



Beyond behaviour

Extending the analysis of school disciplinary absences in
Queensland state schools.



QUEENSLAND
Family & Child
Commission



OFFICE OF THE ABORIGINAL
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

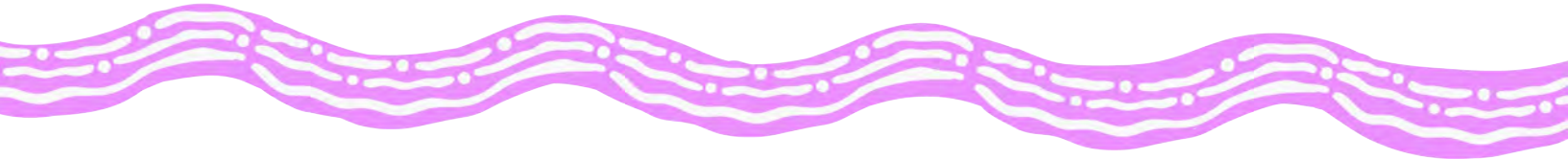


Queensland
Government



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Acknowledgement of **Country**

The Office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians across the lands, seas and skies where we walk, live and work.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as two unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Queensland and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

We acknowledge the important role played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and recognise their right to self-determination, and the need for community-led approaches to support healing and strengthen resilience.



Acknowledgement of **child rights**

The Office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner acknowledges the special rights of children which are recorded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), guided by its four principles: the right of all children to survival and development; respect of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all decisions relating to children; the right of all children to express their views freely on all matters affecting them; and the right of all children to enjoy all rights of the UNCRC without discrimination of any kind.



Introduction

This paper builds on the findings of *Include me, don't exclude me: The experiences of children and young people who have been suspended or excluded from Queensland state schools (Include me, don't exclude me)*, a report released by the Office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner (the OATSICC) in 2025.¹

Include me, don't exclude me demonstrated the disproportionate use of school disciplinary absences (SDAs) on First Nations students, students with disability and students living in out-of-home care, and amplified the voices and lived experiences of children who experienced exclusionary discipline. It also began the conversation about intersectionality, and the compounding experience of exclusion for children who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, have disability and are living in care. *Include me, don't exclude me* utilised the "4As" framework as a method to assess children's rights to, in and through education. The 4As framework shows that to be fully realised as a universal right, education must be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable. This framework shifts the focus beyond individual behaviour to whether education systems are adequately resourced, non-discriminatory, culturally safe, and responsive to children's diverse and intersecting needs.

As the second in a series of reports about SDAs, this paper updates and extends the analysis undertaken in *Include me, don't exclude me*, using 2024 and 2025 data to monitor the current state of disproportionality. It also begins to examine the underexplored issue of the intersection between SDAs and children experiencing poverty. Through this paper, the OATSICC aims to define and discuss poverty as multidimensional, structural and systemic, and recognise the intersectional nature of experiences of poverty. In doing so, this paper positions a broader program of work that will further explore disparities in SDA use and the intersection with poverty, examine patterns and practices across schools, and identify evidence-based alternatives that better support children to remain engaged in education.

This paper and the broader program of work is situated within the Queensland Government's legislative and policy obligations, including international and domestic human rights law, and state education legislation and policy, all of which affirm the right for every child to education that is accessible, inclusive, appropriate and high-quality. Further, the Queensland Government is a party to the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (Closing the Gap). Evidence shows that in order to meet the Priority Reforms of Closing the Gap, the government must reduce the inequities experienced by Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including in the education system².

This paper therefore positions the use of SDAs as not only a matter for education policy and practice, but one requiring systemic reform. By updating the evidence base and introducing poverty as an intersecting concern, the paper begins a broader conversation about how we must shift the focus from individual student behaviour to inequitable system design. This shift is integral, as failing to recognise inequity in the system only perpetuates inequity further, resulting in ongoing negative impacts and outcomes for children. This program of work ultimately aims to examine how disciplinary practices in Queensland state schools can better align with Queensland's human rights obligations and policy commitments – supporting all children to remain engaged in safe and quality education.



