

15/12/2023

Switchboard Victoria submission:

Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

Introduction

Switchboard Victoria (Switchboard) was established 32 years ago and today delivers peer-driven support services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQ+) people, their families and communities.

Switchboard is committed to ensuring that our work and services address the intersections between different forms of inequality, discrimination and disadvantage, including colonisation, racism and immigration status, and the role that these play in the oppression and discrimination of LGBTIQ+ peoples.

Switchboard serves the LGBTIQ+ community through a number of programs and services including:

- QLife - the Victorian provider for the national 7 day a week LGBTIQ+ support phone service
- Rainbow Door - short-term case management and referral service specialising in family violence and suicide prevention
- Switchboard's national suicide prevention program CHARLEE comprising Lived Experience networks, research, training and bereavement support groups and postvention coordination
- Switchboard's QTIBPoC program that delivers advice and training on anti-racism practices, community development and engagement for LGBTIQ+ people of colour and people of faith
- Rainbow Families - community engagement and support for rainbow families where one, two or more parents, coparents, carers or donors are LGBTIQ+ .
- Switchboard's Out and About program, connecting and supporting older LGBTI+ people across Victoria

Switchboard is extremely grateful to the Victorian government for the many positive and progressive legal reforms and policy outcomes that have been made in support of LGBTIQ+ Victorians, including trans and gender diverse children and young people, and rainbow families over many years.

For definitions and terminology used we refer you to the state government's LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Language Guide (updated October 2023)

[LGBTIQ+ inclusive language guide | vic.gov.au \(www.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.vic.gov.au/lgbtiqa-inclusive-language-guide)

Overview of submission

Switchboard Victoria affirms that clear and visible representation of LGBTIQ+ people and communities is key to providing safe, supportive and affirming spaces for LGBTIQ+ children and young people as well as children and young people from rainbow families. Our submission reflects this affirmation and how it relates to the state education system in Victoria.

Our submission is presented in three parts:

Part One: Our response to the Terms of Reference

Part Two: Our concerns regarding the wellbeing and support for LGBTIQ+ students in the state primary and secondary education system in Victoria.

Part Three: LGBTIQ+ Postvention in Schools - we outline a vital gap in wellbeing support for LGBTIQ+ students impacted by suicide.

Followed by **Recommendations**.

The Switchboard submission reflects our strong support for curriculum content inclusive of diverse families, a focus on sexuality education that includes sex, sexuality and gender identity, respectful relationships education, consent and related themes across the state education system or within student wellbeing programs.

Switchboard reminds the committee that children, young people and their families bring intersectional lived experiences with them to school every day - as First Nation community members, as LGBTIQ+ children and young people, as children from rainbow families as well as living with disabilities including neurodiversity, being from diverse faiths and cultures, living in diverse families, being in a family violence situation, and so on.

Switchboard acknowledges there is strong alignment between homophobia, biphobia and transphobia impacting the school experiences of LGBTIQ+ children and young people, especially for trans, non-binary and gender diverse students, AND the school experiences of children from rainbow families, where one, two or more of their parents, coparents, carers or donors is an LGBTIQ+ community member. In the context of their school experience, overt and covert, direct and indirect bullying, discrimination and harassment is likely to impact these children and young people in similar, harmful ways. Some examples of this include the current moral panic about gender affirming care for trans and non-binary children in schools, and the impact of homophobia on children living in rainbow families during the marriage equality postal survey in 2017. Of course, some LGBTIQ+ young people live in rainbow families too, potentially compounding their lived experiences of harassment and discrimination.

Part One: Response to the Terms of Reference

(1) trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12, including but not limited to –

(a) the factors, if any, that have contributed to decline;

(b) disparities correlated with geography and socio-economic disadvantage;

Switchboard believes that when an LGBTIQ+ child or young person feels safe, included and respected they are more likely to feel connected to their community, achieve success and thrive.

LGBTIQ+ young people can experience a variety of social, family and interpersonal barriers to reaching their potential as a student and of achieving appropriate learning outcomes at each year level.

