



Safe Schools Coalition WA Panel Event

Supporting trans and gender diverse students in WA schools

21 September 2017

- Welcome and thanks.
- Acknowledge and pay respects to the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today.
- Outline background in education.

My role as Commissioner is to work with the WA community to improve the wellbeing of all children and young people.

The role is independent and I report directly to the Western Australian Parliament.

My overarching responsibility is to give paramount consideration in all of my work for the best interests of children and young people in WA.

I am required to give priority to, and have a special regard for, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

My office needs to remain well informed about issues affecting children and young people, and there are four main ways we gather this information:

- consulting children and young people directly to find out what they think about their wellbeing
- speaking with families, community groups and government
- considering the latest evidence and data concerning children and young people's wellbeing
- conducting research or inquiries where additional information is required.

Once I have this information, I advocate for changes to policies, legislation and services that will improve the lives of WA children.

I push for this change by:

- making submissions to State and Commonwealth bodies
- meeting regularly with ministers and department directors general
- tabling reports in the WA Parliament outlining key issues affecting children and young people's wellbeing
- publishing a range of resources (including teaching resources for educators)
- holding seminars and training events for staff of government and non-government organisations
- coordinating events and activities to promote public awareness and understanding of matters relating to the wellbeing of children and young people
- and speaking – and listening - at relevant forums such as today's event.

In my role I must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – now over 25 years old and ratified by almost 200 countries.

The UN Rights of the Child aims to ensure children and young people have access to everything they need to thrive and contribute to society.

All children have the fundamental right to live a full life and develop healthily.

All children have a right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and have their opinions taken into account.

There are now 590,000 children and young people under the age of 18 in WA.

More than a quarter of all our young people live in regional and remote areas of WA.

While I am yet to see a conclusive figure on how many trans and gender diverse children and young people are in WA, using the estimation that approximately 11 in 100 Australians are of diverse gender, sexuality or are intersex, it is possible to estimate that over 60,000 of children and young people in WA are, or will, identify in the future, as LGBTI, with many identifying as trans or gender diverse.

All of us here this evening know that education is important for young people to reach their full potential.

Education is raised in some way by young people in almost every consultation undertaken by my office, regardless of the consultation topic.

After family and friends, children regularly identify school and learning as having the utmost importance to them.

I am currently reviewing the findings from a consultation with 1,800 students across WA on school and learning.

While we know a lot about the importance of education, there is limited information on what WA children think about their schooling, what helps them and hinders them.

Students were asked questions around:

- what they like and don't like about school?
- what helps them, or makes it hard, for them to learn?
- how important is it to be at school each day?
- how important was it to have friends?
- what is important about teachers, ie what attributes do you like or dislike?
- what support do they need?
- in what ways do families help or not help them in their schooling?

We are particularly looking at the importance of relationships and what helps to build positive relationships at school.

Some students who participated in the consultation indicated that students who identified as LGBTI in our school and learning survey were bullied by their peers and teachers about their gender identity or sexual orientation. This is consistent with what we know from other research.

Before I go further, let me acknowledge that while I refer to LGBTI children and young people, I acknowledge that this term is a collective one and that trans and gender diverse children and young people have their own specific experiences and needs which may be very different to other young people with diverse sexuality.

Students wanted education for teachers and students, and for schools to be accepting of diversity.

Students also wanted teachers to be proactive in protecting students from fights and bullying, particularly younger students.

They expressed a desire for schools and school staff to take action and prioritise student safety.

While very few students (less than 10) who took part in the survey identified their gender as 'other', I can provide for you an overview of what they said:

- none of this small cohort said they liked school a lot,
- they did not feel that teachers treat students fairly most of the time,
- and also did not feel that teachers go out of their way to help/talk to students if needed.

This group of students was also unlikely to say that regular attendance was very important to them and that their learning at school is very valuable.

However they all wanted to do further education/training after completing Year 12.

The responses from these students, however small in number, indicate that many schools may not be creating the right learning environments for trans or gender diverse students.

Research shows that a high proportion of homophobic and transphobic bullying occurs in the school environment, and I am very concerned about the significant impact that this has on the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTI children and young people.

As secretary of the Tasmanian Department of Education I released a state-based Respectful Schools Respectful Behaviour framework which clearly defined the responsibility of schools to be aware of their obligations under the Anti-Discrimination Act, had staff who were informed, aware of the sensitivities involved and treated everyone within their school community with understanding and respect.

My office is currently preparing an issues paper on LGBTI children and young people which will guide some further work in this area for my office, and I'm committed to working alongside Government and the non-Government sector to not only improve outcomes for LGBTI children and young people, but to ensure that their voices are heard about the things that are important to them.

This includes hearing specifically from trans and gender diverse young people, and promoting their specific rights.

I'm aware of the work undertaken as part of the Trans Pathway project, which we are hearing more about tonight, and I commend Telethon Kids Institute for undertaking this important work and hope that this research leads to both a better understanding of the needs of trans and gender diverse children and young people, and better outcomes and experiences.

I am keen to see greater support for any trans or gender diverse student in school.

All students should have access to quality and supportive educational environments, regardless of their sexuality or gender status.

I believe that all schools need to have a whole-of-school approach to how they will address discrimination, violence and abuse towards LGBTI children and young people, and clear strategies to create inclusive and supportive environments and settings for these children and young people to learn and participate.

I am pleased that funding to the Safe Schools program has continued in Western Australia under the State Government, and I am keen to see how schools implement this to ensure that all LGBTI children and young people can feel safe and supported in their school and learning.

This also goes beyond our schools. We need a whole-of-Government approach, to ensure policies and practices are inclusive of LGBTI children and young people and that we provide adequate funding to services that address needs of LGBTI children and young people across Western Australia.

We also need education and community awareness raising strategies that promote understanding, respect and inclusion of LGBTI children and young people.

These need to be directed towards children and young people, their peers, families, communities, and at the professionals that support them.

It is vital that all schools understand their students and are responsive to their needs.

All students should feel safe and supported at school. However, for a variety of reasons this is not always the case.

I hope that with better understanding and greater resourcing, we can improve the learning journey for any trans or gender diverse child in WA.

I look forward to hearing from the panel this evening on your views on how we can better support trans and gender diverse students.

Thank you.