

A new Student Behaviour Strategy

Public Consultation Outcomes

Purpose and objectives

On 27 August 2020, the Department of Education released a consultation paper, A new Student Behaviour Strategy: Lifting educational outcomes through early intervention and targeted support, outlining proposed reform directions to support and manage student behaviour in NSW public schools.

The consultation paper was available via the Department's website and the Have Your Say website. In response to significant stakeholder interest, the consultation period was extended for an additional two weeks and closed on 11 October 2020.

This document outlines and summarises the key themes and issues identified in stakeholder submissions. The outcomes of this consultation will inform the development of the final Student Behaviour Strategy (the Strategy).

We would like to thank and acknowledge all colleagues and stakeholders for their continued engagement and considered feedback to develop the Student Behaviour Strategy.

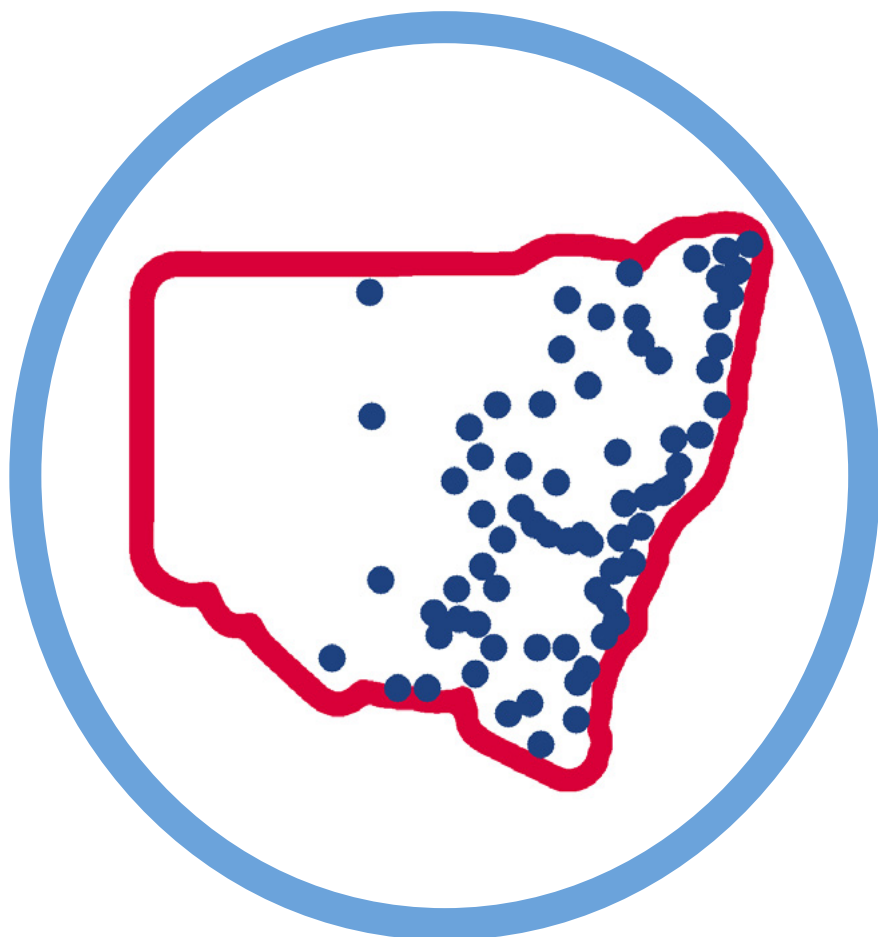


Profile of respondents

Over 900 submissions were received through the consultation period.

Respondents included:

- Principals
- Teachers
- Department of Education employees
- Trade unions
- Professional associations
- Non-government organisations (NGOs)
- Private service providers
- Parents and carers
- P&C Associations
- Community members
- Researchers and academics
- NSW Government agencies and employees



Proposed reform directions in the consultation paper

Behaviour support and management are critical to creating engaging and effective classrooms. Across the state, our teachers, principals and school staff work to ensure every student is known, valued and cared for so they can achieve their potential.

The draft Strategy proposed a framework for evidence-based student behaviour support and management. This included a preventive, student-centred and positive approach and the adoption of a multi-tiered continuum of care to support the needs of all students.

