

SUBMISSION TO THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDING

December 2025

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

Safe and Equal is based on Wurundjeri Country. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work, and we pay respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded and recognise First Nations peoples' rights to self-determination and continuing connections to land, waters and community.

Honouring Victim Survivors

Safe and Equal acknowledges the strength and resilience of adults, children and young people who have experienced family violence and recognises that it is essential that responses to family violence are informed by their expert knowledge and advocacy. We pay respects to those who have not survived and acknowledge the lasting impacts of this preventable violence on families and communities.

About Safe and Equal

Safe and Equal is the peak body for Victorian organisations that specialise in family and gender-based violence across the continuum, including primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. Our vision is a world where everyone is safe, respected and thriving, living free from family and gender-based violence.

As a peak, we work with and for our members to prevent and respond to violence, building a better future for adults, children and young people experiencing, at risk of, or recovering from family and gender-based violence. While we know that most family violence is perpetrated by men against women and children, we recognise that family violence impacts people across a diversity of gender identities, social and cultural contexts, and within various intimate, family and other relationships. We apply an intersectional feminist lens in our work to address the gendered drivers of violence, and how these overlap and intersect with additional forms of violence, oppression and inequality.

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Introduction

Safe and Equal welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Committee *Inquiry into Public School Funding* and the impact of the Allan Labor Government's decision to delay raising Victoria's public-school funding to 75 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard until 2031. As the peak body for Victorian organisations that specialise in family and gender-based violence across the continuum, our submission highlights the potential impacts of delaying increases to public school funding on a core component of the Victorian Curriculum: Respectful Relationships Education (RRE).

Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) has been consistently found to have positive impacts for students and across the whole school community. However, the RRE curriculum relies on the capacity of teachers and support for the RRE workforce, who are increasingly reporting feeling overworked and overburdened, due to high workloads, navigating changing student behaviours and increased responsibility for student wellbeing and needs.¹ Future funding is therefore essential for the continued success of RRE delivery in public schools, fostering a culture of safety and respect that benefits the whole school community.

Increased funding needs to be passed onto public schools when originally promised to support the effective implementation of RRE. Specifically, we need to ensure that there are:

- Increased support, resources and guidance for schools and teachers to address growing sexism, misogyny and backlash and implement RRE as a whole of school approach.
- More opportunities for teachers to build their capability through learning and professional development to enable confident, effective delivery of RRE in the classroom.
- Continued capability building and recognition for the RRE workforce to support the use of new RRE teaching and learning resources.
- Support for the establishment of dedicated RRE teachers or coordinators within all schools to alleviate RRE curriculum burden on teachers.

¹ Longmuir, F, Gallo Cordoba, B, Phillips, M, Allen, KA, & Moharami, M (2022) *Australian teachers' perceptions of their work in 2022*. Monash University. <https://www.monash.edu/perceptions-of-teaching>; Arnold, B & Rahimi, M (2025) *The Australian Teacher Work and Wellbeing Report: An Analysis of Teachers' Work Environments and Wellbeing in Government Schools*. Melbourne: *Research for Educational Impact (REDI)*, Deakin University; <https://redi.deakin.edu.au/project/the-australian-teacher-work-health-and-wellbeing-report-an-analysis-of-teachers-work-environments-and-wellbeing-in-government-schools/>

Respectful Relationships' effectiveness at reducing misogyny and sexism

RRE is an effective approach in helping combat misogynistic and sexist attitudes, supporting young people to establish equitable attitudes towards gender, challenge stereotypes and helps foster a culture of respect across the school community, including principals, parents, community organisations, teachers and students.² This is critical in order to prevent violence against women and all gender-based violence, both for teachers and students and within the broader community and society as a whole.

RRE is a key feature of current and past national violence prevention policies.³ In Victoria, we are recognised as the national leader in implementing best practice approaches in RRE,⁴ and currently the only state in Australia to mandate this as a part of the curriculum. Using a whole of school approach, RRE promotes positive, equal and respectful relationships and helps prevent violence against women, through teaching, learning and engaging leadership around healthy relationships, gender equality and consent education.⁵ A whole-of-school approach helps to embed and sustain positive cultural change across the entire school community, including students, parents/carers, teachers and school leadership.⁶

To date, evaluations of the evidence-based approach to RRE in Victoria have been positive, demonstrating improvements in student's social and emotions skills, as well as their overall wellbeing.⁷ Research published by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) suggests that Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships Education (RRRRE) programs can improve social wellbeing, as well as decrease bullying and sexual harassment among high school students.⁸ When RRE is delivered consistently, students demonstrate stronger recognition of the rights of others and increase their capacity for empathetic engagement.⁹ Engagement with RRE programs can also result in improved relationships between teachers and their class, fostering connection through critical reflection and discussion.¹⁰ There is also evidence to

² Our Watch (2025) *Respectful relationships education toolkit*, Melbourne: Our Watch.

