TOP BLOKES
FOUNDATION

SUBMISSION TO ANTI-BULLYING RAPID REVIEW

REVIEW TO INFORM A CONSISTENT NATIONAL STANDARD TO ADDRESS BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

Prepared by Top Blokes Foundation

30 July 2025



TOP BLOKES
FOUNDATION

WE BELIEVE...

Young males are catalysts for positive change. They have a unique perspective that can help solve some of the societal issues that we grapple with. Their voice is valuable and they make meaningful contributions.

When young males are healthy, engaged and well, they influence others around them to do well too.

Young males have the capacity to learn, can embrace change with open minds and are the solution to their own success.

Young males want to be invested in. They rise to the opportunities to become the best versions of themselves. They deserve the opportunity to harness their potential and become top blokes.

The future for young males is exciting. Our society is becoming more inclusive, attentive and caring to help young males grow into their full selves.

Building strong foundations today forges a positive path for the leaders of tomorrow.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Top Blokes Foundation (Top Blokes) is a youth mental health charity supporting young males aged 10-24 years old. Top Blokes welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review.

Our submission is informed by our experience working with young males in schools and communities since 2006, the lived experience of our Youth Ambassador Council members (up to 10 young males who have participated in Top Blokes programs and provide advice on Top Blokes strategy and operations) and the practice wisdom of our youth workers, who have supported over 20,000 young males across NSW and QLD.

Many of our young men have experienced bullying and/or have exhibited bullying behaviours, and our youth workers have addressed bullying in their practice. Our submission aims to share insights from young men and youth workers to inform your terms of reference and the development of any consistent national standards to address bullying in schools that may emerge as a result of the review.

To develop this submission, we ran a focus group with Youth Ambassador Council members and interviews with Top Blokes Youth Workers. The results as they relate to the terms of reference for the rapid review, can be summarised as follows:

- Bullying in schools occurs in a larger context: school leadership, parents and social values all play a part in preventing and reducing bullying.
- Empathy and communication are key to changing minds and improving relationships between young males who experience bullying and those who exhibit bullying behaviours.
- School staff play an important role, but need training and support to more effectively respond to, prevent and reduce bullying in schools.

OUR SUBMISSION MAKES THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. A national standard to address bullying in schools must be part of **a larger and coordinated approach** to preventing and responding to bullying and its underlying causes in school contexts and beyond.
2. Schools should be equipped and resourced to **deliver targeted interventions both internally and in partnership with qualified external providers** to support students exhibiting bullying behaviours and/or experiencing bullying. These partnerships should complement a whole-of-school approach, not replace it.
3. As part of the national standard to address bullying in schools, school staff should receive **training and support** to identify bullying and to respond to both students exhibiting bullying

behaviour and students experiencing bullying.

4. A national standard to address bullying in schools should consider **school-related bullying that occurs outside school boundaries.**
5. Development of a national standard should explore the **guiding principles underpinning the standard**. These guiding principles should be articulated alongside the national standard.

We strongly recommend the review speak directly to young males to more deeply and directly hear and understand their perspectives. Top Blokes welcomes the opportunity to facilitate this dialogue for the review. We sincerely thank the young men who shared their experiences with us for this submission. They truly live the Top Blokes values and we are privileged to hear their stories, insights and recommendations and share them with you.

We welcome any opportunity to speak with the review co-chairs about our submission.

Regards



Melissa Abu-Gazaleh
Founder and Managing Director

ABOUT TOP BLOKES FOUNDATION

Top Blokes provides safe and supportive spaces for young males to meaningfully connect, explore their identities beyond socially dominant forms of masculinity, develop critical thinking skills and build their knowledge and resilience.

Top Blokes programs are informed by frameworks that promote positive and healthy masculinities, improve mental health, and minimise harm. Programs are delivered by qualified Youth Workers in New South Wales, and Queensland. We also have a new presence in the Northern Territory and Tasmania.

Top Blokes' mission is to challenge and nurture males to be their best selves.

Top Blokes' vision is that more young males lead healthy and safe lives.

