

Senate Inquiry into the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms

Senate Education and Employment References Committee | 31st March 2023

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Berry Street acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands, skies and waterways across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to Elders resting in the dreaming, to the Elders of today, and to the Elders to come, who will continue to care, protect and nurture Traditional Lands.

Berry Street acknowledges Elders as the holders, educators and protectors of cultural knowledge and wisdom. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures date back 60,000 years and that sovereignty has never been ceded.

Executive summary

Berry Street welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms.

This issue is important because poorly addressed disruptive student behaviour can lead to a breakdown of a trusting teacher-student relationship and disengagement with education. It is also important because struggling to manage disruptive and disengaged student behaviours can lead to educator burnout and exiting the profession.

Berry Street has a significant portfolio of education services focused on helping some of Australia's most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people connect, engage and thrive at school. Our Berry Street Education Model (BSEM) was designed specifically for supporting students who experience trauma in their lives. However, the schools we work with have found the training and trauma-informed positive education strategies applicable to all contexts and helpful in facilitating students' behavioural change regardless of trauma background.

In our submission, we respond to the following points from the Committee's Terms of Reference:

- (b) the impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention;
- (c) teachers' views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them;
- (f) the impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students' learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined classrooms;
- (h) how relevant Australian state, territory and federal departments and agencies are working to address this growing challenge.

To address the issue of increasing disruption, we recommend that trauma-informed positive education strategies are embedded in all Australian classrooms.

This can be supported through setting a collective vision and direction, understanding system barriers to change, investment in high-quality research, improving quality of national data on student wellbeing and extent of disruption, encouraging knowledge sharing across systems, and accounting for additional resourcing needed to support trauma-informed response to student dysregulation in funding models.

About Berry Street

Berry Street has supported children, young people and families for over 140 years to address the effects of violence, abuse and neglect. We are one of Victoria's largest providers of child and family services. In 2022, we worked with over 33,700 families, children and young people, including over 1,100 through residential and foster care arrangements.

Berry Street has a significant portfolio of education services focused on helping some of Australia's most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people connect, engage and thrive at school. Our services tackle different points on the continuum of care from early intervention and prevention to intensive, targeted and wrap-around support. In 2022 alone, we have:

- trained over 10,200 Australian educators in the **Berry Street Education Model (BSEM)** – a set of strategies to increase engagement with students who struggle in the classroom and improve all students' self-regulation and academic achievement;
- supported over 300 young people to connect or re-establish their education and pathways through the **Navigator program** and the Educational Support for Children in Care (previously known as **Children in Residential Care (CIRC)**) program;
- worked in a close partnership with 9 Victorian government primary schools to deliver intensive 12-month support program to students at risk of disengagement with school through our **Side by Side** program.
- worked with 233 **Berry Street School** students who attended our flexible specialist secondary school – designed for young people affected by trauma whose needs are not met by the mainstream system;
- delivered the **Education First Youth Foyer** program in the Goulburn region for 40 young people aged 16–24 years at risk of homelessness to overcome barriers to education and attainment by providing them with up to two years of safe, stable accommodation.

Our BSEM program is particularly relevant to the matter raised by the inquiry. Developed by teachers for teachers, the BSEM foundational course provides educators with a toolkit of 100+ practical strategies for immediate use in the classroom and across their school. The strategies are relevant for both mainstream and specialist schools and help increase the engagement of all students, including those with complex, unmet learning needs.

We show educators how to help students meet their own learning needs by:

- understanding the benefits of trauma-informed teaching on child development and ability to learn;
- creating a supportive and trauma-informed positive education classroom;
- bolstering student-teacher relationships;
- applying positive relational classroom behaviour management strategies; and
- instilling strengths-based practices across the school.