Monitoring school disciplinary absences in Queensland

Departmental policies for state schools in Queensland continue to state that:

*'the use of any SDA is considered "a very serious decision". It is typically only used (...) when other options have been exhausted or the student's behaviour is so dangerous that continued attendance at the school is considered a risk to the safety or wellbeing of the school community.'*³

SDAs include:

- › short suspensions (1–10 days)
- › long suspensions (11–20 days)
- › exclusion from a school or more than one school
- › enrolment cancellation (which can only be used if a student is 16 or older).⁴



In 2025, there were **71,805 SDAs issued to 38,171 state school students, representing 6.8 per cent of all students.**⁵ Positively, use has decreased since 2023, where 7.5 per cent of all students received an SDA.⁶ This data is probably an undercount of disciplinary absences that are dictated by schools. The OATSICC heard through *Include me, don't exclude me* about children attending school for reduced hours, or being sent home to calm down, meaning disciplinary exclusion is being used without being formally recorded.

The disproportionate use of SDAs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability and students in care has continued, as seen in Figure 1. It is important to note that students may be counted over multiple demographics, and that First Nations students, students with disability and students in care are also counted in 'all students'.

Figure 1: Percentage of students who received an SDA, by demographic 2023–25

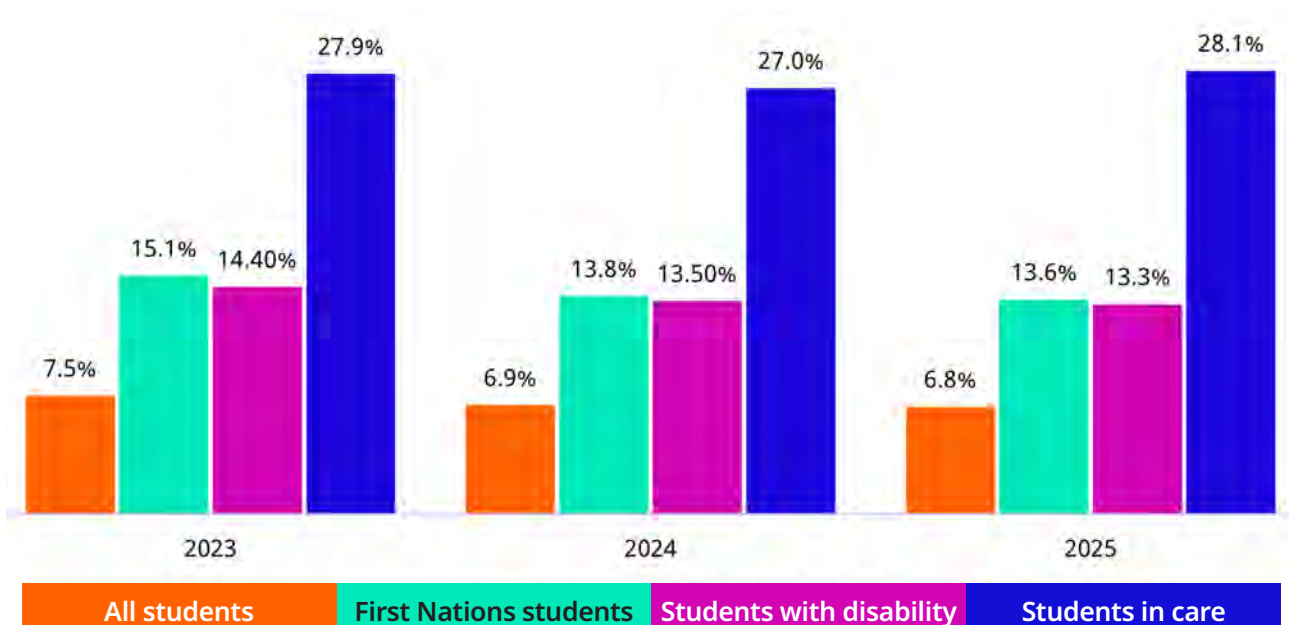




Figure 1 shows that First Nations students and students with disability continue to receive SDAs at approximately **twice the rate** of all students, with the percentage slightly decreasing between 2023 and 2025. For students in care, disproportionate use of SDAs has remained similar since 2023, with these students receiving SDAs at more than **four times the rate** of all students in 2025.⁷

Despite the student population consisting of:

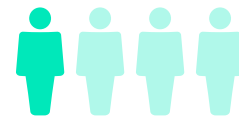
- 12 per cent First Nations students
- 27 per cent students with disability
- one per cent students in care.⁸

This means that, in 2025, around:

Of all students who received an SDA in 2025, approximately:



one in seven First Nations students received an SDA



one in four students were First Nations



one in eight students with a disability received an SDA



one in two students had disability



one in four students in care received an SDA.



one in twenty students were in care.

