

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND SAFETY IN SCHOOLS

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Community and population level studies have shown the association between high levels of self-reported discrimination and poor mental health. Further, evidence from a number of Australian studies indicates that discrimination and harassment in education is a continuing problem.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission's (VEOHRC) *Human Rights and Safety in Schools* initiative was funded through the Victorian Government's *Fairer Victoria* social justice strategy. The initiative was a response to Victorian law and the obligation of schools to improve student wellbeing and to help ensure safe and inclusive school environments for all.

Given the breadth of the brief and the current demands on schools, a key challenge for the VEOHRC was how best to make a constructive and sustainable contribution from outside the education sector and with moderate resources.

An environmental scan and consultations with key stakeholders determined that the initiative would be more effective and sustainable if it sought to strengthen school leadership capacity and better resource existing strategies, rather than create new or competing expectations of schools and principals.

A partnership approach was pursued with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). Four integrated strategies were developed to provide consistent messages to schools. Arguably the most innovative component of the initiative was the development of a series of practical tools, guidelines and resources to assist government school principals to assess and meet their schools' equal opportunity and anti-harassment obligations as part of the Department's *School Compliance Checklist*.

The *School Compliance Checklist* is an accountability and risk assessment tool developed by the DEECD. It is an electronic checklist that identifies all the legislative and Departmental policy requirements with which government schools must comply. From the commencement of the 2007 school year, all government school principals were asked quarterly to self-assess the level of their school's compliance with these requirements.

By linking with the *School Compliance Checklist*, the VEOHRC ensured the strategies were relevant and sustainable, and that the tools were accessible at the very time principals required them. In this way, the *Human Rights and Safety in Schools* initiative helped translate equal opportunity and anti-harassment principles and legislation into everyday practice in schools.

This presentation will share the tools and guidelines, and make recommendations on the key factors for success when working with education systems and sectors to ensure strategies are sustainable and relevant to schools.

Note:

Relevant social determinant of health: Freedom from discrimination

Relevant methodologies: coalition building, policy-making, building capacity of workforces