The model comprises five domains:

- **Body** – how to help your students to regulate their stress response, de-escalate in school and classroom contexts, and provide strategies for increased focus;
- **Relationship** – positive relational classroom management strategies that promote on-task learning;
- **Stamina** – how to create a culture of academic persistence in your classroom by nurturing student resilience, emotional intelligence and a growth mindset;
- **Engagement** - motivating students with strategies that increase their willingness to learn;
- **Character** – how to harness our values and character strengths approach for effective learning and for future pathways.

This submission speaks to our experiences as a leading provider of trauma-informed positive education strategies for engaging children and young people at school and in the classroom. It is grounded in the last 25 years of trauma-informed practice, positive psychology, and the science of learning research. It is also informed by our on-the-ground experience working side by side with teachers, school leaders and education support staff towards building safer, calmer, child-safe, and trauma-informed school cultures.

Our response to the Terms of Reference

Step beyond 'order in the classroom' and focus on whole-school consistency of language and expectations, proactive strategies and fair consequences

ToR: (c) teachers' views on whether or not they are sufficiently empowered and equipped to maintain order in the classroom and what can be done to assist them

Risk-taking behaviour is part of healthy human development which increases between childhood and adolescence as a result of changes to the brain's socio-emotional system. Risk-taking declines towards adulthood as the capacity for self-regulation grows. Schools play an important role in supporting students to learn, practise and master cognitive, social and emotional skills – how to take risks, make decisions, self-regulate and learn from mistakes.

However, some students exhibit highly dysregulated, confusing and unpredictable behaviours daily – extremely challenging to respond to by educators who experience many competing demands for their time and attention. These students often are punished for 'acting out' when most of their behaviours relate to defence and coping mechanisms – mechanisms they developed in order to survive in the aftermath of stress, trauma, abuse and neglect which affected their emotional, social, physical and neurological development.

No serious issue can be looked at in isolation. We cannot separate students' behaviour at school from the systems and social structures they navigate every day – the social norms of their community, their family and household situation, their relationships with peers and teachers, if they are exposed to bullying, racism, and violence, exposure to community or intergenerational trauma, mental health issues, family violence, and other adverse childhood experiences.

Children and young people who attend school with a range of complex concerns often require professional help for their distress and difficulties. Our team does not assert that a teacher should aim to be a student's therapist or counsellor. Teachers are not explicitly trained to explore the complex histories of their students. However, many families that desperately require professional help lack the resources to obtain it from a qualified health professional. For them, a healing nature of the classroom and school community is of primary importance.

Our work is based on understanding that classroom and school environments have enormous therapeutic capacity for vulnerable young people. It is clear to us that when children come from unstable homes, their school may be the most stable and consistent place in their lives.

We advocate strongly for the value of integrating trauma-informed principles into whole-school behaviour management approaches. The challenge is to help the student to better understand their own reactions and to learn new, more adaptive pathways to physical and emotional self-regulation. In this context, we see an effective trauma-informed approach to student behaviour as one that:

- *involves proactive strategies to promote positive student behaviour* – such as beginning the day with a checking-in routine on students' readiness to learn, predictable classroom rhythms, and developing Ready-to-Learn plans with students which identify their strengths, triggers for dysregulation and strategies that assist them to regulate;
- *involves pre-emptive responses* – which recognise when students show early signs of escalation and prevent escalation; examples include enacting the Ready-to-Learn plans, and co-regulation of student behaviour through teachers' own reactions, voice, and body language;
- *is implemented at a whole-school level and relevant for all* – with consistent systems and shared language among staff, assisting schools respond to all students – students engaging risk-taking behaviour as part of typical adolescent development, students dealing with typical or overwhelming stress, and students who experienced trauma, abuse or neglect;
- *involves consistent expectations and predictable consequences* – providing clear expectations and consistently reminding students of them creates a sense of safety; this should be coupled with predictable and fair consequences appropriate to the given situation or student that support learning from experience;
- *preserves strong student-teacher relationships* – all students should feel they have an advocate in their school; responding to dysregulated student behaviour might rupture this relationship; subsequent restoration through private and respectful conversations needs is important.