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/resources/toolkit>

³ Pfitzner, N, Ollis, D, Stewart, R, Allen, KA, Fitz-Gibbon, K, & Flynn, A (2022) *Respectful Relationships Education in Australian: National Stocktake and Gap Analysis of Respectful Relationships Education Material and Resources Final Report*, Monash University.

https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/Respectful_Relationships_Education_in_Australia_National_Stocktake_and_Gap_Analysis_of_Respectful_Relationships_Education_Material_and_Resources_Final_Report/21099592?file=37467172

⁴ Our Watch (2021) *Respectful relationships education to prevent gender-based violence: Final evaluation report (2021)*, Melbourne: Our Watch, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/resources/rre-evaluation-reports>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Our Watch (2025) *Respectful relationships education: A blueprint for preventing gender-based violence through education systems*, Our Watch, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/resources/blueprint>

⁷ Our Watch (2023) *Submission in response to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria*, Melbourne: Our Watch. <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/submissions/response-to-the-inquiry-into-the-state-education-system-in-victoria>

⁸ Cahill, H et al (2024) *A social network analysis and implementation study of an intervention designed to advance social and emotional learning and respectful relationships in secondary school*, Sydney: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS). <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/respectful-relationships-research-report/>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Cahill, H, Lusher, D, Farrelly, A, Calleja, N, Wang, P & Hassani, A (2023) *A social network analysis and implementation study of an intervention designed to advance social and emotional learning and respectful relationships in secondary school*, Sydney: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS). <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/respectful-relationships-research-report/>

suggest that the introduction of RRE in schools can lead to increased disclosures from students, indicating that students may feel more confident to seek help and challenge gender-based violence.¹¹

Public schools are on the frontline of addressing misogynistic and sexist attitudes

Schools can play a powerful role in shaping how young people view the world.¹² The education system is a unique setting, where gender-based violence prevention and early intervention work can be effective, and where respect, equality and positive attitudes can be modelled to young people who are still forming their knowledge and attitudes.¹³ However, schools can also function as settings where sexist and misogynistic attitudes are reinforced, shaped by institutional cultures, systems, and norms.

Alarming, teachers are reporting noticeable shifts in male students' attitudes in their classrooms toward women,¹⁴ including the increased use of vulgar, sexualised and aggressive language.¹⁵ In particular, female teachers – who are disproportionately impacted compared to their male peers – are describing disrespect, sexual harassment and misogyny from male students directed at them and at female students.¹⁶ These experiences are profoundly affecting female teachers, not only disrupting their work, but causing significant distress.¹⁷ For some female teachers, this has prompted them to leave the profession entirely.¹⁸

Meanwhile, female students are reporting feeling unsafe and unhappy at school.¹⁹ Teachers have described the use of silencing comments, gendered slurs and intimidation by male students in their

¹¹ Kearney, S, Gleeson, C, Leung, L, Ollis, D & Joyce, A (2015) *Respectful relationships education in schools: The beginnings of change: Final evaluation report*, Melbourne: Our Watch.

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/resources/rre-evaluation-reports>

¹² Our Watch (2025) *The evidence for respectful relationships education*, Melbourne: Our Watch.

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/the-evidence-for-respectful-relationships-education>; Westcott & Roberts (2025) *Misogyny is thriving in our schools – why aren't we doing more?* Monash University.

<https://lens.monash.edu/@education/2025/07/14/1387706/misogyny-is-thriving-in-our-schools-why-arent-we-doing-more>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Westcott, S, Roberts, S & Zhao, X (2024) The problem of anti-feminist 'manfluencer' Andrew Tate in Australian schools: women teachers' experiences of resurgent male supremacy, *Gender and Education*, 36(2), 167-182.

doi:10.1080/09540253.2023.2292622

¹⁵ Schulze, S (2024), 'Make me a sandwich': our survey's disturbing picture of how some boys treat their teachers, The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/make-me-a-sandwich-our-surveys-disturbing-picture-of-how-some-boys-treat-their-teachers-228891>

¹⁶ Little, E (2025) Mapping misogyny at school: a feminist cartography of spatial (in)justice according to women teachers' testimonies, *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52, 2471-2490. doi: 10.1007/s13384-025-00820-w; Schulz, S & McDonald, S (2024) 'Not my boy': When teachers are harassed by students, some schools and parents fail to help, The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/not-my-boy-when-teachers-are-harassed-by-students-some-schools-and-parents-fail-to-help-237122>; Westcott, S, Roberts, S & Zhao, X (2024) The problem of anti-feminist 'manfluencer' Andrew Tate in Australian schools: women teachers' experiences of resurgent male supremacy, *Gender and Education*, 36(2), 167-182. doi:10.1080/09540253.2023.2292622

