

October 2023

# Submission in response to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria



Our Watch

# Contents

Acknowledgement of Country	3
About Our Watch	3
Our Watch's role in respectful relationships education	3
About this submission	4
Executive Summary	5
What is respectful relationships education?	6
Responses to Terms of Reference	7
(2d) - The impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture.	7
(5) - Examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing.	8
(6) - School funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.	9

## Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Indigenous organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is not an 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problem.' As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Indigenous women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

## About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the culture, behaviours, attitudes and social structures that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national frameworks, *Change the story* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2021)<sup>1</sup>, *Changing the picture* (2018)<sup>2</sup> and *Changing the landscape* (2022),<sup>3</sup> we work at all levels of our society to address the deeply entrenched, underlying drivers of violence against women. We work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work, and socialise.

## Our Watch's role in respectful relationships education

Since its establishment in 2013, a key focus for Our Watch has been developing the evidence base for respectful relationships education. Our Watch has an extensive history in respectful relationships education and has led pilots in both primary and secondary schools and worked alongside policy makers, educators, students, school leadership and experts in designing, implementing, and evaluating respectful relationships education across Australian jurisdictions.

Our Watch has had a long-standing relationship with the Victorian Department of Education including working in collaboration on the initial roll out of the initial RRE approach in Victoria following the Royal Commission recommendations, providing professional learning for the state base RRE workforce, working as partners on the RRE in Primary School Pilot (2017-2019) and currently sits as a member on the Department of Education RRE Expert Advisory Group.

Our Watch has also supported information sharing and coordination of practice and best-practice policy nationally, including by convening the National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Group (2017–2020) as well as currently Chairing the Commonwealth convened National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Working Group (NRREEWG). We continue to provide ongoing policy and practice advice on what is needed to design and deliver best practice respectful relationships education to departments of education and other stakeholders across the country.

## About this submission

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria.

As an organisation with extensive experience and expertise in the primary prevention of gender-based violence within the education system, this submission focuses on the evidence base for best practice respectful relationships education (RRE) including the current approach in Victoria.

In the context of RRE, and in line with our expertise and relevance to this Inquiry, Our Watch's submission focusses on the following Terms of Reference:

- (2d) - The impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture.
- (5) - Examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing.
- (6) - School funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide further advice or assistance to the Committee in relation to the issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, Amanda Alford at



## Executive Summary

Respectful relationships education (RRE) is the holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence, which includes teaching and learning about healthy relationships, gender, power and control in relationships and consent education. RRE uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces, to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from such violence.

The Victorian Government is currently leading the nation with its best practice approach to RRE. The Respectful Relationships initiative in Victoria is strongly aligned with the evidence base for the whole of school model of RRE, incorporating all seven of the core elements (outlined below) identified as essential components for effective RRE.

Evaluations of the evidence-based approach to RRE in Victoria to date have been positive with improvements in student social and emotions skills and wellbeing. This speaks to the significant impact RRE can have across the school community when appropriately prioritised and resourced. RRE is a generational initiative and as such the effectiveness of the initiative would be most effectively measured through a combination of short, medium and long-term measures. As a result, a longitudinal study on Victoria's RRE initiative would make an important contribution to the evidence base for RRE.

The policy environment, investment and prioritisation of RRE in Victoria over the past 9 years have been significant and the Victorian Government and Department of Education is to be commended on its long-term vision commitment and investment in RRE. It will be important to maintain a consistent level of commitment and investment to ensure that the education system in Victoria continues to build on the substantial system and structural reform already undertaken and continue to lead the way nationally on embedding evidence-based RRE across the education system.

### Recommendations

Our Watch recommends that the Victorian Government:

1. Build on the current professional development approach to respectful relationships education to include professional learning for school leaders.
2. Ensure the sustainability of the Respectful Relationships initiative across Victoria, including through continued commitment to a long-term approach and funding of evidence-based respectful relationships education.
3. Ensure ongoing and longitudinal evaluation of respectful relationships education, which measures implementation fidelity in addition to impact and attitudinal change of young people.

## What is respectful relationships education?

Respectful relationships education (RRE) uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces, to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from such violence. RRE is the holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence, which includes teaching and learning about healthy relationships, gender, power and control in relationships and consent education.

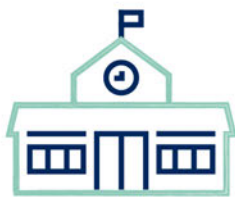
Schools are a key setting for the prevention of gender-based violence. RRE in school settings is one of the most promising strategies to prevent gender-based violence, including sexual violence. Evidence<sup>4</sup> shows that gender inequality is a key driver of gender-based violence. Respectful relationships education supports young people to establish equitable attitudes towards gender, enabling them to avoid or challenge limiting or harmful stereotypes, and develop positive personal identities and interpersonal relationship skills, which supports their overall wellbeing.

