



# JAMES MERLINO MP

## STATE MEMBER FOR MONBULK



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## MYTH BUSTING: SAFE SCHOOLS PROGRAM

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**Myth: The program is a compulsory part of the school curriculum.**

**Fact:** The Safe Schools program is not an element of the Victorian Curriculum. The Safe Schools program provides evidence based information, resources and professional learning to schools to foster school environments that are safe, supportive and inclusive of all students, including students who are same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse. The program supports schools to prevent, and respond to discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) students.

**Myth: Schools are forced to join the program and should be able to opt-out of the program.**

**Fact:** The Victorian Government has made a clear commitment to expand the Safe Schools program to all government secondary schools by the end of 2018. All other schools, including primary schools and non-government schools are able to access the program and request support where they need it. This is because the Victorian Government values and celebrates diversity and is committed to removing discrimination from Victorian laws, services and society, including for LGBTI Victorians.

Schools that are engaged with the program have demonstrated a commitment to build an environment that is safer and more inclusive for the whole school community. Each school has flexibility in the application of Safe Schools program resources, professional learning and advice, based on the local context and school community needs. It can involve, for example, a review of school policies and practice, professional development for school staff, and establishing a student led group to organise inclusive events.

**Myth: The program is not preventing bullying. Instead it promotes a dangerous agenda that is based on an extreme sexual ideology.**

**Fact:** The Safe Schools program is about making sure all children are safe at school and are provided an environment where they can be happy, confident and resilient. Students cannot learn effectively if they are being bullied, harassed and do not feel safe at school.

LGBTI young people experience high rates of bullying and the vast majority of this abuse occurs at school. For example, *Writing Themselves in 3*, the third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people, found that

- 61 per cent of LGBTI young people report experiencing verbal homophobic abuse
- 18 per cent report physical homophobic abuse

- 69 per cent report other types of homophobia, including exclusion and rumours
- 80 per cent of respondents experienced the reported abuse at school.

LGBTI young people are entitled to the same level of safety at school as all other students. Discrimination in Victorian schools has a negative impact on the whole school community, including for teachers, parents and other family members.

To provide an environment that is free of discrimination, it is important for all students to understand and be aware of the diversity that exists within the community. This includes gender diversity, sexual diversity and intersex topics.

**Myth: The program promotes and teaches children to undertake risky/inappropriate behaviour (e.g. chest binding/cross-dressing) and is a form of abuse.**

**Fact:** The program does not promote chest binding or cross-dressing. The program provides information and resources to schools and students to raise understanding and awareness of sexual and gender diversity.

Many LGBTI students feel uncomfortable about seeking support or affirming their identity and providing guidance and advice about these processes can reduce fear and anxiety in dealing with this.

For many people, the question of their gender or their sexuality is straightforward; however, for some it is more contested as they don't fit neatly into the 'norm'. It is important for all children and young people to understand that not everyone is the same and to respect this.

**Myth: Parents are not given an opportunity to consent to their child's participation and the program disregards the wishes of parents who do not wish for their children to participate in the program.**

**Fact:** The Department of Education and Training encourages parental and school community engagement as part of the Safe Schools program. Schools determine how to implement the Safe Schools program at their school, based on their local context and the needs of their school community. This is often done in consultation with students, school council and the broader school community.

The program does not impose specific requirements for student participation but does require all school community members to demonstrate the school's values. In instances where students are more directly involved, this participation tends to be extra-curricular and voluntary, such as through student groups for LGBTI students and allies or special events such as for International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexism and Transphobia or Wear It Purple Day. As with any extra-curricular activity, parents can choose for their children not to participate in those activities after discussion with the school.

The Department encourages parents to discuss any concerns regarding their child's participation in the program directly with the school principal. Within any school community there is always a diversity of views represented and schools take those views into account when working with children and their families.

**Myth: The government should not be in this space. Parents should be the ones who determine how and when their children are provided with information about LGBTI people and sex education. The program undermines the role of the family.**

**Fact:** Making sure our school environments are safe and free from discrimination and harassment is a requirement under Australian and Victorian anti-discrimination laws. The role of a school is to equip its students to lead healthy and productive lives, to not only achieve academically but also to be happy, healthy and resilient. Social and emotional learning is a key aspect of development for young people.

