

**Yvette Berry MLA**  
**Deputy Chief Minister**



Member for Ginninderra  
Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development  
Minister for Housing and Suburban Development  
Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence  
Minister for Women  
Minister for Sport and Recreation

Mr Tom Duncan  
Clerk, ACT Legislative Assembly  
GPO Box 1020  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter of 24 August 2017 with information about petition No 21-17 received by the Assembly on 24 August 2017 in relation to the Safe Schools Coalition program.

In accordance with Standing Order 100, I provide you with the following response to the issues raised by the petition:

All ACT schools, both government and non-government run, are diverse environments that reflect the differences in our community. Students present to schools with a range of personal characteristics including diversity in gender identity and presentation, sexual orientation and intersex status. Our diversity is beautiful and children should be encouraged to be themselves without experiencing prejudice. All schools have a duty to provide a safe, respectful and inclusive environment free from bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence.

The petition raises concerns about Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) materials and associated resources leading to more identity confusion and anxiety in developing children. Concerns about the Safe Schools Program have already been investigated by the Australian Government, including materials associated with the program. The Loudon review in 2016 assessed whether program resources were age appropriate, educationally sound and aligned to the Australian Curriculum. The review recommended changes to curriculum materials, removal of links to third party materials on the program website and included the requirement for parental consent to participate in the program. Many of the resources referred to in anti-safe schools campaigns refer back to materials linked to the program prior to this review.

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The petition cites concerns regarding research associated with the program. The findings of initial research produced by La Trobe University is consistent with robust data about the impact of bullying which is outlined in the literature review (2010-2014) undertaken by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group<sup>1</sup>. This working group operates under COAG and reports to Education Council. Many same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse people report school as a significant site where they experience prejudice, discrimination, harassment and violence. This research demonstrates that bullying, discrimination and isolation of young people has serious and negative affects on students' sense of belonging, safety and engagement at school, with subsequent impacts on education participation, achievement, health and wellbeing.

It is considered that the concerns in this petition are based on inaccurate information and misconceptions on what has been delivered in ACT schools to date. The facts are:

- To date, SSCA ACT has offered professional learning to school staff as requested by individual schools. Topics include information about the SSCA Program, sexuality and gender diversity and inclusive practices and curriculum resources.
- SSCA ACT also provided consultation support to schools where there were concerns about specific student issues.
- SSCA ACT also engaged with both public and independent school parent peak bodies to address parent community concerns, and had positive responses in this engagement. The objective of this engagement is ensuring schools are safe, respectful and inclusive environments for all students.
- SSCA ACT has *not* directly taught students in classrooms as part of the SSCA Program.
- SSCA ACT is not aware that any school has made use of the SSCA curriculum material.

Looking forward, the new *Safe and Inclusive Schools Initiative* is ACT specific and will respond to particular needs that exist within ACT schools and the broader ACT community. It has been developed through active engagement from a range of key education stakeholders, parents groups, and health and community sector organisations through a formal reference group structure as well as via informal consultations. Safe and Inclusive Schools Initiative is responsive to young people's needs and builds the capacity of schools and families to support young people at school.

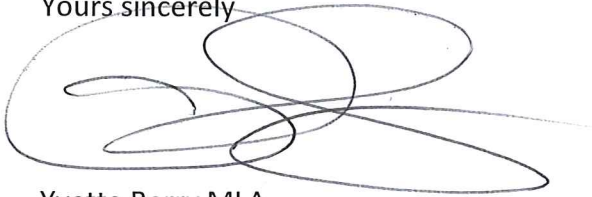
The ACT Government has been clear in its commitment to introduce programs that support inclusion and fight discrimination against LGBTIQ Canberrans. In line with ACT's *Human Rights Act 2004* and the ACT *Discrimination Act 1991* the ACT Government believes that all people are entitled to respect, dignity and the right to participate in every aspect of our community regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education and Training. (2015). *A review of Literature (2010-2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group.*

In my conversations with young people they have expressed the significance of attending a school where they felt valued and accepted by their peers and teachers for who they are. This culture of acceptance and inclusion in schools is critical to young people's wellbeing and educational outcomes and is why the ACT Government will continue to support the new ACT initiative.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Yvette Berry MLA  
Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development

17 NOV 2017

