

*LEADING FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN VICTORIAN PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS: FINAL REPORT, SEPTEMBER, 2020*

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## Introduction

This report examines key findings from a survey of 91 Victorian public school principals/assistant principals on leading for social cohesion. Conducted from February-April 2020, the survey aimed to identify:

1. The major social issues that were impacting students in Victorian public schools;
2. Key resources and supports that were helping school leaders to build more socially cohesive school communities; and
3. Gaps in supporting/resourcing school leaders to carry out this important role.

The survey's findings build on and extend our pilot study of the role of Victorian public school leaders in conducting challenging conversations about socially and politically volatile issues with their school communities (Wilkinson, Walsh, Keddie, Howie, Sum, & Longmuir, 2018). The pilot study identified a range of practices highly effective schools engaged in when conducting these challenging conversations as part of leaders' efforts to build more socially cohesive school communities:

<https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/leading-for-social-cohesion-how-principals-respond-to-challenging>.

## Methodology

The survey instrument was developed with Whereto Research in late 2019 and early 2020. Once finalised, links to the online survey were distributed to the Victorian Department of Education and Training [DET] principals and assistant principals via: Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Victorian Principals Association, the Australian Education Union (Principal Class), Australian Principals' Federation, the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, Country Education Partnership and Monash University's marketing channels and networks.

The survey was open from February 24 to March 15 2020 initially, and then extended to 12 April 2020 to ensure that as many Victorian school leaders as possible were able to participate. A final sample of n=91 Victorian State Principals and Assistant Principals was achieved. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted and the findings were presented for feedback to an invitational symposium of key stakeholders including: the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals; Victorian Principals Association; the Australian Education Union (Principal Class); Australian Principals' Federation;



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Department of Education, Victoria; Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership; the Australian Council for Educational Leaders; the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission; R E Ross Trust; Centre for Multicultural Youth; Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, and University of Melbourne. The resultant discussions with stakeholders supported and enriched the findings.



## Key Findings

### 1. Major social issues impacting students

School leaders identified a range of social issues currently facing Victorian public schools. These included **family violence**, **social isolation**, **mental health** and the **impact of social media**.

- **Cyberbullying** represented the top social issue identified by school leaders as negatively affecting the student community (60% of school leaders placed this in their top three issues); followed by racism (22%), mental health (20%) and poverty (20%).
- In terms of building social cohesion in their schools, school leaders were most concerned about students exposed to **family violence** (69%) or affected by **mental ill health** (66%).
- Almost half the school leaders (47%) reported a **significant increase** over the past five years in the proportion of students at their school requiring intervention because of **mental ill health**. 23% reported that exposure to **family violence** had significantly increased over the last five years.
- Most school leaders (46%-63%) noted that the incidence of students **experiencing discrimination or harassment** from other students **had not changed over the last five years**. However views were mixed, with, for example, 21% reporting an increase in race-based discrimination while 26% reporting a decrease.

The comments below illustrate these major concerns:

- “Students feeling isolated – difficulties regarding making friends – lack of social skills taught at home...”
- Increasing anxiety and depression. Retention of good staff in the profession/public education system...
- Dysfunctional families, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse...
- Social media concerns outside of school hours spilling over into school. Covert bullying happening through social media that schools are expected to solve...



- Increasing number of students with anxiety and lack of resilience, social/emotional problems. Students unable to deal with conflict and disappointment.”

## 2. Overall attitudes and perceptions about social cohesion

- The majority (83%) of school leaders agreed that **encouraging social cohesion** was an **important part of their role**. 65% felt that their school was **very socially cohesive**.
- The majority of leaders agreed that their school allocated resources according to student need (93%), supported all students to have a voice (93%) and provided opportunities for students to express their cultures (87%). **Fewer agreed they made allowances for religious practices or opportunities to express religion (59-63%)**.
- Students from different national and ethnic backgrounds were reported to have a **strong sense of belonging with the school (82%)**. However, this connection **decreased** as the circle widened (64% had a strong sense of belonging with the community; 48% had a strong sense of belonging with Australia).
- School leaders reported that over the last five years students had become **more likely** to be accepting of those perceived to be different to them (67%), **more likely** to help each other out (65%), and **more likely** to get on well together (59%).

