

Suspension and Exclusion Rates From Schools in Most Australian States Are Skyrocketing. Are We Now Inclusive or Exclusive?

Kathleen Tait & Mervyn Hyde

Recent reports from several Australian school systems show that more and more students are being suspended and excluded from schools than in the past (Orr et al., 2023; Graham, 2020). We even see rapidly escalating rates of student suspensions from Prep and Grade 1 classes (Harman et al., 2021). Disturbingly, some states have more than double the number of suspensions and exclusions shown in other parts of the country.

Why is this happening?

In every Australian state, there are policies committing schools to national and international agreements to provide 'inclusive education' for all students. In this context, an increasing trend in suspension or exclusion (e.g., <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2006-0316>) is hard to understand and appears to be completely counter to this aspiration. Are these children just 'rotten apples' spoiling other students' education, or is the picture more complex than that? <https://cru.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/QPPD-Small-Choice-in-Rotten-Apples-2003.pdf>. This question is even more pertinent, when a leading Australian politician finds it necessary to call for the removal of children with disability and autistic children from regular classrooms. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-22/pauline-hanson-under-fire-repulsive-bigoted-comments-autism/8640328>

With increasing uniformity evident across our school education sector in national curriculum standards, achievement testing and reporting, and teacher professional standards, are we in Australia enacting the inclusive mantra that we espouse in our legislation, policies, and practices if sustained high rates of school suspensions and exclusions are evident?

According to Graham et al. (2023), continuing data trends emerging across eastern, mainland States over the last 10 years (e.g., <https://qed.qld.gov.au/publications/reports/statistics/schooling/students>) show that the children most likely to be suspended or excluded from schools:

- are boys,
- are from poor economic backgrounds,
- have an indigenous heritage,
- have a disability of some kind,
- show significant school absenteeism,
- are exposed to drug use,
- display aggressive behaviour, or
- have low educational attainments, particularly in literacy.

A particularly worrying aspect of these data is that suspensions are increasingly reported for students in Prep and Year 1 (Harman et al., 2021; Stegelin et al., 2020).

Other data show that this cohort is most likely to be involved in criminal behaviour in the future. As the Victorian Youth Affairs Council noted in 2016, our school-based suspension and exclusion decisions result in these kids becoming 'tougher' and more anti-social. The personal costs are high for these

continued on next page

students; if they do not receive an education sufficient to achieve employment and effective citizenship, they will not only suffer now but in the future. The social and economic costs of this outcome are also felt by the wider community. Ross Homel's Pathways' studies in Australia received national and international acclaim in identifying and responding to the needs of these students in our schools in positive and effective ways (<https://www.realwell.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Keeping-children-out-of-prison-Homel.pdf>).

Student suspensions/expulsions in NSW

According to Rudolf and colleagues (2024) in New South Wales (NSW), the rate of student suspensions in public schools is approximately one in 25 students. In 2023, one in 66 primary school students and one in 12 secondary school students were suspended. Graham and colleagues reported that, in 2021, 10% of Aboriginal students were suspended, and students identified as receiving adjustments due to a disability in NSW schools accounted for almost 48% of all students suspended in 2023 (Graham et al., 2023).

In 2023, a new Student behaviour policy was implemented for the first full calendar year, outlining the suspension and expulsion procedures across NSW Government schools. This policy was only in effect between Term 4, 2022 and the end of 2023 (replaced by another policy in Term 1, 2024). Enacting this document resulted in a change from suspension types and reasons for suspensions and descriptors. Under this policy, a student was able to be given a suspension if their behaviour: (1) caused harm to any person; or (2) created an unacceptable risk to the health and safety, learning or the wellbeing of any person.

The duration of a suspension could be:

- up to 5 consecutive school days for students in Kindergarten to Year 2, and
- up to 10 consecutive school days for students in Year 3 to Year 12.

The 2024 NSW Department of Education student behaviour policy (<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2006-0316>) introduced significant changes to the previous student discipline in NSW government schools' policy. This included the introduction of formal cautions, which were required prior to suspension for low level behaviours (unless there was an immediate risk to the health and safety of staff or students), and changes to the grounds for suspensions; and the length of suspensions.