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Little, E (2025) Mapping misogyny at school: a feminist cartography of spatial (in)justice according to women teachers' testimonies, *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52 2471-2490. doi: 10.1007/s13384-025-00820-w; Schulz, S & McDonald, S (2024) 'Not my boy': When teachers are harassed by students, some schools and parents fail to help, The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/not-my-boy-when-teachers-are-harassed-by-students-some-schools-and-parents-fail-to-help-237122>

¹⁹ Westcott, S & Roberts, S (2023) *Investigating the growing culture of misogyny in schools*, Australian Education Union (AEU) News. <https://news.aeuvic.asn.au/in-depth/investigating-the-growing-culture-of-misogyny-in-australian-schools/>

classrooms, leading to female students requesting permanent removal from the class.²⁰ Moreover, there has been a sharp increase in attacks on queer youth in schools and homophobic threats targeted at LGBTIQ+ teachers.²¹ This behaviour is ultimately undermining women, girls' and gender-diverse individuals' entitlements to safety and education.

Respectful Relationships Education is at risk of being undermined

Every person in the school community deserves to be respected and treated equally, yet, fostering a culture of respect in schools is an ongoing challenge. With delays in raising Victoria's school funding, RRE is more likely to be pushed to the periphery, at a time when schools need more support to effectively counter harmful attitudes and fully implement a world leading curriculum through a comprehensive whole of school approach.

There is significant appetite in Victoria to support young people to help develop healthy and respectful relationships. Amidst concerns of rising misogynistic and sexist attitudes in classrooms, the new Victorian Rights, Resilience and Respectful Relationship teaching and learning resources for schools have been updated to include a comprehensive suite of age-appropriate resources on consent, gender equality, relationships, pornography, masculinities, gender stereotypes and hate speech.²² The new resources place a particularly strong emphasis on promoting healthy ways of being a man and how to challenge outdated gender roles.²³ They are designed to be more inclusive of First Nations students, students with disabilities, and students of all genders and sexualities.²⁴ By ensuring funding to public schools is increased when originally promised, schools will be more likely to be able to invest in schools staff ability to implement the resources to strengthen learning outcomes and support the wellbeing of their students.

²⁰ Westcott, S, Roberts, S & Zhao, X (2024) The problem of anti-feminist 'manfluencer' Andrew Tate in Australian schools: women teachers' experiences of resurgent male supremacy, *Gender and Education*, 36(2), 167-182. doi:10.1080/09540253.2023.2292622

²¹ Wedesweiler, M (2024) *The Andrew Tate factor behind a toxic behaviour problem at Australian schools*, SBS News. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/the-andrew-tate-factor-behind-a-toxic-behaviour-problem-at-australian-schools/idqvvy1y>

²² Our Watch (2024) *Our Watch welcomes updated Victorian teaching and learning materials for respectful relationships*, Melbourne: Our Watch. <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/news/our-watch-welcomes-updated-victorian-teaching-and-learning-materials-for-respectful-relationships-education>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Our Watch (2024) *Our Watch welcomes updated Victorian teaching and learning materials for respectful relationships*, Melbourne: Our Watch. <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/news/our-watch-welcomes-updated-victorian-teaching-and-learning-materials-for-respectful-relationships-education>

To date, the benefits of RRE have been widely documented.²⁵ Even so, barriers remain, which impact the quality of implementation in schools.²⁶ At the broader school-level, challenges include competing priorities, staff turnover and the level of effort required to maintain momentum, as well tailoring to different local school contexts. School type is also an important factor. Whereby primary schools have found it to easier to embed curriculum and promote whole-school approaches, secondary schools may require additional support to help change the attitudes of teachers while finding opportunities to link curriculum.²⁷ Teachers have indicated that often they are unable to teach RRE as it was intended due to lack of capacity and guidance from schools.²⁸ Importantly, teachers may lack the confidence to deliver RRE, due in part, to concerns over perceived sensitive content and facing resistance from parents.²⁹ These findings mirror feedback from the RRE workforce, who have reported significant backlash in their roles, often stemming from a lack of understanding of what RRE entails. Insights from the frontline indicate that in many cases, there is no dedicated RRE teacher or coordinator within school settings. Therefore, RRE curriculum is an additional load placed on teachers, who may not be equipped or supported to hold such conversations with young people.

The whole of school approach is the most important component in RRE, aiming to embed systemic change by recognising the role of everyone within the school community in preventing gender-based violence.³⁰ The support of parents is a significant aspect of delivering RRE in schools.³¹ Teachers are increasingly encountering a lack of support and acknowledgement from parents, who are defensively dismissing misogynistic and sexist attitudes and behaviours, especially when it's exhibited by their own children.³² Even in instances where support from parents or carers is strong, there is evidence to suggest that parents generally have a low level of awareness of the details of RRE and the content

²⁵ Acil Allen (2021) *Respectful Relationships Evaluation 2019-21*, Victorian Department of Education and Training, <https://www.vic.gov.au/respectful-relationships>; Kearney, S, Gleeson, C, Leung, L, Ollis, D & Joyce, A (2015) *Respectful relationships education in schools: The beginnings of change: Final evaluation report*, Melbourne: Our Watch.