Some of the **limitations** school leaders reported in what they could do to improve social cohesion included the following:

- “Lack of time to be involved in parent forums...”
- The community does not view a primary school as an important part of the community...
- Behaviours that damage or limit social cohesion often originate from the home... social media has diminished the standing of schools as an institution in our society, so our authority to take action to address social ills is often challenged and undermined...
- Simply because that isn't a focus at our school. It's all about the results.”



### 3. Key resources and supports for school leaders in building social cohesion

- Strong **connections with parents** and **school and community events and partnerships** were noted as factors that helped generate social cohesion within schools.
- 84% of school leaders felt that their school's **anti-discrimination policy** helped to **support social cohesion** in their school – 15% claimed that the policy had no impact on social cohesion.
- In terms of supporting social cohesion, ***Respectful Relationships*** was the resource or program most commonly accessed by schools (86%), followed by *Amplify: Empowering students through voice, agency and leadership* (76%), and *Cultural Understanding and Safety Training (CUST)* (74%).
- Many school leaders noted the usefulness of the *Respectful Relationships* program in helping them to build a socially cohesive school.



The following comments typified many responses:

- “Open communication involving parents at the school in a meaningful way. Responding to issues and concerns in a timely manner and empowering students to find their voice...”
- Programs such as *Respectful Relationships*. Applying Positive Education principles to student wellbeing policy. Having an effective and experienced student wellbeing staff. Access to other programs, e.g., Doctors in Schools/ community programs...
- Community partnerships. Family information evenings. Committed and caring staff...
- Multicultural days and days like Sorry Day and NAIDOC events, our college Aboriginal dance group, programs that build cohesion for different cohorts and that teach strength and resilience such as *Rock and Water*.
- Employing intelligent and articulate staff who demonstrate a genuine care and compassion for all students, no matter what. The rest is relatively easy: put the outcomes for students at the centre of all our work; model expected behaviour; lots of encouragement and support.”

#### 4. Gaps in supporting/resourcing school leaders to build more socially cohesive school communities

- The majority of leaders agree that encouraging social cohesion was an important part of their role (83%), and 65% felt their school was very socially cohesive.
- While most felt well prepared, one in five **disagreed that training/professional development was accessible to staff** to help them deal with discrimination/ harassment within the student body.

The following themes emerged in closing observations:

- Students and families falling through the gaps in Australia’s welfare system.
- Increasing divides between rich and poor.
- Inequitable school funding system pitting poorer schools against wealthier ones.
- Demand that schools be the panacea for society’s ills.



The following comments illustrate these themes:

- “[I have] feelings of disengagement, hopelessness and at times anger against the disenfranchising inertia of society's power structures. Every social issue I can think of for our school stems from the widening gap in incomes and its associated beliefs of superiority and inferiority.
- Our small rural community has been affected by fires, floods, a youth suicide of which we have struggled with mental health. This includes students, staff, families and businesses. The department has been phenomenal in consistently trying to deliver support but our rural location creates high complexities. With the isolation regulations, the mental health risks are alarming.
- The need for schools to be the educator, caregiver and guide for the whole community – schools seen as the panacea for any social issue – the huge focus at a [government] departmental level on academic outcomes when clearly schools are required to be so much more than this and as such pressures on schools to do more than what they have ever been designed to be.”

The comment below sums up a **key insight** of leading for social cohesion in schools:

*“If we work from a philosophy that we cannot be responsible for the students’ background, but we can be responsible for the happiness and learning environment in which we all work then we believe that the management of ‘fairness, consistency and understanding’ will benefit all students in the long term.”*



## Key messages and next steps

### 1. The importance of leading for social cohesion within a social justice framework

The notion of social cohesion is a nebulous and contested term. However, the responses from the survey indicate *many factors within and beyond the contexts of schools that are inhibiting justice and equity for students*. Like Andrew Markus (2017), we understand social cohesion or social harmony as an ongoing process that is enabled and constrained by key factors of economic, cultural and political equity or justice (Fraser, 2009; Keddie, 2012). We would argue that *social cohesion requires social justice* – this is about creating the conditions of equity in terms of democratic participation, cultural recognition and resource allocation.