Research conducted by La Trobe University “Writing Themselves In 4” (2021) ¹ indicated that “*more than three-fifths (60.2%) of (LGBTIQ+) participants said that in the past 12 months they felt unsafe or uncomfortable at secondary school due to their sexuality or gender identity.*” In addition, “*over one-third of secondary school (38.4%; n = 1,404) ... (LGBTIQ+ students) reported missing day/s at their educational setting in the past 12 months because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.*”

The research surmises that survey participants with “*unsupportive classmates are more likely to move schools, miss classes, hide at recess or lunch, not use the change rooms, and drop out of extra-curricular activities.*”²

The intersections of class and LGBTIQ+ identities can offer considerable barriers to safe, effective and positive learning environments and experiences for young LGBTIQ+ students. These include:

- Being affirmed or denied existence of your identity – such as allowing practices that may be exclusionary or difficult to negotiate for vulnerable students and their parents – where language or cultural awareness may be a barrier.
- Outlining issues that cause need for school changes requires high level of narrativisation which has the potential to retraumatise and/or place a young person at risk of disclosure to a new school and teaching staff they may not wish to be visible prior to attending a new school.
- Socio-economic and geographical locations can similarly determine the type of schools that are available and opportunities to be clearly and confidently supported within community – whether this be cultural, familial or religious.
- While young people do have the option to change schools and go to schools outside their geographical location or “school zone” there are often DE regional or school-based barriers that restrict such a move, even if made on compassionate grounds.

Geographic and socio-economic disadvantage which can compound issues of family violence and LGBTIQ+ exclusion. These disadvantages have the potential to impact levels of support at home if

¹ Hill AO, Lyons A, Jones J, McGowan I, Carman M, Parsons M, Power J, Bourne A (2021) Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ young people in Australia. National report, monograph series number 124. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

² ibid Page 51.

young LGBTIQ+ people are experiencing bullying or harassment within a school setting, can increase risk within the home of family and sexual violence, can limit access to support networks (lack of public transport), can limit engagement with or access to medical services (living in rural or regional areas), community activities such as sport, music or friendship groups

When LGBTIQ+ young people report family violence at home, their school may be the only place they feel safe. In “Writing Themselves In Again 4 (2021) respondents who had experienced harassment or assault based on their sexuality or gender identity, in the home in the past 12 months (n = 712) indicated that the two highest ranking perpetrator/s in the home were (allowing for multiple responses) parents/carers (412) followed by siblings (230). (For further references to the prevalence of young LGBTIQ+ people under 25 experiencing family violence from family of origin and/or in the home refer to footnotes³)

There is also a growing evidence base to suggest many LGBTIQ+ students are also neurodiverse, therefore likely to be experiencing multiple barriers to accessing affirming and accessible education systems. As it may be for a student exploring their gender identity, there remains considerable stigma and misinformation about what having ADHD or autism means for a child or young person in terms of educational success. Being both LGBTIQ+ and neurodiverse could have a huge impact on a student's sense of safety being their authentic self in their school environment. For example, Australian research conducted in 2018⁴ found “that 22.5% of transgender adolescents had a diagnosis of autism, compared to 2.5% of all Australians, and the researchers estimate up to 25% of gender diverse people may also be Autistic”⁵ (Autism Spectrum Australia).

(3) the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of State Government interventions, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to address poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement;

As noted within the Safe+Equal submission to this inquiry, inclusion of the Rights, Resilience and Respectful Relationships curricula is essential in combatting gender-based violence. Understanding the importance and complexity of preventative work is essential in not only supporting students' education and wellbeing but to supporting teacher wellbeing and retention.

Systems of gender-based power remain in systems of teaching. Gender-based discrimination has been outlined as foundational to understanding and preventing family violence. Just as significant, gender-based discrimination impacts LGBTIQ+ teachers, executives, and administrative staff.

Continuing to promote, fund and develop LGBTIQ+ support structures within schools is imperative to improving and supporting mental health and wellbeing for young LGBTIQ+ students. Data from

³ [There's no safe place at home report - Equality Australia](#) (with drummond st services) published in 2020; and [Writing Themselves In publications, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University](#) published 2021.

⁴ [Revisiting the Link: Evidence of the Rates of Autism in Studies of Gender Diverse Individuals - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

⁵ [Gender and Neurodiversity – Autism Spectrum Australia \(Aspect\)](#)

Writing Themselves In 4 demonstrates the importance of understanding the needs of and focusing on specific supports to promote LGBTIQ+ young people's health and wellbeing.