To achieve this, the following system-level approaches were discussed, focusing on four key areas of change:

- 1 integrating student behaviour within our broader approaches to learning and wellbeing;
- 2 providing targeted support to vulnerable student cohorts through evidence-based interventions and a dedicated expert workforce;
- 3 building capacity across the workforce through available and continuing professional learning; and
- 4 commissioning services for improved outcomes.

Proposed changes to the use of suspensions were also outlined in the consultation paper and comment sought.



Key themes emerging from consultation

Across all submissions, stakeholders were aligned in expressing strong interest in improving how student behaviour is supported and managed.

Stakeholders told us that supports and resources should be strengthened to address the learning and wellbeing needs of all students and school staff.

With respect to the proposed reform directions, there was broadly positive support from stakeholders for the early intervention and prevention measures aimed at building positive behaviour and equipping teachers to better support and manage behaviour.

There was divided opinion – some strongly supportive and some strongly opposed – to the proposed reduction in the maximum length of suspension. Most stakeholders are of the view that any changes here would need to be accompanied by additional supports and practical resources if they are adopted.

Key concerns expressed by stakeholders included:

- the high-level at which the reform directions were outlined and a desire to see more detail and links to the evidence base;
- the need to balance any changes to suspension with appropriate safeguards and supports to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of staff and students;
- the diverse experiences of staff and students; and
- the need to support vulnerable student cohorts.

Submissions highlighted the need for:

- ongoing consultation and engagement;
- access to additional supports, services and resources for staff, including multiagency and multidisciplinary solutions;
- ongoing improvement, systems reform, implementation support, and monitoring and evaluation; and
- greater communication and engagement between schools, parents and carers and the community to foster shared responsibility for student wellbeing and learning outcomes.

We have consulted widely over the past two years. Although our engagement has been broad, we acknowledge that not all stakeholders had the opportunity to comment on all of the proposed reform elements prior to the public consultation period.

Our future consultation and engagement will ensure opportunities for meaningful stakeholder participation at every stage. We will develop and test ideas and design solutions together.

What we heard

Best practice and evidence-led approaches

- There was broad endorsement of the proposed positive and student-centred approach to student behaviour support and strengthening the Department's commitment to equity and inclusion, subject to the strengthening of supports, services and resources for both staff and students.

- Teachers and principals described diverse experiences in managing student behaviour and offered a range of views and perspectives on best practice behaviour support and management theory and practice.

Reform directions

- Stakeholders expressed an interest in understanding and engaging with best practice and emerging evidence.

- We will develop new resources, practical guidance and professional learning to share the evidence and best practice in promoting positive and productive behaviour and to support capability building at foundational, advanced and specialist levels.



Support for teachers and school staff

- Submissions from teachers and principals emphasised the growing complexity associated with managing student behaviour and the increasing demands this placed on the workforce. We agree that these challenges were not adequately acknowledged in the consultation paper.
- There was broad consensus among teachers and principals that existing system supports and pathways were inadequate to meet the needs of both staff and students. Submissions identified a range of additional supports, specialist services and practical resources required to achieve the reform objectives. These included:
 - professional learning to build capacity, confidence and empower staff to drive learning and wellbeing
 - access to internal specialist services, such as the school counselling service, student support officers and various learning and wellbeing support roles
 - access to external specialist services, such as early childhood education, health, disability and early intervention and prevention services
- Some principals, parents and carers told us that the Strategy should support greater flexibility in decision making to allow school leadership to exercise appropriate discretion. Others told us that the Strategy should offer clearer and more actionable advice and guidance to ensure consistency in decision making across schools and equitable outcomes for students.
- The majority of parents and carers who provided feedback focused on students with disability. These stakeholders were vastly supportive of the proposed reform directions, and also called for further supports and training for teachers and school staff to build their capacity and understanding of managing the behaviour of students with disability.
- Among NGOs, there was overwhelming support for schools being provided with

additional resources, access to specialist services and professional learning to empower and build the capacity of teachers and school staff to manage complex behaviour, particularly for students with disability and students in out of home care.

