

# Gender clash grips schools

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Page 15 | Section: NEWS

494cm on the page



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MANY religious schools, most notably those of fundamentalist Christian doctrines, foster discrimination against sexually diverse students and fail to provide a safe environment, the Commissioner for Children and Young People says.

In a report published today, commissioner Helen Connolly said South Australian schools must abide by legal obligations and parents should be aware their children could be ostracised and bullied.

Some religious schools, including most of the Catholic sector and the longer established independent schools, did operate respectfully and she hoped newer independent schools could learn from those examples.

"I surmise parents choose Christian schools for the whole ethos, for the good aspects like justice, compassion and humanity," said Ms Connolly, pictured.

"But when you're choosing a school for your year 3 or 5 child, you may not be thinking about what if my child is

gay and how that will work out for them in the longer term.

"If your child becomes 'the other', how do you want them to be treated?"

The report, No Exceptions, draws on many conversations with young people and a survey at religious schools. The survey involved 86 respondents aged 13 to 22.

The report revealed a range of discrimination – from being ignored in the curriculum to "open discrimination and harassment that repeatedly went unchallenged".

A common complaint was that when bullying was alleged, school leaders failed to support the LGBTQIA+ student to avoid reputational damage if it became public.

Association of Independent Schools of SA chief executive Carolyn Grantskalns said she respected Ms Connolly and her advocating for every child.

"However, the survey is a very small sample from which to make sweeping observations," she said. "All schools care about their students."

Ms Grantskalns knew of fundamentalist schools which had expelled students for bullying gay classmates and noted the Uniting Church was very inclusive.

Catholic Education director Neil McGoran gave an assurance that "there is a place for every young person in a Catholic school where they feel known, valued and included".

The report comes as Attorney-General Vickie Chapman proposes reforms to the Equal Opportunity Act.

The reforms remove an exception to discrimination law for religious bodies that provide essential services, including children's education.

Following consultation, a Bill could be introduced to parliament early next year.

Ms Connolly said young people wanted changes to school culture and a curriculum which discusses and normalises diversity.