This report found that for young LGBTIQ+ participants: "High or very high levels of psychological distress among 16- to 17-year-old participants of *Writing Themselves In 4* (83.3%) were more than three times that of the 27.3% reported among the general population aged 16 to 17 years."⁶

Schooling experiences during and post COVID-19 have demonstrated the importance of flexible, engaged and compassionate teaching and student experiences. For LGBTIQ+ young people, added complexities exist alongside navigating state-wide COVID-19 challenges such as:

- Difficulties accepting own gender/sexuality
- Rejection by peers/family after coming out
- Fear of coming out when in lockdown and away from peers and/or school-based support services
- Home spaces becoming unsafe if young peoples' LGBTIQ+ identities which they may be free to express at school or within their friendship groups are not accepted within home spaces
- Increase in neurodivergent self-diagnoses, assessment and affirming support needs
- The stress and pressure of lengthy lockdowns and then a return to traditional school settings has been a key factor in higher rates of ADHD and Autism diagnosis and support requirements. While not specific to LGBTIQ+ young people, there is a significant correlation between LGBTIQ+ identities and folks who are neurodivergent. This means there are compounding levels of need, or experiences of discrimination, that can more significantly impact young LGBTIQ+ people.

INCREASE IN ANTI-TRANS VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

During the last three years, but escalating in March-May 2023, there has been an increase in anti-trans hate speech, incidents shared on social media, in alternative and online media and through school yard chatter.

This international, national and state-based increase in anti-trans hate is aligned with misogynistic attitudes towards women propagated by influencers such as Andrew Tate and a rise in white supremacy when considered alongside the increased violence from groups like National Socialist Network in Victoria. While this inquiry is not exploring these influences on children and young people's behaviours specifically, Switchboard encourages the Committee to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of far-right extremism and neo-Nazi content on social media. Switchboard often hears from parents and carers of trans and gender diverse young people and children from rainbow families, including where they have trans or gender diverse parents, carers or siblings, about the negative impact the rise in anti-trans hate is having on these students at home and at school.

Switchboard highly recommends the Committee read the Trans Justice Project "Fuelling Hate Report"⁷ launched on the steps of the Victorian Parliament in November 2023.

⁶ Ibid page 16

⁷ [Fuelling Hate Report - Trans Justice Project](#) (2023)

(4) the administrative burden on teachers and the availability of new technologies to alleviate the burden;

Switchboard encouraged the Department to require schools who engage in procurement practices of new technologies to mandate the inclusion of specific categories in student management systems (like Compass) including:

- student and family details that are inclusive of diverse family forms – listing more than two parents, not to using mother or father terms or allow for self-selection of mother/parent, for example.
- If necessary to ask, allow for the inclusion of sex (as in sex assigned at birth) and gender (social/ gender identity) as two distinct enrolment categories.
- Allow for pronouns to be registered correctly on Compass or similar student management systems and for the current name (possibly different to the enrolment name) to be listed so all staff, including Casual Relief Teachers (CRT) can see the correct name and pronouns on any given day.

(5) examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing; and

Switchboard strongly supports the Department of Education continue to improve and develop world class, best practice, teaching materials and curriculum to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing; and to include teaching material, information and educational resources relevant to the lives of LGBTQIA+ children and young people and students from diverse families like rainbow families.

One of the most effective and easily achievable ways to provide direct support to LGBTQIA+ young people, and particularly acknowledge and support the diversity of LGBTQIA+ young people is to build queer and trans histories and experiences into curriculum.

State based curriculum should include and recommend subjects and texts (literary, film, non-fiction and historical) that feature diverse protagonists, families and communities to help to ensure the intertwining of diverse communities within all aspects of curriculum. Victoria's schools and communities are diverse and interconnected, and so our histories, texts and curriculum should better reflect our myriad communities. The incorporation of queer and trans texts and history into curriculum should build on and compliment the inclusion of disability, cultural and racial diversity, migration and refugee histories and narratives as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrative representation and perspectives (which should be in addition to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island language, education and history curricula).

Comprehensive sexuality education, when implemented and supported at state level can be hugely successful in supporting young people's understanding of relationships, as well to drastically increase safety and knowledge around informed consent.

There is increasing global push back to comprehensive sex education as evidenced in the United States, but also most recently in New Zealand as the position of the newly elected Prime Minister and National government in New Zealand is to attempt to remove or reduce mandatory relationships and sexuality education.

(6) school funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

Switchboard strongly supports increasing funding to the Safe Schools Unit within the Department of Education and the continued development and updating of the RRR material across early years education to secondary level.

Despite the introduction of several new wellbeing initiatives, wellbeing funding in state education across Victoria is woefully inadequate, especially given the dramatic increase in schools refusal/school can't in the post-covid era as well as increased negative public discourse surrounding transgender and non-binary children and young people.