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/resources/rre-evaluation-reports>; Our Watch (2021). *Respectful relationships education to prevent gender-based violence: Lessons from a multi-year pilot in primary schools*, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia. <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/resources/rre-evaluation-reports>; Pfitzner, N, Ollis, D, Stewart, R, Allen, KA, Fitz-Gibbon, K, & Flynn, A (2022) *Respectful Relationships Education in Australian: National Stocktake and Gap Analysis of Respectful Relationships Education Material and Resources Final Report*, Monash University.

https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/Respectful_Relationships_Education_in_Australia_National_Stocktake_and_Gap_Analysis_of_Respectful_Relationships_Education_Material_and_Resources_Final_Report/21099592?file=37467172

²⁶ Cahill, H, Lusher, D, Farrelly, A, Calleja, N, Wang, P & Hassani, A (2023) *A social network analysis and implementation study of an intervention designed to advance social and emotional learning and respectful relationships in secondary school*, Sydney: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS).

<https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/respectful-relationships-research-report/>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cahill, H, Lusher, D, Farrelly, A, Calleja, N, Wang, P & Hassani, A (2023) *A social network analysis and implementation study of an intervention designed to advance social and emotional learning and respectful relationships in secondary school*, Sydney: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS).

<https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/respectful-relationships-research-report/>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Safe and Equal (2025) *A Whole School Approach to Respectful Relationships Education in Schools*, Melbourne: Safe and Equal. <https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/a-whole-school-approach-to-respectful-relationships-education-in-schools/>; Our Watch (2025) *Respectful relationships education toolkit*, Melbourne Our Watch.

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/resources/toolkit>

³¹ Our Watch (2021) *Respectful relationships education to prevent gender-based violence: Lessons from a multi-year pilot in primary schools*, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia. <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/education/resources/rre-evaluation-reports>

³² Westcott, S, Roberts, S & Zhao, X (2024) The problem of anti-feminist 'manfluencer' Andrew Tate in Australian schools: women teachers' experiences of resurgent male supremacy, *Gender and Education*, 36(2), 167-182.

doi:10.1080/09540253.2023.2292622; Zhao, X, Roberts, S & Westcott, S (2025) Institutional responses to sexual harassment and misogyny towards women teachers from boys in Australian schools in the post-#metoo era, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 57(2), 141-158. doi: 10.1080/00220620.2024.2316620

covered which can contribute to backlash.³³ Principals and implementation leaders have revealed that they shared common experiences of backlash and resistance from parents who are opposed to RRE, typically expressed as misogyny, homophobia, transphobia or challenging the school's right to provide RRE to students.³⁴ Feedback from Safe and Equal's RRE community of practice has confirmed that the RRE workforce is indeed experiencing significant backlash, even from within schools.

Delays in public school funding at this time, will only create an environment for this backlash to flourish further, with schools facing impossible choices of where to direct efforts and resources. Future funding for public schools, by contrast, will ensure that the whole of school approach is well resourced and supported, allowing the RRE workforce to continue to perform their crucial yet often invisible work, including establishing systems for safe disclosures.

Conclusion

RRE is dependent on long-term financial and political commitment, in addition to a well-resourced education system. Through securing future funding for public schools, in addition to continued and greater support for a whole of school approach to RRE implementation, Victoria has a significant opportunity to create and be part of generational change. In addition to raising public school funding when originally promised, we need to ensure that there is:

- Increased support, resources and guidance for schools and teachers to address growing sexism, misogyny and backlash and implement RRE as a whole of school approach
- More opportunities for teachers to build their capability through learning and professional development to enable confident, effective delivery of RRE in the classroom.
- Continued capability building and recognition for the RRE workforce to support the use of new RRE teaching and learning resources.
- Support for the establishment of dedicated RRE teachers or coordinators within all schools to alleviate RRE curriculum burden on teachers.

Safe and Equal urges the Allan Labor Government to reverse their decision to delaying raising Victoria's public-school funding to ensure that RRE continues to be delivered to children and young people across the state and remains the leader in whole of school approaches that are working towards a safer Victoria.

³³ Acil Allen (2021) *Respectful Relationships Evaluation 2019-21*, Victorian Department of Education and Training, <https://www.vic.gov.au/respectful-relationships>

³⁴ Cahill, H et al (2024) *A social network analysis and implementation study of an intervention designed to advance social and emotional learning and respectful relationships in secondary school*, Sydney: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS). <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/respectful-relationships-research-report/>