Reform directions

- Teachers and principals have told us that more support is required to meet the diverse learning and wellbeing needs of our students. To do this we need to build on our current successes, identify opportunities for ongoing improvement and provide systems-level support to students, staff, parents and carers.
- We recognise that there is a need to strengthen the supports available to staff in managing the diverse and often complex needs of students and in responding to challenging behaviours.
- As a first step in strengthening staff supports, the following initiatives commenced on Day 1, Term 1, 2021:
 - a suite of foundational and specialist professional learning, tools and resources on behaviour support and management
 - a new workforce of behaviour specialists to facilitate integrated service support through advice, collaboration and complex case management
 - access to a panel of behaviour support service providers will be streamlined to support evidence-informed interventions and enable local decision-making.
- We will continue to work with all stakeholders to develop specialist advice and services for effective behaviour support, to be implemented later in 2021. We will ensure our workforce has access to the tools and supports they need to manage behaviour across the spectrum of student need, including promoting positive, inclusive and respectful behaviour and responding to and managing complex, challenging and unsafe behaviour.

Engagement, early intervention and prevention, multi-agency solutions and targeted support for vulnerable cohorts

- Stakeholders noted the complex drivers of student behaviour, including child and family issues, domestic and family violence, drug and alcohol, health and mental health and socioeconomic disadvantage. It was noted that these drivers required multidisciplinary interventions and multiagency responses.
- Stakeholders were in favour of greater early intervention, prevention and targeted interventions to ensure continuity of support both in and out of school settings.
- Parents, carers and NGOs identified the critical importance of shared community responsibility in supporting student learning and wellbeing outcome. These stakeholders encouraged the fostering open and productive relationships and meaningful engagement between schools, students and their families.
- Teachers and principals noted the difficulties of ensuring parental and carer engagement in managing student behaviour.
- Among teachers and principals, there was a range of views on the scope of their role to support student behaviour and student wellbeing. This included discussion of the role of teachers, parents, carers and the community, in social and emotional skill-building.
- Many parents and carers raised concerns that stronger guidance is needed between schools, parents and students in the earlier stages of any decision-making processes, and called for greater provision for reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of students with disability.

- NGOs were particularly supportive of engagement, early intervention and prevention, multi-agency solutions and targeted support for vulnerable cohorts, whilst recommending that further detail and guidance was required to implement this reform direction.

Reform directions

- We recognise that student behaviour is complex and that early intervention, preventative approaches and collaboration between stakeholders are required
- We agree we need to better identify, understand and address the drivers of behaviour and that our responses must be integrated, multidisciplinary and multiagency
- In 2021, work will commence to develop co-commissioning solutions with other NSW Government agencies, particularly the Department of Communities and Justice. Adopting a co-commissioning approach will enable genuine multiagency collaboration and accountability for improved student outcomes. Co-commissioned services leverage the strengths and capabilities of government agencies and the ability to design services that deliver continuity of support for students both in and out of school settings.

The critical importance of ongoing, genuine engagement and consultation

- Many teachers and principals were concerned that the duration of the public consultation period was inadequate to enable appropriate engagement with the proposed reform directions. These submissions highlighted the importance of transparency in the design and implementation of the Strategy to enable meaningful engagement and participation in the reform initiatives and the need for ongoing consultation.
- Parents and carers, NSW Government agencies, community members, NGOs and private service providers strongly held that engagement and consultation should reflect the diverse voices and experiences of all system users, including vulnerable student cohorts, including students with disability, Aboriginal students, students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, students at risk of contact with the criminal justice system and students in out of home care.
- Some stakeholders noted concerns about the scope of the proposed reform directions and implementation timeframe and the pressure it may place on the workforce, especially in the context of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reform directions

- We recognise that ongoing engagement and collaboration will be critical to building an inclusive education system and that there are concerns about the timeline in the consultation paper. We will continue to work with stakeholders in our next phases of translating the strategy to policy and procedures and implementation. A new draft timeline acknowledges the concerns raised.

Proposed changes to the use of school suspension

- Teachers and principals strongly agreed that suspension is a critical safeguard to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of both staff and students. Some parents and carers shared this view, particularly in the context of bullying.
- This area of the consultation paper drew the greatest diversity of responses, with some stakeholders strongly supportive of the intention to reduce the maximum period of suspension and others strongly opposed. The majority of stakeholders agreed that additional supports to staff and students and viable alternatives to suspension would be critical for any changes to be effective and sustained.
- A range of views were expressed on the various objectives and benefits of suspension, including:
 - suspension protects staff and students in circumstances in which a student's behaviour is unsafe and poses a risk to others;
 - suspension gives staff the time and opportunity to develop and put in place a plan, consider other strategies, or engage and coordinate services, to support a student's behaviour upon their return to school;
 - suspension provides respite and relief for school staff in circumstances of repeated and continuing challenging and complex behaviour;
 - suspension in circumstances of bullying has the effect of acknowledging the right of students to learn in a safe environment, protects and provides a period of respite to the victim of bullying and strongly signals that bullying is not acceptable;