Top Blokes has three programs that we deliver in schools and with community partners such as workplaces and community organisations:

- 10-13 program: run in primary schools over one school term
- 14-17 program: run in high schools over two school terms
- 18-24 program: run with community partners over 10-20 weeks

Graduates from these programs can become members of our Grad Club, which offers them ongoing support and opportunities for personal and leadership development as well as to stay connected with like-minded males.

Top Blokes has a Youth Ambassador Council, comprised of up to 10 young males who have participated in Top Blokes programs. The Youth Ambassador Council provides lived experience advice and guidance on Top Blokes programming, operations and strategies, as well as engaging in policy and advocacy activities.

EVIDENCE ON BEST PRACTICE IN RELATION TO PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO BULLYING IN SCHOOL CONTEXTS - INCLUDING ADDRESSING BULLYING BEHAVIOURS AND REDUCING UNDERLYING CAUSES.

Available evidence indicates that the most effective strategies for preventing and responding to bullying in school contexts take a whole-of-school approach that focuses on creating a positive school climate and offers targeted interventions for students exhibiting bullying behaviours and/or experiencing bullying (Evian Waasdorp et al. 2022, Nickerson 2019, Sainz & Martin-Moya 2023, Swearer et al. 2010). In this respect, a national standard must be part of a larger and coordinated approach to preventing and responding to bullying in school contexts.

The young males and youth workers we spoke to recognised this, identifying the connection between school culture and broader societal values, and the value of targeted interventions that address bullying behaviours and reducing underlying causes.

> Bullying is a symptom… the problem is the culture of schools."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> If we can make bullying feel as outdated as smoking… that's what is going to make it eventually get in people's heads that bullying should be stopped."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Young males felt that many current strategies are tokenistic and ineffective, for example posters, assemblies and student leadership-driven initiatives. They recognise that a positive school culture comes from the top, with Principals and senior teachers leading the charge. They identified peer solidarity/active bystanders, empathy, and challenging the "pack mentality" as powerful disruptors to bullying.

> There is no definitive way to get rid of bullying…there will always be someone with a big ego…a big thing with minimising it from happening in schools…is making people more aware of the effects, taking apart the pack mentality…they're thinking it is OK for them to do that when they have 20 people behind them telling them it is alright."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> My friends ignored me because they felt like they didn't want to get called out… it showed me who was truly my friend."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

This view was shared by youth workers, who have seen the impact of Top Blokes workshops on young males who exhibit bullying behaviours.

> All of my one-on-one interactions with some of the more challenging boys that display some of these behaviours have all been immensely positive. When they are removed from that pack mentality and their walls come down or the mask comes off, they are just young boys who maybe aren't seen and recognised publicly unless they act out."
>
> - REECE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Young men told us that both victims and bullies need support and were able to recognise the underlying causes of bullying. They described bullying as a symptom of deeper social and emotional issues.

> I started to realise that trying to talk to him was never going to change the problem because he was kind of taking off his anger and insecurities onto me, and he had a bottomless pit of insecurities."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> Adults and governments need to understand the other side...the victim of all the bullying...we need to relieve a bit of that pressure [on the victim]."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Importantly, young men look beyond the school environment when asked how to prevent and reduce bullying in schools. They emphasised the need for adults in students' lives to reflect on their own behaviour and emotional health, and to develop their emotional literacy as parents.

> It is like a cycle, and it starts with adults. If we've established that bullies are the way they are because they're damaged and hurting, a lot of that comes from your upbringing and parents...incentivise and encourage the conversation in adult spaces as well."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> You don't just wake up one day and decide you want to hit someone. That comes from something."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> It starts with adults. Some of [them] actually might need therapy because they don't know how to conduct ourselves... and [they're] giving that to [their] children."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

This view was shared by youth workers:

> Many of the values, beliefs, and perspectives that young people hear from heir parents and home environments are repeated at school without much reflection - they often adopt these views without questioning whether they truly believe them."
>
> - TOBY, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

> The parents can be the reason a child bullies...but nobody wants to go there."
>
> - REECE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

We also recognise that many parents and carers are unaware their young man is exhibiting bullying behaviour, and are shocked to learn of it. In these cases, it is critical that parents and carers support the young man to understand what is at the root of this behaviour. Open communication is key to these important conversations being safe, constructive and empowering for young males to facilitate behaviour change. Young males and parents and carers have told us that these conversations can be hard to have. Parents and carers have told us they need support to build their skills in communicating with the young males in their lives. This reinforces the importance of a national standard being part of a larger and coordinated approach to preventing and responding to bullying and its underlying causes in school contexts and beyond, as per our Recommendation 1.