**Myth: There is no evidence to warrant such a program.**

**Fact:** Many studies around the world show that LGBTI students experience higher rates of harassment, social exclusion and bullying than their non-LGBTI peers<sup>1</sup>.

For example, *Writing Themselves in 3*, the third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people, found that

- 61 per cent of LGBTI young people report experiencing verbal homophobic abuse
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These experiences significantly affect students' emotional wellbeing and social health as well as their engagement in learning and school activities.

Two studies looking into the impact of homophobia at school found that for LGBTI students:

- 3 in 10 could not concentrate in school
- 2 in 10 missed classes or days of school
- 2 in 10 had lower marks
- 1 in 10 did not use the toilets
- 13% dropped out of sport
- 1 in 10 moved schools
- 8% dropped out of school altogether<sup>2</sup>

In addition to poorer educational outcomes, LGBTI young people are at greater risk of self-harm, suicide, excessive drug use and sexual risk behaviours compared to non-LGBTI young people.

**Myth: The program diminishes the seriousness of other forms of bullying (e.g. disabilities, racism) and should therefore be wrapped up into a broader anti-bullying program.**

**Fact:** Bullying is a serious issue for everyone in a school community. It can happen anywhere, anytime, and can have devastating consequences. All schools are required to have policies in place which provide students with a safe learning environment where the risk of harm is minimised and they feel physically and emotionally secure.

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<sup>1</sup> Toomey and Russell (2016) 'The Role of Sexual Orientation in School-Based Victimization: A Meta-Analysis', *Youth and Society*, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 176-201; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2011). *Review of Homophobic Bullying in Educational Institutions*, UNESCO, France, p14.

<sup>2</sup> Hillier, L., et al. (2010). *Writing themselves in 3: The 3<sup>rd</sup> national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of SSAGQ young people*. Melbourne: ARCSHS; Robinson, KH et al (2013) *Growing Up Queer: Issues Facing Young Australian Who Are Gender Variant and Sexuality Diverse*, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.

There are a number of programs and resources available to schools to prevent and respond to bullying. Bully Stoppers provides evidence-based anti-bullying advice and resources through a free online toolkit to empower school leaders, teachers, parents and students to tackle bullying.

Data shows the severe impact of homophobic and transphobic bullying on young people. This warrants a targeted response. The Safe Schools program supports a school to be a safe environment for all students.

**Myth: The program content is not age-appropriate and should not be offered to young children or children with a disability. It is inappropriate for special needs schools.**

**Fact:** The Safe Schools resources are evidence based and age-appropriate. Teachers have flexibility in which resources they use and how they use them. Teachers use their judgement to determine what is appropriate for their students, based on their age, abilities, level of understanding, local context and other factors. This is something that teachers do every day, in every class and with every interaction with their students.

The Safe Schools program provides professional learning to teachers to ensure they are equipped to deliver the program in schools through school policy and practice, student led activities and inclusive teaching and learning activities.

**Myth: The content takes classroom attention away from what matters – reading, writing, and arithmetic.**

**Fact:** Safe Schools is not an element of the curriculum and it does not take time away from key learning areas such as literacy and numeracy. We know that students cannot learn effectively if they are being bullied, harassed and do not feel safe at school.

Schools that are engaged with the program have made a commitment to build ‘an environment that is safer and more inclusive for the whole school community’. How this commitment is implemented is at the school’s discretion and therefore looks different for each school.

**Myth: The program is not an effective use of resources.**

**Fact:** In the 2015-16 State Budget, the Victorian Government increased its existing funding to Safe Schools Coalition Victoria by \$1.04 million over four years to expand its program into every Victorian government secondary school by 2018.

By comparison with other education related spending, this is a small amount of government spending that has a large impact on a vulnerable cohort of young people.

Evidence shows that young people that feel safe in their learning environments have better learning outcomes.