challenges for schools that undertake to enhance their Safe Schools initiatives is to find effective ways to engage parents.

3: PROJECT OUTCOMES

All schools and clusters were required to evaluate the effectiveness of their projects and a variety of methods was used by the 171 schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their projects, including:

- student and parent surveys about bullying (before and after the project)
- statistical data (e.g. incidents, detentions, suspension and absenteeism)
- focus group interviews with selected students, teachers and staff
- anecdotal feedback and observations from staff, students and parents
- parent feedback about anti-bullying policies, brochures and materials
- reports from anti-bullying sub-committees
- student and teacher evaluations of specific programme components.

The Usefulness of Collecting Data

A great many schools commented on how useful they had found the collection of data to be in informing their project and their directions for the future. In many cases, the teachers and general school community had been unaware of the extent of the bullying problem in their school until they collected survey data or ran focus group interviews. Most intended to continue collecting data in this way.

Positive Outcomes

Half of all project schools reported that they had achieved many or all of their intended project outcomes. Most reported a significant shift towards developing environments that promote and support more open discussion about bullying and 65% reported that their school culture had improved 'greatly or significantly', or 'a lot' as a result of their project.

Most schools found that working on their projects had been a positive and beneficial experience for them in a range of other ways as well. The positive outcome that was reported most often by schools was that there was now a greater awareness about bullying in their school community. Many schools recognised that the NSSF Best Practice Grant money had provided them with an opportunity to start an important process in their school. There was also a perception in several schools that the project had acted as a catalyst for programme and policy review both in the narrower anti-bullying picture and also the broader behaviour management and welfare picture.

Projects had clearly engendered feelings of optimism in many schools, which resulted in more confidence about undertaking additional initiatives. For many schools, their data collection confirmed that they were 'on the right track', leading them to feel more enthusiastic about continuing with their project. Other frequently mentioned indicators of success were: increased teacher confidence in handling bullying incidents; a greater acceptance of the important role teachers can play in discouraging bullying; a greater preparedness to develop the skills to prevent and manage bullying.

Many schools reported that their rates of time out, detention and suspension had decreased as a result of their Safe Schools initiatives, especially for certain students. Other outcomes that schools reported in relation to positive changes in student behaviour included:

- increases in students behaving in a more pro-social way
- improved peer relationships
- students being more prepared to speak up openly about bullying
- increases in respectful behaviour by students towards both peers and teachers
- improved teacher–student relationships.

Positive parent awareness about bullying and greater support from parents were also mentioned by many schools as indicators of success. One school reported that the language used about by some of their parents (in regards to bullying) changed, in that it became more knowledge-based than emotive. Working in partnership with parents on Safe Schools initiatives appeared to provide a school with another positive way to improve its relationships with the school community as a whole.

Several schools reported increased enrolments as a result of the changed and more positive perception from the community of how the school managed bullying, its level of safety and its pro-social environment.

4: PROJECT ISSUES

New Students

One issue that confronted a number of schools was the enrolment during the life of the project of newly-arrived refugees or new students transferring into the school with challenging behaviour patterns or a history of bullying. Schools developed a variety of strategies, such as induction programmes and peer mentoring, to support such students and help them to learn about the school's values and its anti-bullying stance.

Staff Commitment

The resistance of some staff to changes proposed or made during the project was an inhibiting factor in several schools. Resistance arose in most cases from differing underlying philosophies about how bullying should be handled or lack of acceptance of particular programmes or approaches. One school spoke of 'the ebb and flow of teacher enthusiasm' with a resultant loss of momentum for the project, and the loss of momentum that occurred over the long holiday break in December/January.

Resources and Time

Many schools noted that they had underestimated how long it would take them to develop a policy, organise a parent forum and locate appropriate, user-friendly and engaging resources to implement specific programmes or initiatives. Many also commented on the lack of appropriate resource material and the difficulty of knowing which ones do and do not have credibility. Similarly, many schools had difficulties in identifying and accessing appropriate and expert professionals to work with them as consultants or providers of professional learning units on bullying-related areas.