As the survey noted, schools cannot be the panacea for the (growing social and economic) inequities of the broader social world. However, they can work in ways that better support social justice and social cohesion – especially in the current environment where principals have significant autonomy and discretion over the ways in which they use and manage their resources (albeit in a system of increasing economic rationalism and external compliance).

A key factor in leading for social cohesion is *creating a school environment that reflects economic, cultural and political justice*. This means ensuring that all students can maximise the benefits of education through: receiving adequate human and material support; feeling culturally recognised and included; and feeling that they are accorded a voice. In most schools, there are initiatives that reflect these three areas of justice. However, there are many *enduring barriers* and contentions at the school, system and broader social level to realizing these goals that the survey reflects and which warrant further attention.

### 2. Supporting schools and their leaders in negotiating the differing ‘moral geographies’ of home, community and government

Schools are sites of human activity (Curry, 1999) and micropublics (Ho, 2011). Within these sites, school leaders play a key role in defining what is permissible within the school boundaries: “Schools are sites in which moral determinations routinely take place, such as about what is taught and how and the behavioural boundaries enforced within and outside classes” (Walsh & Casinader, 2019, p. 148).

Previous research has found that “teachers [and school leaders] take moral stances whether they wish to admit doing so” (Walsh & Casinader, 2019, p. 148). They report feeling constrained in how they can influence behaviours beyond the classroom and



school gates and we see some of these constraints reflected in the preceding survey. Nevertheless, schools as places are fundamentally normative, “concerned with what is right and good conduct and where. To say, ‘that’s how we do things here’ captures a form of place-specific moral justification which is subject to spatial differentiation” (Lee & Smith, 2004, p. 181). Lee and Smith refer to this as a “*moral geography*”.

Used in development and social justice (Lee & Smith, 2011), a possible way of thinking about the next steps is to better *understand schools as sites existing within moral geographies. These geographies co-exist and are often in tension with other sites, such as the home, community and government.* For example, major social issues impacting students that the school leaders identified included: family violence, mental health and the impact of social media – issues which often arise in sites outside school. Reaching, working with and possibly influencing those sites to improve social cohesion is a major challenge for school leaders. Behaviours damaging social cohesion often ‘originate from the home’.

In terms of building social cohesion within their schools, Victorian school leaders were most concerned about students exposed to family violence, with nearly a quarter reporting that exposure to family violence, drug and alcohol abuse had significantly increased in recent years. Similarly, social isolation was linked by some to a “lack of social skills taught at home”. Cyberbullying was the top social issue identified Victorian by school leaders as negatively affecting the student community. Social media activities outside of school hours were “spilling over into school” with “covert bullying happening through social media that schools are expected to solve”. Cyberbullying constitutes “unacceptable” behaviour which can work across boundaries between school, home and wider social life. *Other sites, such as government, also had an impact, such as the focus of policy on academic outcomes,* “when clearly schools are required to be so much more than this.”

The role of the school is also *challenged by community attitudes and expectations.* Some leaders reported that their local community does not view the school as an “important part of the community”. Social media has “diminished the standing of schools as an institution in our society, so our authority to take action to address social ills is often challenged and undermined”. Wider social pressures such as inequality were also identified as creating pressures on social cohesion in schools. Schools were seen to be a locus of response to these challenges, simultaneously seen “to be the educator, caregiver and guide for the whole community” and a “panacea for any social issue”. A corollary of this is that schools as sites varied in the nature of their challenges, such as the unique complexities identified in rural schools following floods and fires.



*Developing key resources and support to assist school leaders to build more socially cohesive school communities ideally takes into consideration forces emanating from sites beyond the school gates. This includes specific training/professional development for staff to help them deal with discrimination/ harassment within the student body.*

Strong connections with parents, community events and partnerships were noted as helping generate social cohesion within schools. But school leaders also reported constraints in doing so, noting a lack of time to be involved in parent forums. Further work is needed on mapping and delineating the moral geographies of schools and their intersection with sites such as students' homes, communities, local businesses and government.