Proposed changes to the use of school suspension (cont'd)

- suspension functions as a mechanism to alert parents and carers to the seriousness of a student's behaviour; and
- suspension as a mechanism to impose a punishment, maintain discipline and achieve specific and general deterrence.
- Numerous comments were made by teachers and principals that the decision to suspend a student was informed by a range of considerations, was not taken lightly and was the last resort. Principals and teachers noted that schools already implement a range of alternatives to suspension.
- Among teachers and principals, opinions differed on the overall effectiveness of suspension as a mechanism to manage student behaviour.
- Stakeholders who strongly supported the case for change regarding a reduction in the maximum period of suspension:
 - referred to research that found suspension to be ineffective as a behaviour management intervention and research that linked suspension to poor life outcomes, particularly for vulnerable students. Some stakeholders also outlined the adverse effects associated with their personal experiences of suspension.cited various concerns relating to the use of suspensions, including student disengagement from education and peers, recurrence of behaviours of concern and the increased likelihood of rolling suspensions, low academic achievement and increased involvement with the justice system.
 - NGOs, NSW Government agencies, principals and teachers, parents and carers and community members were generally supportive of the proposal to reduce the use of suspension, subject to the strengthening of supports, services and resources for both staff and students.
- Stakeholder concerns about a reduction in the maximum period of suspension included:
 - that it may have the effect of signalling to students and the wider community that NSW public schools were adopting a permissive approach to behaviour management. These stakeholders suggested this approach softened or undermined the 'zero tolerance' approach to student bullying. It was further suggested that this would compromise the deterrence effect of suspensions, both for individual students and the student community broadly.
 - teachers and principals in rural and remote locations noted challenges in accessing professional and specialist services, and that a reduction in the maximum period of suspension would limit the opportunity to secure appropriate services to support a student's behaviour upon their return to school following suspension.
 - some teachers and principals expressed strong concerns that it would limit the behaviour management interventions available to staff in response to unsafe behaviour and therefore pose a risk to staff and student safety, health and wellbeing.
- Parents and carers, Parents and Citizens' Associations and NGOs identified the right to procedural fairness in suspension as a key area of concern, and the need to more clearly define processes and pathways. Specific issues included parent and carer access to information, transparency and oversight of decision-making, fair and equitable appeals processes and timelines, inconsistency in the way in which suspension is applied, and the need for

Proposed changes to the use of school suspension (cont'd)

earlier involvement in the management of behaviours of concern.

More broadly, these stakeholders groups felt that greater involvement of the student and their families was required to implement effective solutions to manage behaviour and ensure continued engagement in school.

- Teachers and principals sought clarification of the potential operation of in-school suspension, specifically the availability of staff for supervision and the availability of rooms and the funding implications. It was strongly held that in-school suspension may not be appropriate in circumstances in which a student's behaviour was unsafe or posed a risk to staff or students.

Reform directions

- We recognize the need for school suspension as a last resort in the continuum of options for schools. Suspension will continue to be a critical safeguard if student behaviour poses a risk to the physical and psychological safety of others.
- We acknowledge and accept that while many stakeholders are supportive of a reduction in the maximum duration of suspension, many have legitimate concerns that this must be accompanied by supports, resources, services and procedures. We need to identify and implement interventions that support positive behaviour change and ensure the safety and wellbeing of students and staff.. This will include alternatives to suspension that promote positive, inclusive and respectful behaviour and while maintaining the safety, health and wellbeing of all students and staff.
- As our research shows that exclusionary discipline, such as suspension, is linked with increased recurrence of problem behaviour, lower scores in academic achievement, lower school retention rates, increased likelihood of involvement with the youth justice system, and poor long-term health and wellbeing outcomes, we need to reduce our useage of suspensions and reduce their impact on students, especially those already disadvantaged in the education system.
- We recognise the breadth and strength of views on this subject and will continue to discuss how we translate our strategy into policy and procedures and the support schools need to to reduce the use of suspension overall, reduce the maximum length of suspensions and ensure that school staff are supported to do this..
- We will continue to examine both attendance and suspension data to understand what it means for vulnerable students.

