

8 August 2024

The Secretary
Government Administration Committee A
House of Assembly
Parliament House
Hobart TAS 7000

Lodged via email: assemblygaa@parliament.tas.gov.au

Dear Secretary

Re: Inquiry into bullying and discrimination in Tasmanian schools

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into your inquiry into bullying and discrimination in Tasmanian schools, and the impact these have on students and staff.

headspace welcomes this inquiry and considers that it will be helpful to better understand and prevent bullying and discrimination in Tasmanian schools. In our submission, we have included the views of a headspace Youth National Reference Group (hyNRG) member from Tasmania (in green text).

About headspace

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. headspace has 161 services across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas (including four in Tasmania), and offers online and phone support services and digital resources through eheadspace. headspace provides multidisciplinary care for mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drug use, and work and study needs. More information about headspace programs is provided in Attachment 1.

When a young person is experiencing bullying and harassment and needs support, headspace provides support via both in-person (centre based) and online (eheadspace) programs. We also provide resources for young people and their families to help create an understanding of bullying and harassment (including cyberbullying) and how to respond.

The impact of bullying and discrimination

Young people tell us that bullying and discrimination can impact significantly on their mental health. Experiencing bullying can be traumatic and have a lasting impact. As the member of hyNRG said:

The impacts bullying has on young people is far larger than it may seem. Many people like myself come out on the other side a completely different person than before, some don't even make it out. The effects can last a lifetime.

Bullying, harassment and discrimination can affect a person's performance at school, university, TAFE or work, and can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide.¹ Our hyNRG member described the impact of his experiences at school:

¹ See for example: Suicide Prevention Australia, *Social-economic and environmental determinants of suicide: Background paper*, August 2023.

Bullying was a constant throughout my high school years...The impacts this had on my life have been vast and lasting, many of which I still battle with today.

(During Year 8) I was on track for professional academy trials but started to face panic attacks and fear being seen as less than I was. This devastated my dream of being a professional footballer and largely amounted to hatred of playing a game I had once loved.

After another year of abuse, I began failing in school. I would return home with bruises all over my body and grazes from where I had been thrown, punched and kicked. I began to show signs of depression, difficulty leaving my bed and the house. I started to have thoughts of suicide and stopped planning for any future as I wasn't sure I would have one.

I lied to my parents out of fear that speaking out would only make the treatment worse. This resulted in my parents and I falling out, a relationship I still haven't been able to repair today.

Particular cohorts of young people experience higher rates of bullying and discrimination. For example, a disproportionate number of LGBTIQ+ young people experience poor mental health, and this has been directly related to experiences of stigma, prejudice, discrimination and abuse because of identifying as LGBTIQ+.²

First Nations young people also experience high rates of bullying and discrimination. In Mission Australia's 2019 Youth Survey, three in ten (30%) of First Nations young people said they had experienced bullying during the past 12 months, compared to two in ten (20%) of non-Indigenous respondents.³ Nearly three-quarters (73%) had experienced bullying at school, TAFE or university.

As a First Nations young person, in school it was hard for me to be open about my culture. I was forced to hide that side of me out of fear. There were many times where I was discriminated against by schoolmates for being too 'fair' to be an aboriginal person. This made me feel as if I had to prove myself to be aboriginal, but without mentors or any connection to my mob I felt isolated. Eventually, I felt embarrassed to be aboriginal and had thoughts to stop declaring that I was.

The challenge of cyberbullying

Today's young people have grown up with social media as an integral to their lives and the way that they communicate and access information. As the ubiquity of social media has increased, cyberbullying has grown as a major challenge.