Some significant improvements to state schools' access to workforce development and curriculum content related to improved whole-of-school LGBTIQ+ student wellbeing and inclusion include:

- Minus 18 being offered under Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions under the Schools Mental Health Fund⁸
- Review of the Rights, Resilience and Respectful Relationships curricula – conducted in early 2023.⁹

Additional funding is urgently required to improve support for, and awareness and understanding of, non-binary children and young people, where they may feel like they have a mix of genders, or like they have no gender at all or might consider themselves as genderfluid, genderqueer, trans masculine, trans feminine, agender or bigender – as defined in the state government's Inclusive Language Guide referenced earlier in this submission. Professional development for school staff is urgently required.

External bodies such as School Sports Victoria have sought to improve guidelines to support the engagement of trans and gender diverse students in School Sports Victoria activities. State Schools Victoria acknowledges that non-binary students are not catered for adequately in these updated guidelines: for example “ *Students who identify as non-binary are currently required to select a gendered event category (e.g. intermediate girls netball, or primary boys mixed Australian football) for SSV sporting activities.*”¹⁰

Switchboard asserts that, given that in Victorian young people aged under 18 are able to change their birth certificates to record their sex ¹¹ to any number of options including non-binary, gender

⁸ [Mental Health Menu \(education.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/mental-health-menu)

⁹ [Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships - FUSE - Department of Education & Training](#)

¹⁰ [Inclusion \(ssv.vic.edu.au\)](https://www.ssv.vic.edu.au/inclusion)

¹¹ [Change your child's record of sex \(child born in Victoria\) | Births Deaths and Marriages Victoria \(bdm.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/change-your-childs-record-of-sex-child-born-in-victoria)

queer, trans masc and so on, and have been able to do so since May 2020, the state education system needs to catch up with the reality, and legal reality, of their LGBTIQ+ students' lives.

Part Two: Switchboard's concerns regarding the wellbeing and support for young Victorian LGBTIQ+ students.

Switchboard Victoria has read concerning statements within a number of submissions to the Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria.

Switchboard wishes to raise serious concerns at the number of submissions requesting that gender and/or sexuality not be taught or delivered within a school setting. These requests are discriminatory in nature and threaten the safety and well-being of children and young people within state schooling.

This year has seen a deeply concerning increase in anti-trans media reporting, sentiment as well as public debate. The impact of instances of anti-trans rhetoric across Victoria has been detailed in reports such as the *Fuelling Hate* (2023) report by the Trans Justice Project which outlines the alarming rise in discrimination, vilification and instances of online and in person anti-trans hate.

As an organisation that runs two LGBTIQ+ support helplines, Switchboard is keenly aware of the significant impact public debate and instances such as the Posie Parker anti-trans speech that saw neo-Nazi's on the steps of the Victorian parliament, has on LGBTIQ+ communities.

Switchboard also regularly receives calls from parents and carers, health professionals, teachers and staff who work in schools, seeking information and support as to how to best assist young people in their lives who are trans, non-binary and gender diverse. Schools are important places for young LGBTIQ+ people to seek safety and support. Victoria must ensure we are working toward safe, supportive and inclusive environments for all LGBTIQ+ young people in schools.

We welcome any opportunity to discuss these concerns with the Committee at a later date.

Part Three: LGBTIQ+ Postvention in Schools

Switchboard Victoria play a fundamental role in the coordination of postvention across Victoria. This includes running education sessions, support groups and providing advice to those in workplaces, schools, universities, hospitals and other institutions. Through this work, we have become aware of the lack of support for LGBTIQ+ students impacted by a suicide and the gap in postvention response for LGBTIQ+ young people.

We have sought to expand our remit to include LGBTIQ+ young people, however, to date this issue has received minimal attention and concern. LGBTIQ+ people who experience loss through suicide are more likely to experience thoughts of suicide and suicidal distress. They are also more likely to experience disenfranchised grief – this may arise from the biological / family of origin or school erasing the LGBTIQ+ identity of a young person who has suicided, lack of wider social acceptance of the young person's LGBTIQ identity or the person who is bereaved experiencing gender or sexuality-based bullying or family violence that impacts their ability to process their loss.

While we do not have specific data on the number of young LGBTIQ+ people who die by suicide each year, research from studies such as *Writing Themselves in 4* provide clear indications that this is a priority area for support, engagement within schools, and the development of an LGBTIQ+ young person specific postvention response.