While our experience delivering programs to young males and the results of our in-house and independent evaluations make us optimistic about opportunities to prevent and reduce bullying in schools through a whole-of-school approach that incorporates targeted interventions, the young males we spoke to were sceptical about the possibility of completely eradicating it. Youth workers also recognised that there is no quick fix.

> It's almost like you can't stop it. It is like a disease. Once you've squashed the pathogen there is a bit that is still there and it springs up again."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> If we really want the best for our young people, it's a collective...including parents...we all play a part somehow."
>
> - REECE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

The relationship between bullying, power and dominance is well theorised and documented (Andrews et al. 2023, Horton 2019, Menesini & Salmivalli 2017). To address bullying, we need to understand and disrupt these power dynamics within the school context and beyond.

The young males and youth workers we spoke with recognise this as a core challenge and opportunity:

> Once the social leader's uniformity is threatened, they see that... they do what they can to break that disruption"
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> I had a lot of trouble with a group of [popular] guys all through from Year 7 to Year 9, and we started the Top Blokes halfway through Year 9. And so I'm sitting there in that room in this program with four or five dudes who, I hate using the word bully, I just hate it, but picked on me a lot, made my life hell...And by a couple of weeks in, one of them comes up to me, tears in his eyes. He's like, "Bro, I'm sorry for how we've kind of treated you," whatever, and he's one of my best friends till this day."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Peer pressure and 'pack mentality' are key components of bullying in schools, which also impacts teachers:

> Some school contacts have discussed the growing number of misogynistic behaviours and inappropriate comments toward female teachers. The cause for this increase I can't confidently comment on but many of these behaviours have been linked to indirect peer pressure situations where the comment or behaviour has been done in front of their friends because they think it is funny, or will get them some sort of social credit.
>
> - TOBY, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

> Pack mentality is a big thing...a lot of what affected me in late primary school and going into the early years of high school was just a lot of me trying to be, I guess, still within that pack. But there was always someone trying to control the strings of that pack...they could get away with whatever they wanted... especially if they are singling people out...'
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

RECOMMENDATION

A national standard to address bullying in schools must be part of a larger and coordinated approach to preventing and responding to bullying and its underlying causes in school contexts and beyond.

EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS BULLYING BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE BEEN BULLIED.

Top Blokes programs do not focus exclusively on bullying, yet have outcomes and learning objectives that serve as protective factors against bullying.

The workshop topics in our school-based programs include resilience, anger management, masculinities, diversity and inclusion, upstander and leadership skills, communication and conflict resolution skills. Through our work with schools and the families of young men, we aim to increase the sense of connection young males feel at school and at home and to promote supportive and healthy relationships.

Group dynamics are an important focus for our programs. Our youth workers are trained in creating safe spaces that promote open and honest conversations, helping build meaningful connections between young males over the 3-6 month program duration.

Several young men we spoke to cited the Top Blokes 14-17 Mentoring Program as a turning point in their experience of bullying at school. They described the Top Blokes workshop as creating a safe space for reflection, identity-building, empathy and emotional expression. Among those who had experienced bullying, they felt it addressed the root causes of bullying more effectively than disciplinary approaches.

Empathy and communication skills: We help young men understand the perspectives of others and how their behaviours can impact them through topics including healthy relationships, online behaviours (including cyberbullying), and diversity. We aim to help boys understand their own emotions and those of others, equipping them with tools to respond with empathy instead of aggression.