There is a misconception that a trauma-informed approach to managing classroom behaviour excuses disruptive behaviours and allows students to act inappropriately because of their past experiences of trauma and unmet needs. This is incorrect. From our experience, students presenting the most dysregulated behaviour are the ones who thrive in the most caring yet firm environments.

Understanding the unmet developmental needs of students helps educators develop empathy, treat students with unconditional positive regard, and decide on the most appropriate support strategy.

At the same time, the importance of consistency when it comes to behavioural management cannot be overstated. It is highly distressing for students if one day they are allowed to swear with no consequences and then the next day they are punished. The shifting ground can be destabilizing for students. When students consistently meet firm but fair expectations, testing the teacher's resolve and pushing boundaries quickly becomes boring. The students develop respect for the teacher, feel a sense of safety and predictability, and settle into focusing on learning.

The case study below is about a school our team had a privilege of partnering with and illustrates the importance of consistent whole-school systems and routines.

Case study: Shifting the mindset from confrontation to a streamlined trauma-informed whole-school strategy (2021)

Monterey Secondary College is about 50 kilometres south-east of Melbourne and educates approximately 300 high school students. Its community contends with many systemic, intergenerational and deeply entrenched disadvantages. From their student profile, 65% of students are in the top 20% most at-risk students in the state. Berry Street has been proud to work side by side with the school on the Berry Street Education Model (BSEM) implementation since 2019.

In the past at Monterey Secondary College the days were too unstructured, there was often unhelpful social mixing (between older and younger students) and there were not enough reasons for students to feel healthy ownership of their campus. In addition, the school relied on punitive measures in response to adverse behaviour:

It's gone from punitive to restorative kind of practice. We used to have detentions and (...) that never worked, because it wasn't a timely reaction and it wasn't a meaningful reaction to what was going on – Year 7 Leader

Kids always getting sent out - they'd never come back. We used to do like red slips and you'd get sent out of class with that but then they'd just walk way... that just never worked with students. – Year 12 student

Along with the many BSEM strategies staff started to enact to increase student engagement, they have also been utilising BSEM strategies to support teacher capability to increase on-task learning and the effective use of restorative practices throughout the campus.

You learn about what some of the unmet needs might be that have led to them [students] feeling like this and then acting this way and how to address this lack of needs. As well how to keep them and others safe if we don't catch it early enough and they do go into crisis. As well as repairing on the way out, so following up after the incident and how best to restore that with them and with others – Teacher

Monterey's core priorities have been doing everything possible to ensure a calm, welcoming environment in the classrooms through consistent routines enacted by all staff members, as well as safety in the yard. A strategic effort has been the staff's intentional planning to ensure that each part of the day has a purpose from students' perspectives. The school has also invested in a consistent system to manage staff support for adverse behaviour:

Calming our environment went hand-in-hand with streamlining our systems for behaviour management, triage and restoration. Now, teachers have clear expectations for how to electronically (and immediately) communicate to leadership team members rostered to support throughout the day; and we are now successfully tracking the daily data for who, what, where and when to tailor our support rosters and provide much more informed intervention strategies for the students – Principal

Full case study can be found here: <https://www.berrystreet.org.au/news/bsem-in-action-monterey-secondary-college>

Additional family supports can make a real difference to the classroom. Safety and wellbeing at home translate directly on how students present in the classroom - whether a student had breakfast, restorative sleep, stress-free morning. Families also play a key role in affirming the importance and value of school, encouraging and monitoring school attendance, showing an interest in and encouraging their child's learning, and providing a supportive home environment in which the child can learn.

Through programs such as Side by Side, we have learnt that seemingly small supports can make a huge difference to families and help nourish a positive partnership with the school. These supports are usually provided by a family support worker and may include (but are not limited to):

- building trusting relationships with parents/guardians/carers;
- consulting with families on how the school can better engage in a culturally-sensitive and appropriate way;
- supporting with morning routines and transportation to school;
- organising meetings with all services supporting a student and their family to develop a consistent approach and share their understanding of the family's circumstances and ongoing needs;
- delivering family sessions on how they can help their child develop self-regulation skills and reduce anxiety about making mistakes;
- providing a home learning pack to support continued connection to school and curriculum during periods of absence from school (e.g., due to illness);
- organising for a student to participate in out-of-school sessions, such as Art Therapy.