In 2023, there were 43,124 suspensions due to *unacceptable risk to health and safety/wellbeing* (Rudolf et al., 2024). Further, in 2023, 148,474, or approximately 18.9% of all NSW government school student enrolments were identified as students receiving adjustments due to disability. This excludes students with disability who are supported through quality differentiated teaching practice. Nonetheless, as reported by Miller (2022), students identified as receiving adjustments due to disability account for 47.9% of all students suspended.

All these issues are part of our current inclusive education policies. So, do we just rest easy on the basis that these students are 'out of sight and out of mind', or do we find ways to practise education that is truly inclusive?

Students deserve better

The answer is clear. It's hard to achieve if you are not at school. So, we need to make sure that the necessary supports are there for students with challenging behaviours, learning difficulties and disabilities. Parents expect more informed and responsive policies in the twenty-first century.

continued on next page

Much of the answer lies in well prepared and supported teachers, that is, teachers who better understand the principles and processes of child development and appreciate that education is not only about measurable curriculum outcomes.

It is about finding ways for all students to reach their curricular and personal potentials, however long that may take. It is about how we, a tax-paying community, support learners with special needs, including those with behavioural challenges, literacy and learning difficulties, and disabilities. Modern world-class education involves having the capacity to respond positively to diversity, with schools and teachers who are willing and able to adapt their planning, support systems, and classroom practices. Excluding those students who may present challenges is a backwards step, both for the students themselves and for society as a whole.

References

- Armstrong, D. (2018). Addressing the wicked problem of behaviour in schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(9), 997-1013.
- Graham, L. J., Killingly, C., Laurens, K. R., & Sweller, N. (2023). Overrepresentation of Indigenous students in school suspension, exclusion, and enrolment cancellation in Queensland: Is there a case for systemic inclusive school reform? *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 50(2), 167-201.
- Graham, L. J. (2020). Questioning the impacts of legislative change on the use of exclusionary discipline in the context of broader system reforms: A Queensland case-study. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(14), 1473-1493.
- Harman, Y., Caltabiano, N. J., & Sorin, R. (2021). Pram to Playground: Why are Five-and Six-Year-Old Students Being Suspended? *The International Journal of Early Childhood Learning*, 28(1), 1.
- Miller, S. M. (2022). Students with disabilities and participation in extracurricular activities. *Master of Science in Mathematics*, 38. https://digitalcommons.shawnee.edu/math_etd/38
- NSW DoE Student behaviour policy (<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2006-0316>)
- Orr, C., Fisher, C., Bell, M., O'Donnell, M., Martin, K., Glauert, R., & Preen, D. (2023). Exposure to family and domestic violence is associated with lower attendance and higher suspension in school children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 142, 105594.
- Rudolph, S., Isbester, S., Payne, A. L., & Delany, T. (2024). Understanding school discipline and exclusion in Australia: Key issues. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52, 1509–1527. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00773-6>
- Stegelin, D., Leggett, C., Ricketts, D., Bryant, M., Peterson, C., & Holzner, A. (2020). Trauma-informed preschool education in public school classrooms: Responding to suspension, expulsion, and mental health issues of young children. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, 23(2), 9-24.

Associate Professor Kathleen Tait's expertise in the field of learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities stems from 30 years practical, administrative and consultative experience in early childhood, primary, special, and inclusive education. She specialises in the field of functional behaviour analysis and evidence-based intervention practices for individuals with complex and developmental disabilities (such as cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorders, physical, intellectual, and sensory impairments). Kathleen has worked in tertiary environments in the United Kingdom, Brunei Darussalam, Hong Kong, Japan, and Australia.

Professor Emeritus Mervyn Hyde is an Adjunct Professor of Education in the Faculty of Education and Tertiary Access at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) and Professor Emeritus of Education at Griffith University. He has been a teacher, school principal, university professor, researcher, teacher educator and academic manager in universities for more than 40 years. Professor Hyde is recognised internationally for his research in special education and inclusive education. In 1994 Merv was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for his contributions to special education in Australia and Indonesia. He was recently on the Board of a large EU-funded project aimed at developing resilience in children in situations of conflict or trauma.