> [Top Blokes was about] dropping your own facade and seeing through other people's...having authenticity and empathy."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> I've had boys admit to bullying and realise, through the program and listening to other boys, that everyone has stuff going on and stop bullying."
>
> - REECE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

> We give the boys concrete examples to unpack - something they can visualise. At first, they often respond with what they think is the "right" answer. But when we strip it back, it becomes clear their perceptions aren't always accurate. Their thought process is often out of step with reality. That's where the real growth happens. It gets reflective and introspective, especially when other boys start sharing their own stories, it helps the whole group reflect more deeply."
>
> - TOBY, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

This can help boys identify inappropriate behaviour they may not have previously recognised. Young men we spoke to described how damaging 'banter' can be, though it is not always understood or recognised as bullying.

Challenging harmful norms that promote dominance: challenging socially dominant forms of masculinity and letting young men shape their own version of what it is to be a man is a throughline of our programs.

> When we come together at school for the [Top Blokes] program, we really come together to oversee that misuse of power."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Safe, consistent support: Weekly sessions with the same youth workers build trust and psychological safety, which many said they didn't experience elsewhere at school. We encourage young men to be open, vulnerable and honest about how they present to the world. Often these types of activities expose challenges that are universal which can build connections across peer groups and demographics.

> "Top Blokes really has that mantra that we're all in the same boat."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> "We call things out in a really healthy way...We don't ridicule, we ask 'Hey, why do you say that?'. So it's more that curious mindset to make them more curious in themselves, and that's where change comes...They might not know the answer straight away, but then the more you keep doing that consistently, they start to say 'because that's what I've always seen. That's what I've always done'. And that opens the gateway then to make a change."
>
> - REECE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

This support is especially important for young men who have experienced bullying. One young man described the fear and isolation he experienced when he was bullied after moving to a new high school:

> "There were a couple of dudes who had a position of power in the school...There were a good couple of years where I'd spend a lot of my lunch breaks hiding behind this one little building... trying not to get seen, so I didn't get chased and get my ass kicked."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Role of the upstander revisited frequently: As young males explore their true identities, they want to find a way to live their values authentically. We talk openly about peer pressure, how to help friends, speaking up online when seeing harmful comments and how to safely call out harmful behaviours including bullying and racism.

Identity and resilience building: Top Blokes helps young men rebuild their sense of self after trauma or exclusion.

> **A big part of it was Top Blokes… just moving away from [the bully] and trying to isolate myself, to allow myself to rebuild who I was."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Relational repair: Some Top Blokes participants form friendships with young males that have bullied them, showing how empathy and shared stories broke down divisions.

Youth workers and young men who have participated in Top Blokes programs have found the program effective in ending bullying between participants:

> **One boy shared that he was bullied at school…He started opening up…the other boys were learning more about him and, but the end of the program, you could see the change in them. At graduation he was the only boy to speak. He shared his experience of bullying. I thanked him and said 'I think you've got some boys here now that have your back' and every boy in the room was nodding. His Mum came up to me later with tears in her eyes, gave me a huge hug and said 'My son wants to come to school again'. This boy now feels empowered to be himself, and that's huge."**
>
> - REECE, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Focusing on times of transition: Top Blokes runs a 10-13 Program in primary schools and a 14-17 Program in secondary schools. These programs reach boys at key transition points in their life:

- The transition from primary school to high school.
- Navigating self-identity and social dynamics in early high school.
- Transition from high school to work, further study or neither.

The young men we spoke to for this submission identified primary school and Years 8-9 as critical in their experiences of bullying. This period is especially challenging for boys who do not easily fit into social groups that form at this age, or who have moved schools and need to form a new social group.

RECOMMENDATION

Schools should be equipped and resourced to deliver targeted interventions both internally and in partnership with qualified external providers to support students exhibiting bullying behaviours and/or experiencing bullying. These partnerships should complement a whole-of-school approach, not replace it.

ADVICE ON WHAT A CONSISTENT NATIONAL STANDARD TO ADDRESS BULLYING SHOULD COMPROMISE

As per Recommendation 1, Top Blokes see the development and implementation of a consistent national standard to address bullying as an important part of a larger whole-of-school and whole-of-community approach that includes targeted interventions.