Sustainability Issues

Many schools stressed the importance of being able to sustain the programmes and practices they

had introduced or refined during their project and expressed some concerns as to the most effective way to do so. Those schools that had customised their programmes and approaches to suit their schools reported more confidence in the sustainability of what they had done. Project schools with special circumstances or students adapted programmes and practices to suit their students and context. Special circumstances included high levels of poverty, transient student populations, and having many families from a variety of Non-English speaking backgrounds. Adaptations included translating surveys and educational material for parents into a range of languages, teaching resilience and moving more slowly with their programmes.

Staff turnover was a very major issue for nearly all schools. This resulted in loss of expertise that was difficult to replace, a lack of awareness by new staff of pre-existing programmes and approaches and their components and hence lower levels of ownership by new staff. Staff loss and change also contributed a slowing-down of the project as new relationships had to be developed. Staff loss was a particular problem in smaller schools.

Working as a Cluster

All schools working in clusters reported that they found this experience to be very positive. Working as a cluster provided a rich collection of knowledge and experiences on which all schools could draw. They perceived that working in this collaborative way had significant benefits for all involved. These benefits included: the promotion of professional dialogue and support; the opportunity collaboratively to develop and share resources; the identification of common issues; the enhancement of existing networks; positive effects on the whole community; the sharing of costs; the development of inter-school collegiality. The four key issues that arose for several schools working in clusters were:

- inconsistencies between schools
- delays in getting the project started because of different starting points
- the need to take time to build relationships
- the problem of maintaining school confidentiality when data and information is shared.

5: GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS IN DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING SAFE SCHOOLS

Six overarching themes emerged from project school's reports and they are also consistent with the outcomes from many previous research studies into school-based anti-bullying initiatives as well as related school-based prevention programmes (e.g. anti-violence programmes and substance abuse prevention) and school-based programmes focusing on wellbeing and social and emotional learning. All six themes link strongly to the guiding principles and key elements of the National Safe Schools Framework. They are:

1. Take a whole school approach.
2. Plan for and create a caring, respectful, inclusive and supportive school culture.
3. Use evidence-based practice.
4. Use a risk management approach.
5. Focus on skill development.
6. Plan for sustainability.

These themes and principles are summarised below. A more detailed elaboration of each theme can be found in the Appendices to this summary report.

Theme 1: Take A Whole-School Approach

This theme reflects two of the guiding principles of the NSSF, which are: *'Recognise that quality leadership is an essential element that underpins the creation of a safe and supportive school environment'* and *'Develop and implement policies and programmes through processes that engage the whole school community'*. It also links to the second key element of the NSSF, which is a focus on *'the establishment of agreed policies, programmes and procedures'*.

Key Points

- Effective leadership is needed to collaboratively develop a long-term whole-school plan and the commitment of all members of the school community.
- Develop a Safe Schools policy in partnership with staff, students and parents, and communicate common understandings about bullying and harassment. Emphasise that *'bullying is everybody's problem'*.
- Review the school's current discipline and welfare policies and related practices and protocols to ensure their alignment with the school's Safe Schools policy.
- Work in partnership with parents. Find positive ways to engage them in Safe Schools initiatives, keep them informed and encourage them to model anti-bullying and pro-social attitudes and behaviour for their children.
- Ensure student participation in and ownership of components of Safe Schools initiatives wherever possible.
- Develop and teach a culturally and developmentally appropriate Safe Schools curriculum.
- Work collaboratively to ensure that Safe Schools programmes and practices are embedded within the curriculum and regular life of the school and not just *'added on'*.
- Involve the local community in Safe Schools initiatives.

Theme 2: Plan for and Create a Caring, Respectful, Inclusive and Supportive School Culture

This theme reflects two additional guiding principles of the NSSF: *'Australian schools promote care, respect and cooperation and value diversity'* and *'Australian schools implement policies, programmes and processes to nurture a safe and supportive school environment'*. It also links to the first key element of the NSSF, which focuses on *'school values, ethos, culture, structures and student welfare'*.

