

PUSH TO CUT BACK ON SUSPENSIONS

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TEACHERS have called for principals to resist pressure to stop suspending or expelling students who engage in violent behaviour.

The Australian Education Union has spoken out in the wake of the controversy over a series of violent videos filmed by students at Golden Grove High School in Adelaide's northeast appearing on social media.

SA president Andrew Gohl said the Education Department was attempting to reduce the number of suspensions in response to an external request for more mediation between students, rather than taking punitive action.

Mr Gohl said the push to reduce suspensions was "fundamentally undermining the capacity of schools to effectively manage unacceptable behaviour compounded by the shortage of specialists who support the student and the school".

"Principals are under pressure to reduce the number of suspensions in response to inappropriate and/or unacceptable behaviour," he said.

"While suspension is not seen as punishment, it is valuable time to allow a school to secure the necessary support to ensure the student's re-entry is planned and that undertakings are given by students and parents in the form of a behaviour contract."

The AEU has been supported by Education Minister Blair Boyer, who said suspension and exclusion were "last resorts and are not decisions schools take lightly".

"But they are tools that can play a role in cases like this to change behaviour," he said.

"I support the right of schools to be able to use suspension as a response to cases of violence like we've seen this week at Golden Grove High School.

"Twenty students were suspended at the school following these incidents."

The move to reduce suspensions and expulsions across the public education system emanated from a report last year by Children's and Young People Commissioner Helen Connolly.

She said excluding a student was a “punitive process that can have long-term effects on children’s educational attainment and treatment within the school system”.

“Behind every child who is excluded from school is a story of loss and pain, both for the child and their loved ones,” she said.

“Our response as a state should never be to impose a sanction that further excludes.

“Instead it should be a response that is inclusive with a view to eliminating exclusion as an option or tool for punishment.”

Ms Connolly said parents and carers had told her about “their desperation with the types of behaviour management practices that are being used in schools and how adversely they are affecting the wellbeing of their children”.

“Anything with the potential for such a substantive impact on a child’s wellbeing and their future attainment must be subject to the most rigorous examination of what standards of justice and representation are being applied,” she said.

Mr Gohl said principals and teachers believed suspensions were important as they provided the opportunity to determine if a student required additional support such as behaviour coaching.

“A suspension period also gives a break to the staff and students to re-establish a positive learning environment,” he said.

Education Minister Blair Boyer agreed, saying “suspensions alone will not tackle the underlying causes of this behaviour”.

“It must be used alongside a raft of other specialist behaviour supports, including counselling and wellbeing support,” he said.

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