Several young men told us they had experienced bullying at school and had made a report to school staff. None reflected on this as a positive experience, and their stories indicate a need for greater support for teachers in identifying and responding to bullying. Young men described poor handling of reports they made to teachers, breaches of confidentiality and a focus on punishment over support. They described reporting bullying as often making things worse and questioned how impactful suspensions were in preventing and reducing bullying. Some expressed frustration with teaching staff who minimised the impact of bullying or blamed the victim.

> "They say it'll be private — but within two days, everyone knows who reported it."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> "Sometimes [the teachers] actually said my name [when questioning a bully], even though I told them not to."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> "They told me the bully was going through something... okay, but that kid just kicked me."
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> **…that kid [the bully] is struggling…so they don't get punished. I understand they were going through a hard time, but if something happens you still need to address it."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> **You're not allowed to take it into your own hands… but they don't do anything for you either."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> **[The school counsellor] was attributing [how I felt about bullying I was experiencing] to me not having my dad around… it put a false belief in my head."**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Youth workers also reflected on their experience with teachers who have mislabelled students as victims and/or students exhibiting bullying behaviours:

> **Often we do see confirmation bias about 'problem' students from school contacts."**
>
> - DANNY, TOP BLOKES YOUTH WORKER

Overall, these comments indicate scope for a national standard to address bullying to boost school staff understanding of bullying and improve responses to the victim and the person exhibiting bullying behaviour.

Research highlights the important role of training and support for teachers in responding to, preventing and reducing bullying (De Luca et al. 2019, Gizzarelli et al. 2022). The youth workers and young males we spoke to also recognised that teachers may not have the knowledge and skills they need to effectively deal with issues like bullying. Young men suggested skill development for teachers alongside the national standards. This should include identifying bullying earlier, how to approach and support the person being bullied and remembering to check in with them periodically.

> Teachers do not have the skills to handle [bullying]...they try to find and punish the culprit, but realistically they need to be equipped with many more skills..."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> 'I feel like bullying is only addressed when someone is nearly killed...when someone hurts themselves or attempts to hurt themselves...when it is not addressed at a deeper level, it can lead to very bad psychological issues later on in life."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

RECOMMENDATION

As part of a national standard to address bullying in schools, school staff should receive training and support to identify bullying and to respond to both students exhibiting bullying behaviour and students experiencing bullying.

We urge the national standards to consider incorporating measures for school-related bullying that occurs off school grounds. Young men described the challenges they face when bullying occurs off school grounds, though perpetrated by people they go to school with. They describe a sense of not being cared for by teachers once they are off school grounds which one young man described as 'humiliating and disempowering':

> You can walk off school property and get hit...if they're not in school uniform they're not going to do anything...it feels like the teachers don't care about their students."

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

> The counsellor said, 'Well, we can't do jack shit because it wasn't at school.'"

- YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

Young men also raised the issue of inter-school dynamics, further supporting the notion of a national standard that goes beyond the boundaries of a single school.

They described bullying that occurs between schools, especially on public transport or in shared community spaces. The young men described experiencing status-based judgment and ridicule tied to school identity, social class, and belief systems. These experiences were seen as under-addressed in current school policies.

RECOMMENDATION

A national standard to address bullying in schools should consider school-related bullying that occurs outside school boundaries.

A positive school culture is characterised by safety (physical, psychological, cultural), empathy and connection, student voice and agency, whole-of-community connection and trauma-informed and culturally safe practice.

We asked young men what a safe school would look, sound and feel like. They described a safe school as one where individuality is accepted, empathy is modelled and power dynamics are challenged. Authenticity and vulnerability were seen as critical ingredients of a respectful culture.

> **'I was in the hospital the other day... I was reading this poster, and it was like, 'bullying and harassment is not accepted by our staff.' It's like, if bullying and harassment isn't accepted in an adult workplace, why is it accepted for kids in schools?'**
>
> - YOUTH AMBASSADOR COUNCIL MEMBER

These and other guiding principles should be explored and articulated as part of developing the national standard.

RECOMMENDATION

Development of a national standard should explore the guiding principles underpinning the standard. These guiding principles should be articulated alongside the national standard.

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