Key Points

- Promote the development of positive relationships across the school. This includes organising opportunities for meaningful same-age and cross-age peer interactions, staff-student interactions and staff-staff interactions.
- Communicate the expectation that all teachers are responsible for addressing bullying in the school even if they have no direct teaching or welfare responsibility for the specific students involved.
- Directly teach pro-social values across the curriculum and promote them across the school community. Focus especially on acceptance of difference and respect. Ensure that students understand that all discriminatory and contemptuous attitudes (e.g. sexist, racist and homophobic) are unacceptable and will be challenged.
- Work towards achieving congruence between the school's policy and its programmes and daily practices. For example, teachers should model pro-social values and anti-bullying attitudes in their teaching and classroom organisation, their interactions with students, colleagues and parents and their behaviour management strategies. What is stated as policy and taught in the formal curriculum should be consistent with students' daily experiences.
- Establish peer support structures that reinforce pro-social values and offer support to students.
- Use relationship-based teaching and learning strategies such as cooperative Learning and small-group enquiry-based group tasks
- Develop an induction programme for new students that includes: a manual for teachers that outlines ways to assist students to fit in with the school's culture; student-produced materials about the school's values and expectations; small-group sessions to teach them about the school's anti-bullying policy and expectations; opportunities to learn relevant skills; peer mentors.

Theme 3: Use Evidence-based Practice

This theme reflects one of the guiding principles of the NSSF, namely '*Australian schools regularly monitor and evaluate their policies and programmes so that evidence-based practice supports decisions and improvements*'.

Key Points

- Use a critical evidence-based approach, in terms of both content and pedagogy, to the selection and adoption of Safe Schools programmes and practices.
- Use multiple components and strategies rather than relying on a single component or programme.
- Work towards 'school ownership' of adopted programmes and practices by customising and integrating them to meet the needs of the school community.

Theme 4: Use a Risk Management Approach

This theme links to the fifth key element of the NSSF, which is *'providing support for students'*.

Key Points

- Establish secure reporting systems that enable students to let teachers know about bullying and harassment.
- Collect ongoing data on behaviour and attitudes that are related to Safe Schools. Maintain systematic records of bullying situations and harassment incidents in order to identify patterns and improvements.
- Identify and manage specific school locations or times that increase the likelihood of bullying.
- Ensure early supportive intervention for specific students whose behaviour identifies them as being more likely to engage in bullying or other anti-social behaviour. Similarly, identify students at risk for social isolation and possible victimisation and provide them with early supportive intervention as well.
- Ensure that all new students are aware of the school's policy, values and expectations in regards to bullying, harassment and pro-social behaviour.
- In secondary schools more time and effort needs to be put into the development of Safe Schools initiatives and more work needs to be done on the development of a positive school culture.

Theme 5: Focus on Skill Development

This theme reflects the following guiding principles of the NSSF, namely *'Australian schools recognise the critical importance of pre-service and ongoing professional development in creating a safe and supportive school environment'*. It also links to the third and fourth key elements of the NSSF, which are a focus on *'provision of education and training to school staff, students and parents'* and on *'managing incidents of abuse and victimisation'*.

Key Points

- Directly teach social skills and resilience skills to students and organise and identify opportunities for students to practise them.
- Teach all students a range of skills that can assist them to respond effectively to bullying and focus particularly on the importance of talking to an adult about it. Avoid an approach that blames students who are bullied for the abusive behaviour they receive.
- Directly teach bystander skills to students to increase the likelihood that they will support peers.
- Provide professional learning opportunities that will enable teachers to develop the range of management and teaching skills needed to develop Safe Schools such as:

- o skills for teaching a social and emotional learning curriculum
- o effective classroom management skills
- o skills for responding to bullying situations.

Theme 6: Plan for Sustainability

This theme reflects one of the guiding principles of the NSSF, namely *'Australian schools regularly monitor and evaluate their policies and programmes so that evidence-based practice supports decisions and improvements'*.

Key Points

- Regularly review and refine all Safe Schools policies, programmes and practices using a process of a continuous refinement and improvement.
- Ensure that teachers have ready access of a variety of sound and engaging Safe Schools resources.
- Plan for the inevitable loss of key staff and arrival of new staff to ensure maintenance of programmes and consistency of practices.
- Address the ongoing challenge of maintaining teacher commitment over time.