



Queensland Teachers' Union

Submission to the Inquiry into improving the delivery of respectful relationships and sex education relevant to the use of technology in Queensland State schools

**Authorised by QTU Executive
10 August 2017**

The Queensland Teachers' Union represents 44,000 members working in state schools and TAFE institutes throughout Queensland. The QTU is committed to protecting and enhancing public education in this state by representing members, including classroom teachers and school leaders, on industrial and professional matters.

Note – throughout this submission, the phrase “sexuality education” is used rather than “sex education” as the QTU believes it is a descriptor that more accurately reflects students’ contemporary needs for education in the area.

Impact of technology on students

Students’ access to internet-based platforms and channels via personal devices, including smartphones, has blurred the boundaries between the school setting and the “outside world”. Social media in particular has created stressors on students by providing new public and private connections with little or no moderation of content.

The QTU believes that the pervasive nature of information technology, combined with widely varying parental and public expectations about how and when students should be accessing personal IT devices (further complicated by the increasing take up of BYOx in schools), mean that notions of controlling student use through “physical barriers” – for example, banning mobile phones from school grounds and requiring school bags to be habitually searched – are unlikely to be effective, and create yet another administrative burden on school staff that delivers no educational benefit.

The QTU believes that it is far more effective to help students acquire the skills to make safe, legal, healthy and respectful choices; these skills then can be used in any setting, at any time.

Currently, individual school communities develop their own policies on students’ use of devices at school and acceptance of these policies becomes a part of the enrolment procedure. The QTU supports this approach but recommends that the Department of Education and Training urgently develop a robust policy that is applicable throughout the state school system that schools can choose to adopt, while allowing variations in response to compelling local circumstances, after consultation with the school community. Consequences for breaching schools’ policies should be clearly stated and supported by DET and by parents. e.g. student mobile phones will be confiscated if inappropriately used at school.

Impact of technology on staff

Just as students have new stressors from social media, so to do staff. QTU members are reporting increased use of social media by parents, students and other community members to harass and intimidate teachers and school leaders. The risk to school staff is particularly high when an issue that brings some highly polarised reactions from the community is associated with a school setting. Sexuality education is one such area: while the vast majority of parents support the provision of such programs in schools, a highly vocal but small minority does not. The QTU requests that DET work with the union to develop strategies and support mechanism to protect our members from online abuse, as part of the employer's obligation to protect employees' workplace health and safety.

Sexuality education

The QTU believes that comprehensive sexuality education should be available on an ongoing basis to all primary and secondary students, and considers that:

- comprehensive sexuality education programs must be part of a broad health education curriculum (which includes areas such as safety, environmental, consumer and mental health)
- sexuality education programs must be non-sexist and non-racist
- presentation or discussion of LGBTIQ issues in a class situation should be positive in approach
- sexuality education programs must be developed in a manner that encourages critical thinking and considered decision-making by students
- sexuality education programs should reflect the interests and concerns of students
- the sexual orientation and/or preferred gender identity of individual teachers must not be a factor in determining which teachers are able to teach sex, health or human biology education.

The QTU endorses the development of curriculum on sexuality education within the teaching service and among school communities and seeks adequate yearly allocations of professional development for teachers, dealing with health education, including sexuality education.

The QTU asserts that the Australian Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum meets student needs, is age-appropriate and encourages students to make safe, healthy and informed choices. For teachers, ongoing and adequately funded professional development is required to deliver this curriculum, as are regularly reviewed and updated curriculum support materials (C2C) that take into account the changing influences and pressures of the world beyond the school gates.

That curriculum is offered only from prep to year 10, with sexuality education in the senior years forming part of schools' pastoral programs. The QTU believes that these are critical years for students needing sexuality education, and recommends that the Queensland Government develop a state school-system wide program for years 11 and 12. That program should be:

- centrally funded
- delivered by centrally chosen service providers (as that is the model preferred by students)
- informed by quality, contemporary research on students' needs
- inclusive of all relevant government departments and through consultation with key stakeholders, including the QTU.

The QTU believes that where LGBTIQ issues are relevant to programs that fall outside the health education area, that relevance should be acknowledged in a positive manner.

Safe Schools Program

The QTU recognises the initial progress, and real difference the Safe Schools Coalition program has had across Queensland school communities in recent years. The QTU urges the Queensland government commit to centrally and recurrently fund and manage a state-wide program dedicated to making schools safer and more inclusive for same-sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students staff and community members. A department led program is essential to create the change to ensure that every student, teacher and community members in every school has access to a safe and inclusive learning environment free from discrimination and persecution.

The QTU stresses the need for vocational education teachers and others involved in advisory roles to be fully familiar with the rights and support mechanisms for LGBTIQ+ students, staff and community members.

Respectful Relationships Education (RRE)

Respectful Relationships Education was introduced in 2016, arising from recommendations from the Not Now, Not Ever Report, and has enhanced the education provided to students.

The QTU commends the Queensland Government for the introduction of the Respectful Relationship curriculum support materials and calls upon the Government to mandate the incorporation of age-appropriate lessons in existing school pastoral care programs with the aim of preventing domestic violence.

If respectful relationships training is deemed to be mandatory, it must be supported by professional development (PD) and resources to help frontline staff develop skills in recognising and reporting signs of domestic and family violence, with the intention to reduce, where possible, the prevalence.

It should be fully funded by the employer and be available during normal working hours, on a student free day, or during twilight PD opportunities. Schools require the tools to support students and staff in a confidential, yet confident manner.

This professional development should be carried out by qualified trainers, external to the teaching profession, who can work with teachers, guidance officers and other relevant staff to provide the necessary information and advice to teachers to allow them to recognise the signs of domestic and family violence among their students and to follow the appropriate reporting procedures.

The QTU does not believe that teachers, who may be survivors of domestic or family violence, are best placed to deliver the training to other staff. There should be the capacity for teachers to opt out if they have past experiences with family and domestic violence, which may still be traumatic.

The QTU supports the notion that the program can be embedded into pastoral care programs, however some staff may require access to professional development to deliver the program. It should be noted that teacher attendance/participation on school camps is voluntary.

Conclusion

The QTU asserts that a centrally provided and fully funded high quality, well-resourced sexuality education program would be of enormous benefit to the students and community of Queensland. The growing use of technology and access to content of a sexualised nature and capacity to share such content reinforces the need for and urgency regarding the provision of such a program.