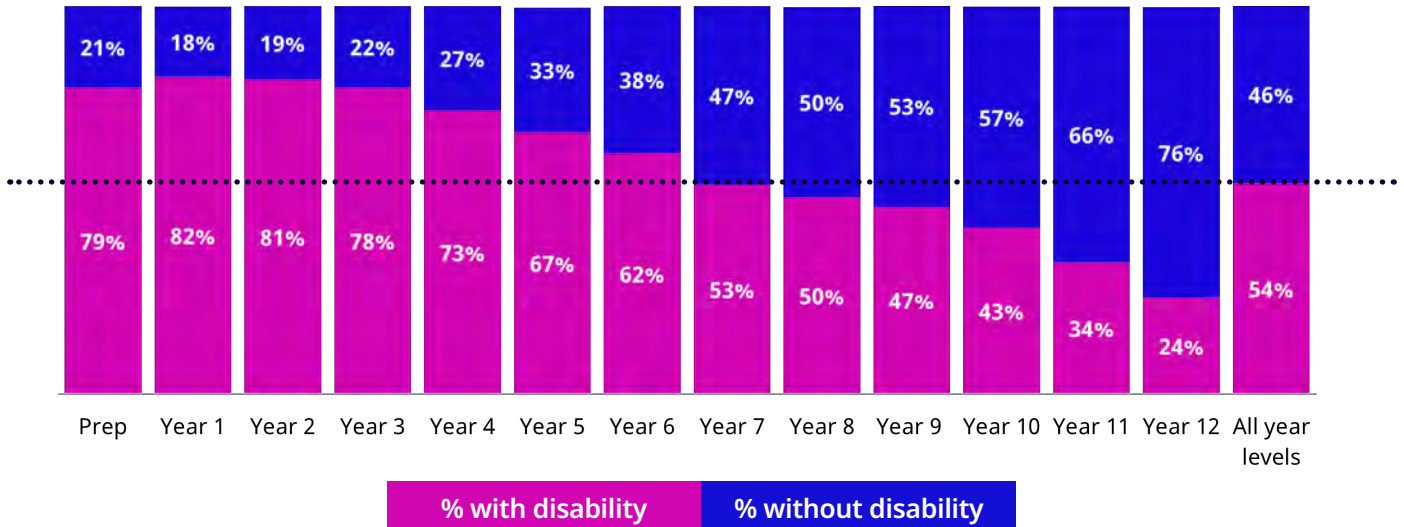
Given the fact First Nations students, students with disability and students in care are also counted under 'all students', **this is likely an underestimate of the true nature of disproportionality.**

As noted in *Include me, don't exclude me*, the intersection of these attributes further increases the likelihood of a student receiving an SDA, with just over a third of First Nations students with disability and living in care receiving an SDA in 2023.⁹ Further, in 2023 approximately 91 per cent of children living in care who received an SDA were also First Nations, had a disability, or both.¹⁰

Disproportionality is even worse in the younger years of schooling, with **79 per cent of prep students who received an SDA in 2025 having a disability**, despite contributing only 21.6 per cent of the prep student population.¹¹ As shown in Figure 2, while still present, the overrepresentation of students with disability decreases significantly with year level.¹²



Figure 2: Percentage of students who received an SDA by year level and whether they had disability 2025ⁱ



This pattern is also observed for students in care, with 10 per cent of prep students who received an SDA being in care, compared to three per cent of Year 12 students who received an SDA.

The OATSICC will explore disproportionality and intersectionality in more detail in future papers.