These supports extend beyond the teacher workforce and require effective cross-sectoral partnerships.

When we turn things around, teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention will follow

ToR: (b) the impacts, demands and experience of disorderly classrooms on teacher safety, work satisfaction and workforce retention

Disrupted and disorderly classrooms happen everywhere and are not exclusive to communities contending with systemic educational inequity. **Unfortunately, ongoing, significant and poorly addressed disruption is more likely to affect Australia's most vulnerable classrooms with a higher proportion of students affected by trauma and other risk factors.**

Teachers who choose to educate vulnerable and trauma-affected students often do so because positive social change gives their work meaning. However, when teachers struggle with effective strategies to manage disruptive and disengaged student behaviours, the challenges of working with trauma-affected students can lead to burnout and to exiting the profession.

Although BSEM was designed specifically for supporting students who experience trauma in their lives, the schools we work with have found the training applicable in all contexts and helpful in facilitating students' behavioural change regardless of trauma background. Teachers in both mainstream and specialist settings increasingly confront challenges in educating students who present with a range of trauma symptoms and behaviours that include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), peer bullying, school refusal, conduct and oppositional defiance disorders, distracted or aggressive behaviour, limited attentional capacities, poor emotional regulation, attachment difficulties and poor relationships with peers.

Educators who participate in our BSEM training report previously facing significant professional and personal challenges in dealing with adverse behaviour and disruption.

While each school is unique in their motivation for whole-school implementation of BSEM, common characteristics of schools who seek to implement BSEM include:

- high levels of teacher absenteeism;
- high levels of teacher turnover;
- low staff morale and crisis-fatigued leadership;
- high incidence of student incidents;
- low student academic and wellbeing outcomes;
- chaotic and unpredictable learning environment; and
- many staff and students feeling unsafe.

Compounding these concerns, teachers themselves can be impacted by their students' trauma presentations through trauma's secondary- and vicarious-effects. Vicarious trauma is experienced by school staff who listen to and support students and families who have

experienced trauma and carry the emotional pain and burden for their students. Our research and experience of working with school leaders show that principals and their leadership teams often feel crisis-fatigued. School leadership teams are leading and caring for teachers who are adversely and continuously impacted by vicarious and secondary exposure to childhood trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout.

In our experience, implementing whole-school trauma-informed systems for behaviour support can have a powerful flow-on effect to improving staff safety, wellbeing, and retention. The case study below illustrates one example.

Case study: Unexpected positive impacts of a journey with BSEM on staffing (2021)

When a new principal arrived at the Monterey Secondary College in 2019, only 15% of teachers agreed their classrooms were orderly and focused. He was the third principal appointed that year with the school's environment described by some as "dysfunctional" and "beyond repair". Berry Street has been proud to work side by side with the school on its BSEM implementation since 2019.

In 2021, 89% of teachers agreed their classrooms were orderly and focused.

One of the unexpected benefits of BSEM, in combination with other school initiatives, is that we've had a significant drop in staff absenteeism. We think it's because staff can now expect and keep working towards calm classrooms most of the time and feel renewed to keep building on that.

