

Everyone's Mental Health Matters! PARENTS VICTORIA INC

Since 1925 Parents Victoria (PV) has provided Victorian Government School (Public) parents with a voice, presenting an organised parent's perspective to State and Federal Governments, educational bureaucracies and institutions, community organisations and the media. We support families how to navigate, communicate and facilitate relationships between home and schools. For a historical insight or to seek further information about our organisation we urge you to visit our website at www.parentsvictoria.asn.au.

PV commends the Victorian Government for holding the Royal Commission to give Victorians (and others) an opportunity to have a voice on what's working or not and areas needing immediate attention and improvement. PV have promoted this opportunity to parents through our communication platforms.

PV did attend and contribute at a public consultation but we also felt it essential to complete a submission from the organisation on behalf of the families (parents, carers and children) we support daily who may not contribute to this process directly. For this purpose, our examples and references will remain deidentified for privacy reasons but the information we provide are an array of numerous case examples with an offering of potential solutions that could prevent harm and emotional impact not just for families but our school and system employees too.

PV is an active ambassador for public education and works incredibly hard at all times in support of families with our schools and system in the best interest of the students, Our Children, Our Concern. It's important for our schools and system to work together with community and all education stakeholders to better understand the aspirations and expectations of our Victorian community.

Hopefully, our submission enables the Commissioners to see through our lens what we see when working with families to restore and/or improve relationships between parents and schools and schools with parents. PV is well aware the mental health and wellbeing of the children, their parents and carers, the teachers, principals and all the relevant school and departmental staff ALL matter!

Schools are social organisations and when a school enrolls a student, they also enrol a family/carer responsible for that child. In more recent years, in our experience our schools are not as connected to community and many schools don't know their families as they once did years ago. Society has changed and PV is aware participants at the recent Royal Commission Public Consultations raised the **issue of isolation and lack of community connectedness.**

For instance, PV has been the state organisation representing Parent Clubs (PCs) in our State Schools and in recent years our PCs are not always supported or promoted by schools themselves. With the loss of these volunteer groups in schools who work so hard for the benefit of the school and their students we can see how easily school communities lose a sense of community and experience eventual disconnection. It's always argued there is a lack of volunteers and/or interest yet in our experience there are willing people to belong and help but they don't feel welcome or supported when they do.

If schools or any learning institution (early childhood, post- secondary or other training centres) knew their student's family better or their "back stories" PV is confident that the current challenges we experience today would change dramatically - it's all about relationships.

Predominantly parents/carers come to our organisation to seek assistance as the relationships are strained or broken between the home and school. Once PV has gathered the facts and done some further due diligence to enable us to offer suggested solutions we identify very quickly where things went wrong. It's important to note it all comes down to timely communication.

In context of a School System and providing assistance to families / students, Parents Victoria sees impacts on mental health for families / students in regards to the following:

1. Expulsion Process

- * Shifts responsibility from one school to another with no benefit to the student.
- * Impacts on health and wellbeing of student
- * Impacts on health and wellbeing of student's family
- * Impacts on health and wellbeing of receiving and departing school principal, staff, community.

Greater support is needed from the system to provide solutions and funding to allow students to reach their maximum potential in their current setting. The expulsion process is brutal, cruel and unsupportive of vulnerable students,

2. PSD Funding Process

- * Process is stressful for family.
- * Lack of understanding by families.
- * Lack of transparency for families of how the money is expended
- * Raised or unrealistic expectations when some schools lack the capability to deliver

In a couple of recent cases where children haven't been able to attend school and/or have been recently expelled, it's clearly evident that additional funding is

required to cover the costs of external practitioners to re-engage students or support schools to implement what is required.

3. Bullying in schools

* Although there is currently a high focus on Anti bullying messaging, resources lack practical on the ground strategies for families and schools.

* Schools need to follow through when programs and plans are identified for addressing cases of bullying. Who monitors?

Case example where a student was assaulted twice in one day and as a result suffered a head injury. This student had already endured bullying at a previous school and had attempted suicide. For this family their main concern beyond their child was what was being done to educate students about causing harm to others.

4. Family Knowledge (Back story) - A solution

Many schools lack resources / staff to understand the "back story" of their families and students - which are required in order to maximise learning and provide necessary supports to students. Family Engagement officers in all schools will assist to support students, families/carers and schools.

5. Student Safety / Child Safe Standards

For example - Victorian students travel overseas for cultural and learning experiences and even though we have a number of legal obligations when working with children here in Victoria the same level of diligence is questionable in other parts of the world. We need to be clear on our communications and expectations with families here and overseas when it comes to home stays and billeting children. Understanding the rules and regulations of other countries when children are hosted by other families (duty of care and loco parentis) and/or in the care of teaching staff. This also applies to camps and excursions in Australia, in particular when children today are suffering high levels of anxiety.

Schools need to be extremely mindful how they navigate custodial orders and don't make any personal judgement on any of the associated parties.

In PV's experience there have been times where schools have inadvertently implied or demonstrated a bias to one parent over the other. We have numerous examples of how this has happened and where the impact on the mental health of the parties involved and in particular the child, has been disturbing and damaging.

Unfortunately, we are seeing emotional distress. Families who – due to the irregular or non-attendance of their student to school; continual suspensions and expulsion - have lost employment and defaulted on their mortgages due to income loss and marriage breakdown.

7. Students with Disabilities

Predominantly here, we see families feeling completely marginalised, they often feel a burden to the school or feel their child is hindering the education of other children. Frequent conversations Parents Victoria has with these families are to keep them feeling supported and in reassuring them people/government do care. As mentioned above under funding, these families are already feeling overwhelmed in living 24/7 with a child or children with additional needs. They rarely get a break and are process fatigued. There are a number of cases we could refer under this topic!

1. What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?

2. What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?

Family Engagement Officers in schools (a "go to" person) who knows families and whose role it is to support students, families and schools.

3. What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?

4. What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.

Timelines for agencies are too long.

Who oversees / facilitates cross-agency support. (It has been commented that parents "need a Personal Assistant" in order to manage day to day issues!)

5. What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

* Access to agencies / practitioners. Timely access.

* Small communities where "everyone knows everyone" is difficult in context of support for students/families/schools.

6. What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?

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* Family Engagement Officers in schools - to know and understand family dynamics and support the home/school relationship

* An opportunity to be heard when parents are seeking solutions to a problem they are experiencing at a school, parents contact us as they trust us

11. Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

Parents Victoria had planned to do this submission much earlier but due to the demand on our services this wasn't possible, families must come first.

Thank you again for this opportunity and hopefully the information we have contributed has been helpful in you endeavours.