Staff safety, health and wellbeing

- Teachers and principals told us that the Student Behaviour Strategy was an opportunity to further strengthen safety, health and wellbeing supports and protections for staff.
- Some stakeholders suggested that complex, challenging and unsafe behaviour had increased in recent years and that this presented greater demands upon staff. Stakeholders attributed this to a range of potential factors and drivers unique to their school communities, including the growth in enrolment of students with a disability, the improved capability of teachers and school staff to understand, recognise and identify disability and additional learning needs, socioeconomic disadvantage and changing expectations of the teacher's role in student behaviour management.
- Numerous comments were made about workforce demands. Specific comments were made about the difficulties of attracting high-calibre candidates to the profession and retaining those employees. Some stakeholders cited current demands, including those associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as reason to re-scope the reform directions or delay or re-phase implementation.
- Principals and teachers outlined their experiences in managing and supporting student behaviour. These experiences ranged across the spectrum of student need, from early intervention to targeted support to managing challenging and difficult incidents.

Reform directions

- Our first priority is the safety and wellbeing of all our school communities and the Department takes this responsibility very seriously.
- We recognise the concerns raised and agree that this Strategy gives us more opportunities to ensure our school communities are safe and supportive places for staff as well as students
- We recognise that student behaviours sit on a continuum ranging from positive, inclusive and respectful behaviours to challenging, complex and unsafe behaviours. The majority of our students are able to behave in safe, respectful and inclusive ways. Our approach to behaviour support must be focused on identifying and supporting functional need to support positive, respectful and safe behaviour.
- To do this, we need to strengthen the system of support for students and staff to create respectful learning and working environments that promote engagement and wellbeing.

Student learning, safety, health and wellbeing

- Teachers and principals, parents and carers and community members expressed concern that complex, challenging and unsafe behaviours had the potential to adversely affect the learning, safety, health and wellbeing of other students.
- Many parents and carers expressed strong support for the reform directions. Some parents and carers outlined their experiences of their child's behaviour needs not being met at school, particularly in circumstances of disability and additional learning needs, and called for better understanding and for support their child's behaviour. This included consideration, measures and safeguards to ensure children with disability were not subject to unfair or repeat suspensions as a result of their disability, and requested that reasonable adjustment be made to support the student's behaviour needs.
- There was broad consensus that a strong anti-bullying stance was a critical component of effective classroom management. Some parents and carers outlined their child's experiences of unsafe and bullying behaviour at school and called for increased anti-bullying support.
- Some stakeholders expressed concern that an equitable and inclusive approach to education would result in the needs and interests of a minority of students being unfairly prioritised over others.

Reform directions

- Again, our first priority is the safety and wellbeing of all our school communities and the Department takes this responsibility very seriously.
- We are working to create safe inclusion and participation for all students. To do so, we recognise we need the right support structures in place to ensure all students can learn and thrive. This includes a strong anti-bullying stance and effective management of behaviours of concern.

Funding and resourcing

- Stakeholders queried whether the Strategy would be associated with new funding and expressed views that the ambition of the reform directions would require greater government investment.
- Principals and teachers told us about their experiences of funding and resourcing constraints at both the school and system-level.

Reform directions

- The Government has made clear its commitment to lifting educational standards and improving the learning and wellbeing outcomes of students across NSW public schools. This commitment is supported by record investment in public education.

Next steps

The Department would like to thank every teacher, principal, parent, carer, community member, non-government organisation, service provider and NSW Government agency who made a submission through the consultation process.

Although there is a broad spectrum of views, there is a lot of common ground including the aim of building positive and respectful behaviour in our students, and creating safe and engaging classrooms, as well as ensuring our school workforce feel comfortable, confident, safe and adequately supported to fulfil their role in classroom and behaviour management.

The feedback from the consultation is currently being considered by the Department to develop the final Student Behaviour Strategy.

The final Student Behaviour Strategy will outline high-level reform directions for supporting and managing student behaviour in NSW public schools. The revised Student Behaviour Policy and Procedures will be released later in 2021 and we will continue to work with stakeholders throughout the next phases of detailed design, planning and implementation. We will adopt a staged approach, and keep listening at each stage to ensure we are getting it right.

Key initiatives to expand access to student behaviour specialists, improved professional learning for teachers and school staff, and external specialist services commenced on Day 1, Term 1, 2021.

The Strategy will be a living framework that will adapt and evolve in line with best practice, emerging evidence and the lived experiences of our students and staff.