In 2021, the eSafety Commissioner reported that 44% of young people in Australia had a negative online experience in a six month period, including 15% who had received threats or abuse online.⁴ headspace's 2022 National Youth Mental Health Survey found that six in ten young people (61%) had experienced some form of cyberbullying in their lifetime. This included having someone threaten to hurt them; post hurtful or mean comments about them; spread rumors about them online; or excluding them from group chats or messages.⁵

When this happens, young people can find it difficult to reach out for support. They can feel embarrassed, blame themselves, be worried about being seen as weak, or worry that they won't be believed, will make the situation worse, or risk parents or teachers monitoring or limit their internet access.

Young people need to know that there are ways to tackle cyberbullying and that it is ok to reach out for support and to talk about it. Educators and schools are well positioned to communicate this to young

² LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, *Beyond urgent: National LGBTIQ+ mental health and suicide prevention strategy 2021-2026*, 2023.

³ Mission Australia, *Youth Survey Report 2019*, 2019.

⁴ eSafety Commissioner, *The digital lives of Aussie teens*, 2021.

⁵ headspace National, *National Youth Mental Health Survey*, 2022 (unpublished).

people, and to provide information and education on how to respond to cyberbullying and where to get support.

Preventing bullying, discrimination and harassment in schools

Many schools in Tasmania are working to build positive school environments, with trusting and supporting relationships between and within students, educators, support staff and parents. This is foundational to establishing respectful cultures where bullying, harassment and discrimination are eliminated. This includes adopting and reinforcing clear standards and expectations for behaviour.

Training for teachers and school staff in identifying and responding to bullying and discrimination is essential. Beyond knowing the school's policies and processes, staff must feel they have the skills and capacity to respond when a student is experiencing bullying. Our hyNRG member described his experience in reporting the bullying he was experiencing:

I had spoken with many teachers about what was happening to me. No action was ever taken. I believe that this was less about teachers not knowing what was happening and more about teachers not understanding how to help someone in that position. In one instance I was even punished for finally sticking up for myself after I had warned teachers that was what I was going to do if they didn't take action. As a result, I never spoke to anyone about what was happening to me again.

Students and families need to be involved in developing positive school cultures and addressing bullying and discrimination. Young people are experts in their own lives and experiences, and have the right to be actively involved in decisions that impact them. Supporting young people to help design and implement antidiscrimination measures and bullying prevention helps ensure these activities are relevant, trusted and effective.

Youth advocacy is especially important in addressing this issue as young people have the power to take action in their own schools. They have the power to speak up about what is happening to others, and they have the power to advocate for additional training for teachers to better support students in need.

The headspace model is built on youth participation, and headspace is proactive in providing opportunities for young people to guide headspace's direction and ensure voices that have historically been overlooked are heard. To do this meaningfully, we have adapted the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Framework, which was designed to support effective engagement through providing a range of levels of public participation. Young people and families are invited to participate at all levels of the organisation. We would be pleased to provide the Committee with more information about what this looks like in practice and how school communities could adopt a similar approach.

Supporting young people's mental health

Beyond addressing bullying and discrimination, schools support young people's mental wellbeing more broadly. Having trusted relationships with supportive adults is a protective factor for a young person's mental health, and many educators fulfil this role for young people.⁶ Educators are also well positioned to observe and respond to signs of poor mental health and wellbeing (such as students acting out of character, avoiding friends, or talking more about difficulties).

In addition, schools can:

- help build mental health literacy within school communities, providing tools and strategies when young people experience challenging life events and transitions

⁶ State of Victoria (2021). *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Final Report, Volume 2: Collaboration to support good mental health and wellbeing*, Parliamentary Paper No. 202, Session 2018–21 (document 3 of 6).

- foster school connectedness, by encouraging positive relationships and providing safe and supportive learning environments
- adopt a trauma-informed approach to support student wellbeing
- promote mental health literacy and implementing wellbeing initiatives within schools, such as the Be You initiative or headspace's Mental Health Education Program.

Linking schools with mental health services

While educators are well positioned to recognise and respond to students' mental wellbeing needs, it is not a role they can – or should – undertake in isolation from professional health services.