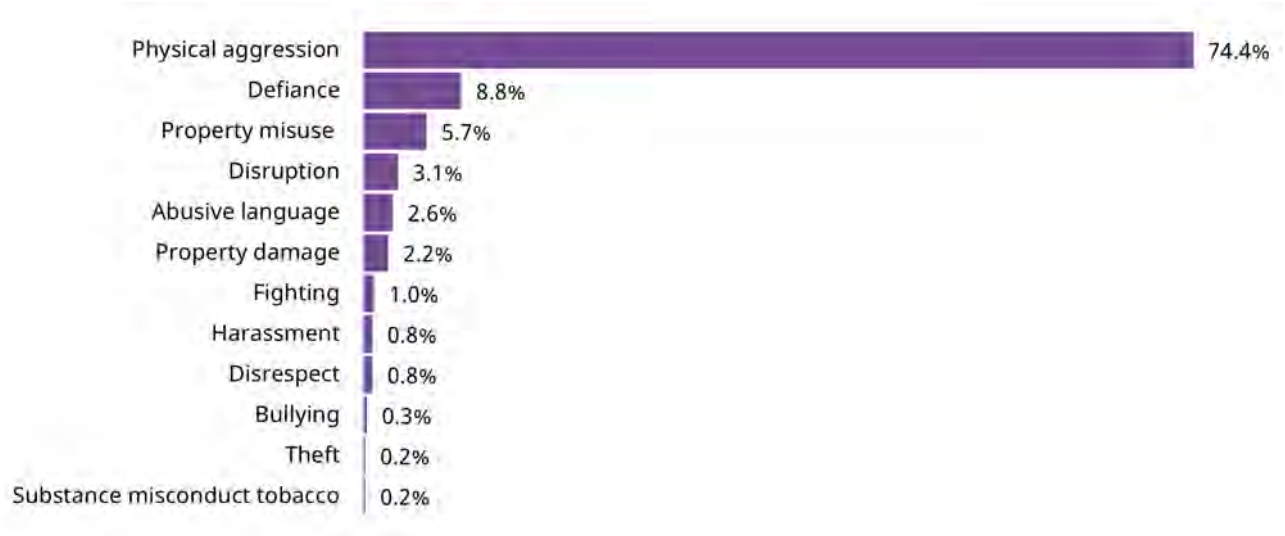
Figure 3 demonstrates the use of SDAs also varies by schooling year level, with SDAs peaking in Years 7–9. SDAs are issued at nearly twice the rate in Year 7 compared to Year 6, corresponding with the transition from primary school to high school.¹³

Concerningly, in 2025, 621 prep students received an SDA. This is an increase from 381 in 2023. In Queensland, prep students are aged between four and six. The reasons for prep student SDAs vary, but the majority were given for physical aggression (74.4%). Defiance (8.8%) and property misuse (5.7%) were the next most common reasons. All reasons can be seen in Figure 4.¹⁴

ⁱ The dotted line denotes the average percentage across all year levels of students with disability who received an SDA in 2025 (54%).