### **3. Schooling is more than measures of academic success**

Navigating the physical and relational spaces and boundaries of school sites to enhance social cohesion requires leaders to understand and consider *the reach of their leadership and the connection of their school with their communities*. In recent decades, dominant narratives from educational leadership research and resultant policies have favoured an 'instructional leadership' approach which coalesces the adage that effective leadership influences student success (see, for example, Louis, et al., 2010). This has been accompanied by a *narrowed conception of success focused on academic achievement* (Reid, 2019). The survey results reveal however, that *schools and educating are about much more than these narrowed conceptions of academic success*.

These narratives and policies produce a pressure to focus attention on instructional leadership priorities, such as student learning outcome data and teacher capacity development. This survey indicates that school leaders are aware of this pressure as indicated by comments such as "Lack of time to be involved in parent forums..." and "Simply because that isn't a focus for our school. It's all about the results" whilst noticing that *strong connections with parents and communities were factors that helped to generate social cohesion*. As explored above, schools are social sites that exist in relation to other social sites, such as homes and community spaces. Leaders' understanding of where the imagined boundaries between these spaces are, as well as their sense of efficacy in permeating the boundaries, will influence the possibilities of working toward social cohesion. The findings from the survey suggest that *supporting leaders to work at and through these perceived boundaries may support them in social cohesion work*.



#### 4. Recognising and supporting the emotional and invisible labour of leadership

In our 2018 study of the practices of highly effective schools in nurturing more socially cohesive school communities, we reported that “Leading for social cohesion in schools is a crucial form of emotional labour which is largely invisible/overlooked” (Wilkinson et al., 2018, p. 4). These survey findings underscore this claim. They reveal the significant toll that some Victorian public school principals/assistant principals are enduring due to increased levels of social ills impacting on the students in their care. The survey suggests that schooling is about far more than the narrow academic results through which schooling success is currently measured. This is not to suggest that academic results do not matter. However, the survey findings suggest that *supporting and caring for students psychologically, socially and physically has become an even more critical role that many schools and their leaders undertake as part of the everyday business of schooling*. In brief, it is part of the “invisible and emotional labour” of being a school leader and needs to be provided with the same resourcing and recognition that instructional leadership now receives.

The survey findings suggests that this form of labour, at least for some schools, is particularly intensive and exacerbated by what school leaders perceive as inadequate and highly inequitable funding and unintended consequences of education policies which recognise and reward academic and not social outcomes. Moreover, one in five school leaders felt that staff did not have adequate training in dealing with harassment and discrimination among students. Given recent media reports of misogyny, discrimination and racism in schools amongst both students and staff (e.g., <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/behind-every-number-is-a-student-survey-finds-widespread-racism-in-schools-20190826-p52krz.html>), this is a particularly concerning finding and one that requires urgent redress.

#### Conclusion

The survey findings need to be treated with caution. They are not a large sample and therefore generalisations need to be tentative. They also represent the view of one key stakeholder group, principals and assistant principals, and students, teachers and parents may well give differing perspectives.

In brief, the survey findings suggest that in relation to *Question One: major social issues impacting Victorian public schools*, issues included: higher rates of cyber bullying; racism; mental health; poverty and exposure to family violence. In relation to *Question Two, key resources and supports* in building more socially cohesive schools, these



included: a range of programs including, but not limited to, *Respectful Relationships*; anti-discrimination policies; and building strong connections and partnerships with parents. In relation to *Question Three, gaps in supports and resourcing*, school leaders identified: a lack of training for staff in dealing with discrimination and harassment among students; inequities in funding allocations and resources; a policy stress on academic outcomes rather than a more holistic view of educating; growing gaps between rich and poor in society with families falling through the cracks; competition between schools for enrollments; dysfunctional home settings; and diminished standing of schools in the community due to negative media representations (c.f., Wilkinson & MacDonald, 2020).

On a positive note, in regard to *overall perceptions and attitudes toward social cohesion*, school leaders reported: improvements in students being willing to help one another out; students feeling safe and experiencing a sense of belonging at school; and students being more accepting of those perceived to be different from them.