Students are best supported when there are strong links between schools and local health and mental health services, who can provide access to multidisciplinary, holistic mental health care.

A role of school and community-based mental health practitioners is to work with other services and coordinate supports for students with more complex needs. This needs to be resourced and promoted by schools and education departments.

Many schools in Tasmania – particularly in regional and rural areas – find it difficult to partner with local mental health services because they often struggle to recruit and retain mental health clinicians and maintain capacity to meet local needs. While digital services such as eheadspace and online supports can mitigate this gap to a degree, increased investment in local youth mental health services (particularly through sufficient and sustainable funding) is vital to create capacity within communities to respond to the needs of young people.

Safeguarding students

We understand that the Department of Education for Children and Young People are now providing mandatory training, as a whole of department approach to ensure schools and communities are better safeguarding children in schools. A future module in this training could encompass ways to consistently respond to and support children who are being discriminated against or bullied in the school setting. Such a preventive measure aligns with best practice principles for safeguarding children.

headspace would welcome the opportunity to discuss bullying and discrimination in Tasmanian schools and the impact on youth mental health in more detail with the Government Administration Committee A.

Attachment 1: headspace programs and services

headspace provides early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. headspace offers young people support across mental health, physical and sexual health, alcohol and other drugs, and work and study – providing an integrated service horizontally across these domains of care.

Our integrated services provide the holistic, multi-faceted support that is a necessary component of a responsive service system model. This includes:

- **headspace centres:** the headspace network of services are youth-friendly, integrated service hubs, where multidisciplinary teams provide holistic support across the four core streams.
- **community awareness:** guided by local youth reference groups and centre staff, Community Awareness Officers at each headspace centre work locally to build mental health literacy, reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking, identify local needs and ensure young people know they can access help at headspace.
- **digital mental health programs and resources:** headspace uses its digital platform to make a range of information and supports accessible to young people, parents and carers, professionals and educators.
- **ehespace:** our virtual service provides safe, secure support to young people and their family and friends from experienced youth mental health professionals via email, webchat or phone. There are also online group sessions led by clinicians or peers, focused on the big issues facing young people and their family and friends.
- **headspace regional telephone counselling service:** headspace offers integrated holistic teleweb support for students in eligible schools in regional Victoria (locations more than 50km from a headspace centre).
- **headspace campaigns:** campaigns focus on stigma reduction, building mental health literacy and encouraging help seeking, while ensuring young people know headspace is a safe and trusted place they can turn to in order to support their mental health.
- **headspace in schools and universities:** Through evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention and postvention services, headspace delivers key initiatives designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of school communities. This includes:
 - **Be You** – a mental health and wellbeing initiative for learning communities. In particular, headspace can support secondary schools to prepare for, respond to and recover together where there has been a death by suicide.
 - **Mental Health Education Program** – this program provides free mental health education workshops for schools
 - **University support program** – this provides training and education opportunities to Australian universities to build their capacity and confidence to engage in conversations about mental health and wellbeing
- **programs and resources to support hard-to-reach cohorts of young people:** these include
 - **Visible project** – a community based initiative using artwork as a form of community engagement and awareness.
 - **Yarn Safe** – mental health and wellbeing resources and support for First Nations young people.
- **vocational supports:** headspace centres provide integrated mental health and vocational support to young people to help them remain engaged in work and study, including implementing Individual Placement and Support (IPS) in headspace centres. In addition, headspace provides vocational support via:
 - **headspace Work and Study Online (hWS)** is a national digital program that provides integrated mental health and vocational support via the phone, video conferencing, online

messaging and email. hWS works closely with young people across their work/study journey from identifying work/study goals to maintaining a work/study placement, typically for a period of around three months.

- **headspace Career Mentoring** connects young people aged 18 to 25 years living with mental health challenges with industry professionals to meet fortnightly over a period of six months via video conferencing and/or the phone to enhance a young person's employment and career opportunities.