



Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disability Queensland	
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Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disability Queensland

Submission to Government Inquiry: Addressing Bullying Through Inclusive, Systemic Change—A Perspective from the Intellectual Disability Community

As the Queensland peak body representing people with intellectual disability and their families, we are deeply concerned by the disproportionate impact of bullying on this community. This submission outlines the urgent need for inclusive, evidence-based prevention and response frameworks to ensure that all students particularly those with intellectual disability can access safe, supportive, and inclusive education.

It is critical that definitions of bullying extend beyond physical bullying and verbal bullying to encompass relational bullying, which can include spreading rumours and exclusion. As part of verbal and/or relational bullying, manipulation and coercion are types of bullying experienced by individuals with intellectual disability (ID) by others who take advantage of their vulnerability. These forms of bullying can be particularly damaging to their mental health and relationships with peers, and the impacts for people with ID can be potentially more adversely impactful than for their neurotypical peers. The prevalence of bullying for individuals with ID is higher than for their neurotypical peers, with a recent study¹ suggesting that people with ID are almost three times more likely to be victimised compared with their peers.

Furthermore, bullying often extends well beyond the classroom and traditional school hours. Individuals may continue to face harassment and intimidation through digital platforms, social media, and interactions within their local communities. For people with intellectual disability (ID), this persistent, multi-environment exposure to bullying represents a serious and ongoing concern. It is essential that bullying prevention and response policies explicitly acknowledge and address these extended contexts, ensuring protections are relevant, responsive, and inclusive of the unique vulnerabilities experienced by the ID community.

What's Not Working

Zero-tolerance behaviour policies and rigid disciplinary systems often lack the nuance required to support students with disability, particularly those with intellectual disability. Without adequate teacher training on disability, these approaches can frequently fail to distinguish between intentional misconduct and behaviours that are a direct manifestation of a student's disability such as challenges with communication, emotional regulation, or sensory processing.

As a result, students with disability are disproportionately subjected to punitive measures, including suspension and exclusion, which undermines their right to inclusive education and contributes to long-term disengagement.

This concern was echoed in the 2025 national bullying inquiry, where Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) reported that three in four students with disability were bullied or excluded at school in 2024, with many families citing zero-tolerance policies as a contributing factor to school withdrawal.²

Such policies frequently fail to consider the broader social and environmental dynamics of bullying and behaviour and can reinforce cycles of exclusion and stigma. The American Psychological Association has also found that zero-tolerance approaches are largely ineffective and may conflict with best practices in adolescent development and disability inclusion.³

In contrast, trauma-informed and strengths-based approaches have shown promising outcomes. These frameworks prioritise safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment — principles that are especially important for students with disability.

Evidence from school-based and community programs indicates that trauma-informed practices can reduce behavioural incidents, improve student engagement, and foster more inclusive learning environments.⁴

To ensure equity and uphold the rights of students with disability, behaviour management policies must shift toward inclusive, trauma-informed models that recognise the impact of disability, value diversity, and respond with empathy and support rather than punishment.

Impact on Learning Choices

An increasing number of families are turning to home and distance education because traditional school settings do not feel safe. In Queensland, homeschooling registrations increased by 70% in a single year, with a 137% rise in primary years and a 205% rise in secondary years over five years.⁴ Many families cite bullying, disability-based discrimination, or punitive behavioural responses as key reasons for withdrawal.⁵

This trend is echoed in the Queensland Audit Office's 2024–25 report, which highlights that bullying remains a significant concern across the state's education system, particularly for students with disability. These figures reflect a systemic failure to provide inclusive, safe learning environments and underscore the need for urgent reform.⁶

Bullying and related school-based issues can be contributors to school refusal, a complex phenomenon characterised by emotional distress that prevents students from attending school. The Senate Inquiry into School Refusal (2023) found that such experiences can have profound and lasting impacts on both students and their families including heightened anxiety, social isolation, disrupted learning, and increased risk of early school leaving.⁷

For families, school refusal can lead to emotional strain, financial hardship, and breakdowns in relationships, as they navigate the challenges of supporting a child in distress without adequate systemic support. These impacts are particularly acute for students with disability, who are overrepresented in school refusal data and often face compounding barriers to inclusion.

Youth Participation

Students with intellectual disability are frequently excluded from meaningful participation in the development of school policies, including those aimed at bullying prevention. Yet, evidence shows that co-designing strategies with young people who have lived experience leads to more effective, inclusive, and sustainable outcomes.^{8,9}

Involving students with intellectual disability in co-design processes ensures that bullying prevention responses are not only relevant and respectful but also empowering reflecting the realities of those most affected. This approach aligns with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which emphasises the right to participate in decisions that affect one's life.

To enable genuine engagement, it is essential that schools provide accessible formats (such as Easy Read materials, visual supports, and plain language resources) and appropriate supports, including trained facilitators and inclusive communication tools.^{10 11} Without these, participation risks becoming tokenistic rather than transformative.

Whole-of-School and System-Level Examples

Schools that prioritise inclusion through visible leadership, co-teaching models, peer education, and family engagement see better outcomes in bullying prevention. At the system level, policies mandating disability inclusion training for students and staff and requiring data-informed wellbeing practices are key to long-term change.

At the system level, policies that require disability inclusion training for both staff and students are critical to fostering respectful, accessible, and equitable learning environments. Such training not only deepens understanding of disability and diversity, but also builds the skills and confidence needed to create inclusive classrooms and school cultures. Programs like Scope Australia's Disability Inclusion for Schools and Victoria's Inclusive Classrooms initiative demonstrate how professional learning can equip educators and students with practical strategies to support participation and belonging.^{12 13}

Furthermore, collaborative partnerships with peak bodies play a critical role in capacity building, extending support networks, building trust with families, and ensuring that lived experience informs policy and practice.

Supporting Equity Cohorts

Intersectionality leads to additional, unique forms of discrimination. Students with disability often experience compounded marginalisation and bullying when they belong to other equity cohorts (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+, rural and remote, or low socio-economic communities). Tailored, culturally safe support based on active listening, collaboration, and challenging biases and inequities must be the norm, not the exception. However, significant gaps in funding, staffing, and training mean many schools are under-resourced to meet this need.

Reporting and Accountability

Reporting mechanisms must be accessible, transparent, and responsive. Students with intellectual disability often face barriers to reporting bullying and their experiences are more likely to be dismissed or minimised. Schools need accessible reporting tools, clear response pathways, and mechanisms to track and address recurring issues at school and system levels.³

Families must have access to an independent, transparent mechanism to raise concerns when they are dissatisfied with a school's response to bullying or behaviour management practices. While internal school processes are important, they may not always provide the impartiality or accountability required to resolve complex or ongoing issues particularly for students with disability or those from marginalised communities.

There needs to be a mechanism for evaluating and reporting how national or state policies are being implemented at the school level. Too often, policies introduced from higher levels are inconsistently applied across schools, with their effectiveness largely depending on the principal's leadership style, the school's culture, and its demographic context.

Robust, disaggregated data on children with disability particularly those with intellectual disability is essential to inform effective service development, policy design, and resource allocation. Without clear and consistent reporting, it is difficult to understand the diversity of needs within this community or to evaluate the impact of current supports.

Guiding Principles

Inclusion and accessibility

Lived experience and co-design

Cultural safety and intersectional inclusion

Proactive practices through information, education, and awareness

Accountability and continuous improvement

Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disability Queensland (DSIDQ) is committed to offering additional information, guidance, and support as needed to ensure that individuals with intellectual disability are meaningfully represented and heard throughout this inquiry.

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