RRE provides an opportunity to reach young children early in their development and shape their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour around gender equality and respect. By continuing this education in later years, it provides crucial support and skills to adolescents who are experiencing their first intimate relationships. RRE also supports the creation of safe learning environments for all children and young people, through the transformation of school cultures to create environments that promote gender equality, respect, and non-violence. The positive, safe and empowering school cultures that can be fostered through whole-of-school RRE supports both student and teacher wellbeing<sup>5</sup>.

As part of a comprehensive approach and knowledge building about gender-based violence, it is helpful to understand why this work is important and what evidence tells us about best practice and effective approaches. A recent review<sup>6</sup> of international and national evidence on respectful relationships education outlines that policy and program design must include seven core elements to be effective as a strategy to prevent gender-based violence:



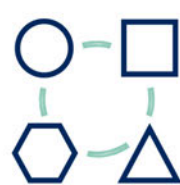
1. Address the drivers of gender-based violence



2. Take a whole-of-school approach to change



3. Support the change by developing a professional learning strategy



4. Use age-appropriate curriculum that addresses the drivers of gender-based violence



5. Sustain and commit to the change by having a long-term vision, approach and funding



6. Support through cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination



7. Evaluate for continuous improvement

A best-practice and sustainable model of respectful relationships education requires all stakeholders – from schools to education departments and governments – to lead the way in supporting an evidence-based, consistent and unified approach. Governments have a crucial role in developing a long-term vision and approach for respectful relationships education and supporting an evidence-based whole of school approach.

## Responses to Terms of Reference

### **(2d) - The impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture.**

The role of school leaders in facilitating an effective and sustainable whole-of-school approach to RRE is critical.<sup>7</sup> Strong school leadership helps to establish and maintain a culture among both staff and students where gender stereotypes are challenged, gender-based discrimination is unacceptable, and gender equality is actively promoted, modelled and embedded across the entire school. This has a range of positive impacts on student and staff wellbeing. In addition to driving school policy change, school leaders ‘till’ the cultural soil by endorsing and encouraging conversations about relationships, equality and gender and sexual diversity.<sup>8</sup> When staff have a sense that the school supports individual teachers, fostered through strategies such as team teaching and a strong school commitment, they can support students to critically reflect on their own beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, school leaders who demonstrate strong commitment to this work foster learners who have the knowledge and skills to make informed and respectful choices in their interactions with others<sup>10</sup>.

Staff professional learning is fundamental to implementing gender-based violence prevention in schools. Ongoing professional development opportunities ensure that both teaching and non-teaching staff are equipped with the knowledge and skills to undertake this work and are able to keep pace with the implications of evolving complex issues such as bullying and young people’s use of social media and pornography.<sup>11</sup>

The Victorian Government approach to RRE currently includes the development of a professional learning strategy, led by an internal RRE workforce, who have skills and knowledge in both understanding and responding to gender base violence and work to support schools to implement a whole of school approach. An evaluation of Respectful Relationships Education in Victorian Secondary Schools found that components of the whole-of-school approach might not have been addressed without the available support of primary prevention and gender equality experts working from education department offices.<sup>12</sup> This internal RRE workforce kept schools ‘on track’ and helped them to develop strategies to support leaders to address relevant issues as they arose.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to providing professional learning for school staff and ongoing provision of support from an internal RRE workforce, the Victorian Government’s approach to RRE would benefit from a professional learning strategy which supports school leadership to understand the critical role they play in leading cultural change within their school community and to build their capacity to implement the RRE model in line with the evidence base.

### **Recommendation**

Our Watch recommends that the Victorian Government:



1. Build on the current professional development approach to respectful relationships education to include professional learning for school leaders.

## **(5) - Examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing.**

The Victorian Government is currently leading the nation with its best practice approach to RRE. The Respectful Relationships initiative in Victoria is strongly aligned with the evidence base for the whole of school model of RRE, incorporating all seven of the core elements (outlined above) identified as essential components for effective RRE. As a result, Our Watch encourages ongoing commitment to RRE in Victoria as an example of best practice and evidence based RRE.

The Victorian the Royal Commission into Family Violence identified the critical role played by schools and early childhood education in creating a culture of respect and equality to prevent family violence. Recommendation 189 of the final report mandated the introduction of respectful relationships education in every government school in Victoria from prep to year 12, delivered through a whole school approach. In response the Victorian Government undertook significantly structural reform to ensure an evidence-based approach to respectful relationships education was embedded into the education system.