We've also focussed on restorative practices and restoring the relationships with students when they've had a blow-up in the classroom. We have observed a significant drop in critical or extreme incidences (...). We are seeing observable and positive changes in teacher wellbeing across the campus as teachers enact BSEM strategies to maintain focus on student wellbeing – School Principal

Further detail on this case study can be found here: <https://www.berrystreet.org.au/news/bsem-in-action-monterey-secondary-college> and here: <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/former-struggle-school-stuns-with-two-year-turnaround-20211219-p59irm.html>

When we turn things around, student outcomes will follow

ToC: (f) the impact of disorderly, poorly disciplined classroom environments and school practices on students' learning, compared with their peers in more disciplined classrooms

Children who have experienced trauma may have difficulties with executive functioning, memory, concentration, and language delays. A student who is almost always on the edge of alert and in a state of fight-flight-freeze is not ready to engage with learning content in a meaningful manner. From a neuroscience perspective, a child or young person who is exposed to complex trauma, such as through abuse and neglect, have similar neurochemical reactions as a soldier on a battlefield. Therefore, their brain and body are focused on survival, not maths or reading.

We cannot expect students to engage in their learning when their focus is on survival.

Such students are often off task. They appear to be attention seeking, have a need for control and a need to disrupt others. To learn, reason, integrate information and make decisions, students need to be in a relatively alert state, but not an escalated state. Understanding that students are off task because they do not have the capacity to maintain their attention in the classroom, helps reduce frustration for both the teachers and the students.

Explicit teaching of wellbeing and equipping students with strategies to self-regulate should be a part of a whole-school trauma-informed behaviour approach. This includes strategies to regulate the body and soothe the central nervous system so the brain can think clearly and utilise its precious resources for learning — instead of reacting to stressors. The approach prioritises the body's needs for physical regulation and effective strategies for everyday stress management. For instance, one student who was explicitly taught self-regulation strategies as part of BSEM commented:

“At the beginning of the year we had to write down some strategies to de-escalate when we're mad or sad – like get a drink, go outside ... I think it's important to have one of those because if you don't and you get annoyed, one day you won't really know what to do. Some people don't use them, but I do” (Year 6 student, Curran).

In addition, trauma-informed strategies can extend students' window of tolerance and help build their stamina for learning. The Window of Tolerance theory is a framework which helps understand how stress impacts young people. According to the theory, there are windows of arousal states that allow for optimum brain processing and functioning. When students are in their window of tolerance, they are more likely to be able to self-regulate, reflect and focus on learning. If a student is pushed out of their window, they move into a state of dysregulation – sympathetic hyper-arousal and hypervigilance. Being below the window of tolerance, means a state of parasympathetic hypo-arousal and students may appear unfocused, exhausted, withdrawn.

Young people who have experienced nurturing, stable environments often have a wide window of tolerance. However, young people who contended with the impacts of trauma have a narrow window of tolerance.

Movement-based activities and brain breaks can be used as planned points throughout the school day to widen the window of tolerance and support students to stay engaged with their learning for longer. Brain breaks are mental breaks between tasks - short-burst activities designed to last between two and five minutes – which enhance student focus.

Strategies which help students be present, centred and ready to learn increase the amount of time students are on task which translates directly to improved learning outcomes. The case study below illustrates how a school in the Northern Territory (NT) used a trauma-informed approach to enable successful learning.

Case study: Malak Primary School

Malak Primary School is situated on the traditional lands of the Larrakia people. The school is committed to providing a learning environment that is safe, supportive and positive for all. It operates in the northern suburbs of Darwin with an enrolment of 200 students from many cultural backgrounds, 21 international languages and 12 declared Indigenous languages are spoken.

In a 2015 review conducted by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) and NT trained reviewers, the recommend goals for the school were: *“To develop a whole school intervention model with differentiated tiers of intervention in both wellbeing and special needs. To maximise human resources and build strategies to support implementation of behaviour approaches.”*

The school undertook the BSEM training in 2017 together with other schools in their region, funded by a System Innovation Grant to address a common problem of practice. Knowing they had to report on the impact of the change implemented, the school leadership established clear data sets to monitor change and set clear non-negotiables from each BSEM domain to be trialled in the classrooms that term/semester.

