

Feature:

Respectful relationships education and a whole school approach

Respectful relationships education has been delivered by prevention of violence against women community organisations for years and thanks to their leadership in this space, the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) mandated statewide delivery across all Victorian schools brings this journey to its next stage – embedding primary prevention in schools.

The evidence tells us that teachers rather than agencies should deliver respectful relationships education within the school context. Given that prevention work inevitably leads to disclosures, family violence and sexual assault agencies will play a vital role in providing advice, support and secondary consultation, while the role of prevention agencies is to support schools to implement the whole school approach.

Schools play a significant role in developing and educating children and young people and are an ideal setting for the primary prevention of violence against women. In fact, prevention agencies have been partnering with Victorian schools to undertake respectful relationships education for years.

The history and impact of this work was recognised by the RCFV, which recommended the Victorian Government mandate all government schools to deliver respectful relationships education from prep to year twelve. The RCFV also recommended the implementation be staged over five years to ensure school readiness, and that it be delivered in line with the evidence – through a whole school approach.

The Department of Education and Training (DET) began rolling out its RR initiative earlier this year along with all the RCFV recommendations. The initiative includes a suite of teaching and learning materials called *Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships*, as well as the appointment of a dedicated respectful relationships workforce, including 34 staff based across DET’s 17 regional offices.

The importance of using a whole school approach

In 2009, DET published *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools*. Developed by VicHealth, this foundational report identified the most effective and promising practices, in Victoria and elsewhere. This report remains one of the most comprehensive overviews of the evidence supporting respectful relationships education and its assertion that the adoption of a whole school approach is the single most important criterion for effective violence prevention in schools was echoed in the RCFV consultations with education and community service providers, researchers and academics.

Underpinned by a robust evidence base, the whole school approach embeds systemic change across the entire school through policy,

practice, staffing and teaching allocation, leadership and school culture, as well as with students in the classroom.

In part, this means critiquing and challenging every aspect of the school, as both a place of learning and a workplace, to understand how the drivers of violence against women are perpetuated, supported, condoned or ignored. During this process, it is common for staff and students to begin noticing the narrow and harmful ways in which girls, boys, women and men are portrayed, treated and expected to behave; whether it’s boys dominating athletic spaces during lunchtime, principal positions filled predominantly by men – despite the workforce being predominantly made up of women – or women doing the lion’s share of cleaning shared spaces like the staff tea room.

There is no one way to ‘fix’ this problem; it requires multi-pronged, long term action both within and outside the classroom, which is what the whole school approach embodies.

The necessity of a whole school approach can’t be understated – if our vision is to create a society that is safe for girls and women, then a holistic approach is needed to dispel violence-supportive attitudes, adherence to rigid gender roles, men’s control of decision-making and disrespect towards women.

While violence prevention programs were previously delivered in schools by specialist family violence, sexual assault and women’s health services, the delivery of mandatory respectful relationships curriculum by teachers was introduced in 2016 and there are now more than 1,000 Victorian government, catholic and independent schools participating in DET’s RR initiative. This means that the role of the specialist prevention sector is changing to focus more on supporting the DET model using a whole school approach.

Where prevention meets response

An unavoidable side-effect of engaging in prevention is an increase in people identifying and disclosing their own experiences of violence. In the context of a whole school approach, this encompasses student, staff

Focus areas of activity for a whole school approach

-  **School culture & environment**
Apply a gender lens to each area of the school community.
-  **School leadership & commitment**
Leadership team can influence cultural change by modelling gender equitable interactions with staff and students.
-  **Professional learning strategy**
Provide professional learning and ongoing professional development to all staff.
-  **Community partnerships**
Involve parents and wider community in training, learning and activities.
-  **Teaching & learning**
Every classroom provides an opportunity to address the drivers of gender-based violence.
-  **Support for staff & students**
Train staff and ensure school partners with family violence and sexual assault services.

What does supporting a whole school approach look like?

Supporting a whole school approach includes activities such as:

- Assisting schools with their gender audit and supporting their understanding of how drivers operate in their schools
- Providing advice to schools on policies and practices that support gender equality and respectful relationships
- Helping schools to engage parents in information nights
- Providing tailored resources that support a whole school approach

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One of the most comprehensive overviews of the evidence asserts that the single most important criterion for effective violence prevention in schools is the adoption of a whole school approach



and parent disclosures of family violence at home and/or within their relationships and experiences of perpetration and victimisation.

The statewide roll out of the RR initiative means that family violence and sexual assault services will receive more referrals, exacerbating the existing pressure on response services as most school staff are not yet adequately equipped to respond to disclosures from their colleagues or students.

Building the capacity of schools to respond to family violence is part of the role of the DET RR initiative and student support services workforces. The work involved is considerable, so specialist family violence and sexual assault services still have a crucial role to play. This role involves receiving referrals, providing secondary consultation, advice and support to school staff and helping build their capacity to recognise family violence indicators, respond appropriately to disclosures and make appropriate referrals, all while complying with DET guidelines and mandatory reporting obligations. However, for family violence and sexual assault services to take up this consultation and support role they must be adequately resourced and funded.

Successful primary prevention requires a level of cultural, behavioural and attitudinal change which can only be achieved through mutually reinforcing and sustained efforts across all of society – in schools, workplaces, sports clubs, popular culture and beyond. Similarly, prevention efforts in schools won't be effective if they are only delivered in the classroom. A soundly designed whole school approach implemented in stages is the only way to safely and effectively implement respectful relationships in schools, and the evidence tells us that in the long term, this will reduce the prevalence of violence against women in our state.

Thanks to years of leadership and advocacy from community agencies, we are seeing the first coordinated statewide effort to embed primary prevention in a universal system. Despite the challenges, the RR initiative is a brave strategy and its success depends on a staged, comprehensive whole school approach that leads to the cultural, systemic change necessary to shift the attitudes and behaviours of children and young people and create an equitable and respectful school culture.

More information

Training on respectful relationships and how to implement a whole school approach: dvrvc.org.au/training

Respectful relationships information, resources, networks and events: partnersinprevention.org.au



Download the whole school approach poster from our website: partnersinprevention.org.au/resources/whole-school-approach/