The Respectful Relationships initiative in Victoria aims to embed a culture of respect and gender equality via curriculum, policies, practices and the whole school environment. The Victorian Government is implementing Respectful Relationships across schools and early childhood services including:

- a lead and partner schools initiative, providing intensive training and support to over 1950 government, Catholic and independent schools to implement the whole school approach to Respectful Relationships
- the resilience, rights and respectful relationships teaching materials for Foundation to Year 12
- a professional development program for early childhood educators
- a regional Respectful Relationships workforce to support schools and early childhood education settings to implement respectful relationships education and strengthen referral and response to family violence.

Evaluation of the Respectful Relationships initiative in Victoria shows that schools have made significant progress in implementing Respectful Relationships and early signs of positive change have been reported in school communities. The evaluation found that the initiative improved students social and emotional skills, including:

- A better understanding of feelings and emotions, improved coping strategies and ability to articulate needs.
- Increased empathy for others and a stronger understanding of what makes a respectful relationship.
- Increased willingness to approach teachers and engage in sensitive conversation about their emotions and experiences.

The evidence-based approach to RRE in Victoria to date is positive and speaks to the significant impact RRE can have across the school community when appropriately prioritised and resourced.



## **(6) - School funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.**

### **Long term vision and funding to sustain and support change**

The policy environment, investment and prioritisation of RRE in Victoria over the past 9 years has provided a strong foundation for RRE in schools across the state, and evaluations have demonstrated the significant benefits of RRE in Victoria. Building on this foundation, there is an important opportunity to ensure there is an ongoing commitment to RRE and to sustain an enabling environment for this work moving forward.

In addition to provision of appropriate support to individual teachers, classrooms and schools to implement holistic respectful relationships education, there is also a need for a broader policy context in which gender equality and respectful relationships can be facilitated.<sup>14</sup> An enabling environment for respectful relationships education requires a long-term vision and commitment, together with investment in the education system commensurate to implementing the whole of school model.

Since 2016-17, the Victorian Government has invested approximately \$82.1 million to support the implementation of RRE in Victorian schools. RRE remains a priority for the Victorian Government through the Family Violence reform rolling action plan 2020-2023 and Free from Violence Second Action Plan (2022–2025) (Second Action Plan). The Second Action Plan has 10 key priorities that guide primary prevention work, including work in schools and early childhood as key settings. The Second Action Plan including actions to:

- Further embed Respectful Relationships and consent education
- Continue to support all Victorian government schools and participating Catholic and independent schools to implement and embed Respectful Relationships.

In line with these commitments and actions, there is a clear role for ongoing leadership and support by the Victorian Government for RRE. While the prioritisation of and investment in RRE in Victoria over the past 9 years have been significant, it no longer has the benefit of the intensive mobilisation typically associated with new initiatives and reform. A consistent level of momentum with new tranches of students and teachers will be important for sustained effort and impact.<sup>15</sup> As a result, Our Watch emphasises the importance of ensuring the sustainability of this important work in Victoria, including through extension of existing work and ongoing investment in this work.

### **Recommendation**

Our Watch recommends that the Victorian Government:

2. Ensure the sustainability of the Respectful Relationships initiative across Victoria, including through continued commitment to a long-term approach and funding of evidence-based respectful relationships education.

### **The impact of respectful relationships education**

Best-practice RRE can shift the gendered drivers of violence at individual, school, system, policy and broader societal levels when integrated effectively into the education system. In the short-term, respectful relationships education can challenge violence-supportive attitudes that some staff and students may hold. It can support more respectful behaviour, counter gender stereotyping among students, and strengthen schools' commitment to gender equality at the institutional level. In the longer term, respectful relationships education has the potential to contribute to reduced rates of gender-based bullying and harassment, shift school cultures towards being more gender equitable and challenge violence-supportive norms. The potential for respectful relationships education to create shifts in the gendered drivers of violence within schools is evidenced in

Australian evaluations of respectful relationships education.<sup>16</sup> These have found that RRE:

- increased student knowledge of positive attitudes towards and confidence in discussing issues of domestic violence, gender equality and respectful relationships
- decreased student adherence to gender stereotypical attitudes. Rigid gender stereotypes can be harmful and limiting, affecting students' interactions with each other and their participation in life.
- increased teacher understanding of the importance of respectful relationships education.
- improved student classroom behaviour
- improved teacher-student relationships
- increased understanding of respectful relationships, gender equality and gender-based violence among school leadership – including principals

While a longitudinal evaluation of respectful relationships education in Australia has not yet been undertaken due its recency, international research has demonstrated that school-based prevention initiatives can reduce future violence perpetration and victimisation of students.<sup>17</sup> RRE is a generational initiative and as such the effectiveness of the initiative would be most effectively measured through a combination of short, medium and long-term measures. As a result, a longitudinal study on Victoria's RRE initiative would make an important contribution to the evidence base for RRE. Given its best practice implementation, in Our Watch's view Victoria is the only state in Australia currently in a position to be able to undertake this type of evaluation.