## Recommendations

A number of recommendations flow from the above findings. Some are more easy to put in place, whilst others require a more whole of government approach to rethinking the role of schools in our society. Recommendations have been divided into three areas, which include:

### 1. Supporting Schools

- *Programs seeking to address cyberbullying continue to be valuable.* For example, resources provided by the eSafety Commissioner and ReachOut continue to provide valuable resources. However, the challenges provided by “social media concerns outside of school hours spilling over into school” require deeper consideration of, and responses to, how social media use beyond school can profoundly impact social cohesion within schools.
- *Pre-emptive work addressing mental ill health* continues to be important to maintaining social cohesion.
- *The harmful effects of students exposed to family violence necessitate responses beyond the school.* Equally, programs such as *Respectful Relationships* can also provide primary prevention. Combined efforts to address family violence will have positive flow on effects to community cohesion and schooling.
- *Support programs that build cohesion* including those that teach strength and resilience (e.g., Rock and Water). These need to be carefully designed and tailored to the distinctive and diverse groups of students.
- *Continue the provision of well-resourced and whole of school programs that tackle key issues of discrimination, bullying and support more inclusive school*



communities. *Respectful Relationships* and CUSP training are examples of two such programs, but as noted above, a range of these programs were identified by school leaders as highly supportive in building more inclusive school communities. These programs do not necessarily need to be sourced from government agencies and many non-government actors are doing valuable work; however, government can leverage system-wide change.

- *Provide specific training for all staff in dealing with issues of racism and harassment among students and extend this training to dealing with discriminatory attitudes amongst staff.* There were some indications on the survey that at least some staff lacked the threshold knowledge and skills for dealing with these issues. Ongoing training, rather than 'one-off' or excessively legalistic approaches, are most helpful. Recent media reports of racist attitudes amongst some (not all) teaching staff suggest that specific training for staff in dealing with their own racist and discriminatory attitudes is also necessary.
- *Support schools in building strong connections with parents and schools through community events and partnerships.* These play an important role in generating social cohesion within schools and building a sense of belonging. Locally based non-government and not-for-profit organisations can play an important role in facilitating such connections.

## 2. Government/Systems

- Governments can play a role in *freeing up school staff time to be involved in parent forums.*
- *Support schools to develop antidiscrimination policies* that have clearly articulated goals and outcomes at the symbolic and practical levels. School leaders indicated that antidiscrimination policies at school level, reinforced by state government policies, could be very helpful in supporting a whole school approach to dealing with these issues.
- *Provision of mental health workers* based in schools to build school capacity in this key area.
- *Provision of adequate resourcing of public schools*, particularly those with high levels of equity groups. The survey findings and qualitative responses indicate that many school leaders, students and their communities are dealing with the fallout from increasingly inequitable funding regimes for schools and more broadly still, inadequate welfare support for families and community. At federal level there has been an increasing growth in funding for private schools, despite government schools taking on the majority of students from equity backgrounds (Chrysanthos & Carey, 2020). These inequitable funding regimes are, in turn, a



major factor in Australia having “one of the most unequal countries at the primary and secondary levels reflected in the long performance tail and a strong correlation between social disadvantage and outcomes” (UNICEF, 2018).

- *Cessation of policies that reward competition between public schools for enrolment of students.* The latter has deleterious impacts on students and community by segregating groups of students, undermining social cohesion and undercutting education for all.
- *Replacement of academic outcomes as the key measure of schooling success with a more holistic set of indicators; adequate resourcing, training and support to achieve these indicators; and “clarity and definition of the role of the principal... [in order to]... reflect current requirements and ensure the role is manageable” (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020).*

### 3. Research

- *Better understand and capture the “invisible and emotional labour” of school leaders as a basis for providing better resourcing and recognition of what school leadership actually entails.*
- Further research is needed on *mapping the moral geographies of schools* and their intersection with sites such as students’ homes, communities, local businesses and government.
- Following this, *research examining how school leaders draw on non-school actors in order to build cohesion* and address challenges such as disharmony and exclusion so that initiatives become locally owned and led by communities could be valuable.

Australians have long held dear to cultural traditions of a ‘fair go for all’ and a warm and welcoming community, particularly for those from diverse ethnic backgrounds. These survey findings suggest both the truth of some of these perceptions and its fallacies. Covid 19 has provided us with a rich opportunity to work differently, to make different and much fairer choices. Let us seize the moment. It is what we owe our next generation.



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