“Almost three-fifths (59.1%) of participants aged 16 to 17 years had experienced suicidal ideation in the past 12 months, more than five times the proportion

observed in the general population aged 16 to 17 (11.2%). • More than one-tenth (11.0%) of participants aged 16 to 17 years had attempted suicide in the past 12 months, almost three times the 3.8% observed in the general population aged 16 to 17. • Over one-quarter (25.6%) of participants aged 16 to 17 years had attempted suicide in their lifetime, almost five times the 5.3% reported among the general population aged 16 to 17.”¹²

Urgent work needs to take place that seeks to better understand young LGBTIQ+ people’s experiences after a suicide to help inform a LGBTIQ+ postvention service offering. This work would look like funding Switchboard, as the Victorian LGBTIQ+ postvention provider, to undertake a 2-year project to develop and implement this work.

¹² Hill AO, Lyons A, Jones J, McGowan I, Carman M, Parsons M, Power J, Bourne A (2021) Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ young people in Australia. National report, monograph series number 124. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. (Pg. 16)

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure that LGBTIQ+ cultural awareness training is provided annually to all school staff – including and not limited to reception and front office staff, enrolment officers, principal class, education support services staff, student services and wellbeing staff, teaching staff. Thereby improving student engagement, supporting and affirming students, and being confident in responding to student or family queries with accuracy and confidence.
2. Urgently explore and expand Department of Education knowledge and evidence base, by funding research and codesign methods that to build the capability of state education school wellbeing programs and teacher professional development on non-binary and gender diverse students¹³.
3. Improve and increase staff capability to implement Child Safe Standards, especially in relation to Child Safe Standard 5 – Equity is upheld and diverse needs respected in policy and practice¹⁴. As in “an organisation must, at a minimum, ensure:
 - 5.1 The organisation, including staff and volunteers, understands children and young people’s diverse circumstances, and provides support and responds to those who are vulnerable (which could include access to all gender toilets)
 - 5.3 The organisation pays particular attention to the needs of children and young people, especially... *lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children and young people.*”
4. Develop and promote policies and procedures on the PAL (Policy and Advisory Library) that acknowledge and support teaching and education support services staff to prevent burnout rates – acknowledging also that there is increasing pressure from parents and families to provide a ‘balanced’ discussion around gender and sexuality and to question and push back on gender affirmation strategies in individual schools.
5. Additional support and professional development time should be provided to staff who are teaching or facilitating Respectful Relationships, consent and sexuality education classes and discussions. This may include reducing a staff member’s teaching load in another subject in the term they are teaching these topics for HPE or similar homeroom classes to allow for additional professional development or reflective practice.
6. Increase funding to Safe Schools, with the aim of significantly increasing resource development, broadening scope to include training inclusive of supporting children from rainbow families and tripling the current workforce by 2026.
7. Improve procurement practices for new technologies to ensure the inclusion of specific categories in student management systems – inclusion of diverse family forms, new names and pronouns, etc.
8. Allocate urgent Facilities Funds for every Victorian primary and secondary school to install by 2026:
 - All Gender, single cubical toilets and change rooms available for students as well as in staff rooms for staff use.

¹³ [LGBTIQ+ inclusive language guide | vic.gov.au \(www.vic.gov.au\)](#) page 4
Definition of Non-Binary.

¹⁴ [CCYP | New Child Safe Standards now apply](#) (introduced July 2022)

- Sensory friendly wellbeing rooms for students requiring low sensory input to be able to spend time /study in so they can achieve success at school.
 - Mobility accessibility requirements such as lifts, stair lifts, ramps etc for students living with mobility-related disabilities.
9. Amend school zoning and enrolment processes to allow for LGBTIQ+ children and young people, as well as children from rainbow families, to be able to move more readily between schools outside their residential address zone to ensure they can access education without any further disruption or stress, especially where homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying, harassment or discrimination has occurred.
 10. Urgently advocate to the tertiary sector and engage in policy and curriculum development to ensure Pre-service Teacher Education and Training includes mandatory curriculum for primary and secondary student teachers to improve their personal and professional capability to better understand the socio-historical context of LGBTIQ+ people and communities.

Switchboard Victoria supports the recommendations made by Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) as the peak body and leading policy advocate for young people and the youth sector in Victoria.

Thank you for considering the Switchboard Victoria submission and we welcome any future opportunity to discuss these matters and matters arising with you further.

Yours sincerely,

Lara Hedberg

Senior Policy Lead



Flis Marlowe

Rainbow Families Manager