The most recent review of the school provided a very different assessment: *“Malak Primary School presents as a calm and focused place to learn where caring and respectful relationships are recognised as the key to successful learning.”*

Since 2018, we have been on a trajectory of improvement in our NAPLAN results, especially in literacy and in our Year 3 cohort. I remember attending a regional principals’ meeting in my first year at Malak. I was mortified to see we were the lowest in the region by a large margin. We had to change. – School Principal

The School Principal recognised the important role BSEM played in achieving improved outcomes, reflecting that students are now present, centred and ready to learn.

Full case study can be found here: <https://www.berrystreet.org.au/news/stories-of-impact-malak-primary-school>

Build on grassroots movements to develop a system-wide approach

ToR: (h) how relevant Australian state, territory and federal departments and agencies are working to address this growing challenge

We recognise that the BSEM is not a cure-all solution, but rather part of a suite of interventions and supports needed across all levels of our system to support students in general, and those with complex needs. Since 2014, the BSEM has worked with over 48,000 Australian educators and staff across more than 2,000 schools and this number is growing. We now work with numerous pre-service teaching programs including Teach for Australia. Implicit in the growth in popularity of our model among mainstream schools have been the recognition that:

1. Mainstream teaching approaches and pedagogies were failing to meet the needs of significant numbers of students;
2. Student populations were confronting diverse and complex challenges; and
3. Teachers were facing significant professional and personal challenges in dealing with the diversity of student need.

There is already a huge amount of work underway spearheaded by grassroots organisations that we should build on – individual schools, professional networks, community service organisations, individual jurisdictions. Our teams work closely with state governments in South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, as well as various independent school systems. Valuable lessons can be learnt from the work undertaken to date – development of frameworks and guidelines on trauma-aware education, communities of practice, evaluations of existing programs and collaborations with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

To move Australia forward on this issue, the bottom-up initiatives need to be reinforced by top-down system-wide supports to avoid fragmentation of approaches.

Recommendations

To address the issue of increasing disruption, we recommend that trauma-informed positive education strategies are embedded in all Australian classrooms.

This can be achieved through:

- 1) **Collective vision and coordinated oversight** - Collaborate with school systems, academia and community service organisations to collectively set a vision and direction for embedding trauma-informed positive education in Australian classrooms. Agree on commitments and set targets for all jurisdictions.
- 2) **Implementation** – understand top-down and bottom-up system barriers to change occurring in this space to steer effective implementation of effective trauma-informed behaviour support at a national level.
 - a) Conduct a review of what behaviour management regulations and expectations are currently in place for schools (reporting requirements, curriculum standards, Initial Teacher Education, training for school leaders, child safety regulation, minimum standards for school registration, tiers of interventions) to identify potential barriers to change;
 - b) Map the role of other sectors (Child & Family Services, Police, Health, Child Protection, Out-of-Home Care, Mental Health, Trauma services) in responding to dysregulated student behaviour and supporting students, and understand potential gaps in the level of awareness about trauma-informed practice; and
 - c) Encourage adoption of trauma-informed training (including programs such as BSEM) in all Australian Schools and as part of Initial Teacher Education.
- 3) **Evidence base** – Increase investment in building the evidence base and incentivise high-quality large-scale research on the effectiveness of trauma-informed strategies to create a calm and safe learning environment;
- 4) **Data** - Improve quality and consistency of national data on student wellbeing and extent of disruption in classrooms
 - a) Explore using existing national data collection instruments to measure student wellbeing and level of disruption in schools;
 - b) Understand the scale of missing data from national datasets (e.g., NAPLAN) for students who present with significant disruptive behaviour.
- 5) **Knowledge sharing** - Encourage school systems to share existing data, knowledge, and research on the topic – often never published – such as survey data on student and staff wellbeing, system data on student attendance and incidents, evaluations of programs.
- 6) **Professional capacity** – account for additional resourcing needed to support trauma-informed response to student dysregulation in funding models; this would include (but is not limited to) accounting for additional support roles in a classroom, ongoing professional learning, as well as workload associated with planning, appropriate student de-escalation support, reporting, debrief and restorative work with students.