

## Every LGBTQIA+ student has the right to feel safe at school – no exceptions

South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly, has chosen **Wear It Purple Day** to help highlight the need to create safe, supportive and inclusive environments for all LGBTQIA+ young people attending South Australian religious and faith-based schools.

Her latest report, released today, is ***No Exceptions – creating safer schools for LGBTQIA+ Students***. It follows directly on from her ***Blame Game*** report (released Nov 2020) examining the impact of school exclusions, through which a number of students attending religious schools raised concerns that their peers were not being treated fairly and were being made to feel different because of their sexuality or gender identity. The kind of exclusion they reported their LGBTQIA+ peers to be experiencing included exclusion from the curriculum, stereotyping in classrooms, and a tolerance of open discrimination and harassment that repeatedly went unchallenged.

While the shortfalls are not relevant to all religious schools, some of the practices reported are worrying and must be addressed, as they fail to support the rights of some young people or meet South Australia's state, national and international obligations in relation to the creation of child safe environments.

Of the young people who participated in the study who identified as being part of the LGBTQIA+ community, all reported that their school had discriminated against them and other LGBTQIA+ students in some way. They also said that the schools that do discriminate do so in many different ways. In some cases, students described bullying and discrimination as explicit. This included denying participation at the school on the basis of their gender identity or sexuality. Others described behaviour as happening 'behind closed doors'.

Some of the LGBTQIA+ young people who participated gave positive examples of changes implemented at their religious schools, which have made a tangible difference to their day to day lives - allowing them to focus on their education rather than on defending, explaining, or hiding their sexual orientation.

They also made several recommendations they believed would make schools safer and more friendly environments for LGBTQIA+ young people. These include providing relationships and sexual health education that is respectful of gender and sexual diversity to promote equality, reducing homophobia and addressing school-based bullying and violence; addressing gender and sexuality-based bullying within schools through a review of current school policies, procedures and complaints mechanisms, including assessment of the extent to which they promote safety for all students; and supporting students through provision of links to community-based youth health services and credible information sources beyond school.

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The negative experiences in the report do not reflect the environments in every religious school. There are noted examples of religious schools that actively promote and practice inclusivity. Parents sending their child to a religious school may or may not be aware of their child's sexual orientation, but they would have an expectation that, regardless of what it is, their child would not become victim to bullying or bias from other students or from any of their teachers because of it.

**Quotes attributable to Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly:**

The time spent at school and in school-based activities, means it is one of the most critical environments in young people's lives. Research shows that LGBTQIA+ young people are more likely to experience 'stigma, discrimination, social exclusion, homophobia, transphobia, stereotyping, ostracising and harassment' while at school. It is therefore important that when young people tell us their school environments are unsafe for themselves and their peers, we must listen to them and advocate on their behalf for change.

That any child should feel unsafe or insecure in their interaction with adults, whether at home, while in care, at school, or in other community settings, reflects directly on us as adults, and it is our responsibility to do something about it. Like all students, LGBTQIA+ students should be able to focus on their education and not have to worry about defending, explaining, or hiding their sexual orientation.

When LGBTQIA+ young people were asked what made them feel safe and positive about themselves, their answers were remarkably simple. They wanted acceptance and affirmation from peers, families and other significant adults, and the freedom to be themselves in the community, including in health services and settings, family relationships and home environments, education settings, workplaces, and other public places.

**To download the Commissioner's report [click here:](#)**

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