## Recommendation

Our Watch recommends that the Victorian Government:

3. Ensure ongoing and longitudinal evaluation of respectful relationships education, which measures implementation fidelity in addition to impact and attitudinal change of young people.

---

<sup>1</sup> Our Watch (2021). Change the story. Retrieved from: [Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia \(2nd ed.\). \(ourwatch.org.au\)](https://ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story)

<sup>2</sup> Our Watch (2018). Changing the picture. Retrieved from: [Changing the picture \(ourwatch.org.au\)](https://ourwatch.org.au/changing-the-picture)

<sup>3</sup> Our Watch (2022). Changing the landscape. Retrieved from: <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/01135647/Changing-the-landscape-AA.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Our Watch (2021). Change the story. Retrieved from: [Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia \(2nd ed.\). \(ourwatch.org.au\)](https://ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story)

<sup>5</sup> Konishi, C., Y. Miyazaki, S. Hymel, & T. Waterhouse (2017). 'Investigating associations between school climate and bullying in secondary schools: Multilevel contextual effects modeling'. *School Psychology International*, 38(3): 240–63; DeGue et al. (2020). 'Effects of Dating Matters® on sexual violence and sexual harassment outcomes among middle school youth: a cluster-randomized controlled trial'.

<sup>6</sup> Our Watch (2021). Respectful relationships education in schools: Evidence paper (pages 3-5)

<https://education.ourwatch.org.au/resource/evidence-paper-respectful-relationships-education-in-schools/>

<sup>7</sup> Savasuk-Luxton, R., F. Adler-Baeder, & M. L. Haselschwerdt (2018). 'Understanding change in violence related attitudes for adolescents in relationship education'; Lester et al. (2017). 'What do we know about preventing school violence?'; Tancred et al. (2018). 'A systematic review and synthesis of theories of change of school-based interventions integrating health and academic education as a novel means of preventing violence and substance use among students'

<sup>8</sup> Meyer & Leonardi (2018). 'Teachers' professional learning to affirm transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative youth'; Russell et al. (2020). 'Gender diversity and safety climate perceptions in schools and other youth-serving organisations'; UNESCO (2018). International technical guidance on sexuality education. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>.

**9** Dadvand, B., & H. Cahill (2020). 'Structures for care and silenced topics: Accomplishing gender-based violence prevention education in a primary school'. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 1–15.

**10** Burns, S., & J. Hendriks (2020). 'Sexuality and relationship education training to primary and secondary school teachers: An evaluation of provision in Western Australia'. *Sex Education*, 18(6): 672–88.

<sup>11</sup> Cox, E., R. Leung, G. Baksheev, A. Day, J.W. Toumbourou, P. Miller, ... A. Walker (2016). 'Violence prevention and intervention programmes for adolescents in Australia: A systematic review: Violence prevention review'.

*Australian Psychologist*, 51(3): 206–22; Weingarten, C., J. Rabago, J. Reynolds, K. Gates, E. Yanagida, & C. Baker (2018). 'Examining the utility of a train-the-trainer model for dissemination of sexual violence prevention in schools'. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 80: 70–79

**12** Our Watch (2016). *Respectful relationships education in schools: The beginnings of change. Final evaluation report.*

**13** Our Watch (2016). *Respectful relationships education in schools: The beginnings of change. Final evaluation report.*

**14** Our Watch (2016). *Respectful relationships education in schools: The beginnings of change. Final evaluation report.*

**15** ACIL Allen (2021) *Respectful Relationships Evaluation, 2019-2021, Evaluation Summary.*

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/rr-phase-2-evaluation-summary.pdf>

**16** These outcomes have been demonstrated in evaluations of respectful relationships education in Australia, including Our Watch's 2015 pilot in secondary schools in Victoria (evaluation supported by Dr Debbie Ollis, Deakin University and Dr Andrew Joyce, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University) and 2018 pilot in primary schools in Queensland and Victoria (evaluation supported by the Strategic Research Centre in Education, Deakin University).

<sup>17</sup> Crooks, C., Jaffe, P., Dunlop, C., Kerry, A., & Exner-Cortens, D. (2019). Preventing gender-based violence among adolescents and young people: Lessons from 25 years of program development and evaluation. *Violence Against Women*, 25(1), 29–55.