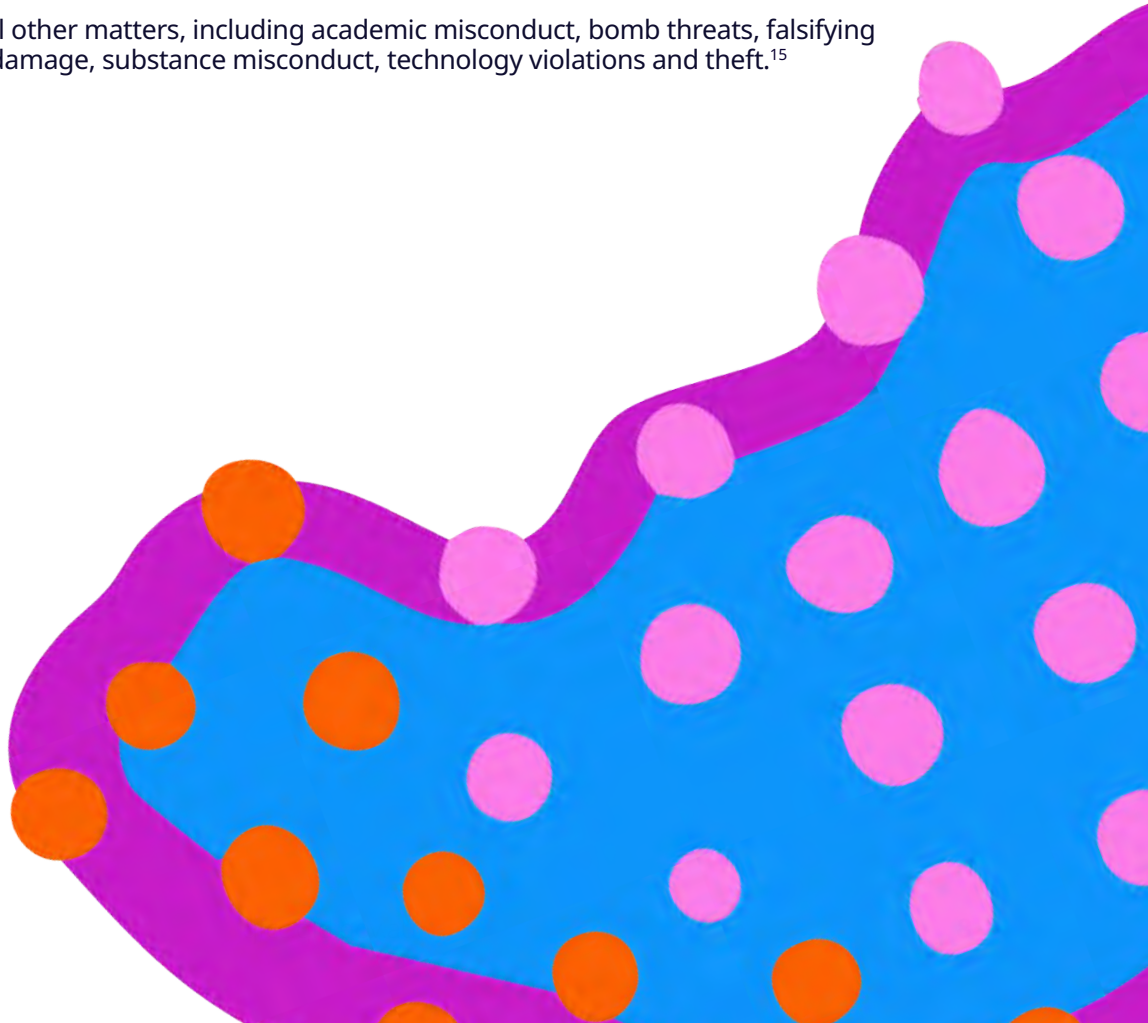


Figure 4: Percentage of prep students who received an SDA by reason 2024



When considering SDAs given in 2024 for all year levels:

- › 64 per cent were for reasons that could cause harm to others, including abusive language, bullying, fighting, harassment, physical aggression, property misuse causing risk to others, and use or possession of combustibles or weapons
- › 22 per cent were for defiance, disrespect, disruption or refusal to participate in the program of instruction
- › 13 per cent were for all other matters, including academic misconduct, bomb threats, falsifying documents, property damage, substance misconduct, technology violations and theft.¹⁵





School disciplinary absences and poverty

Our preliminary analysis indicates that exclusionary discipline is also disproportionately used on children living in poverty, reducing their opportunities for economic and social mobility. In 2026, the condition of poverty is exacerbated by increased cost of living, limited availability of affordable housing and long-term disinterest in improving government income support.¹⁶

The literature on poverty broadly accepts that definitions need to be multi-dimensional and not only consider income but also social inclusion, the opportunity to play a role in broader society, and the ability for an individual to have control over their own life.¹⁷ The Australian Government has not created its own definition of poverty, with various government agencies relying on a simplistic income measure defined as 50 per cent of the median income.¹⁸ This does not speak to the drivers of poverty. For First Nations peoples, defining poverty through Eurocentric material lenses tends to sideline rich relationships, connection to nature and Country, culture, identity and spirituality.¹⁹ The impact of colonisation, for example through child removal, has contributed to the fracturing of identity and cultural continuity, disconnection from land, and the erosion of dignity through sustained oppression.²⁰

The OATSICC is in the process of developing a definition of poverty to drive this project and future work. The current working definition is:

Child poverty is the cumulative and inequitable experience of multidimensional deprivation across material, cultural, relational and participatory domains of a child's life. It is produced and sustained through how interconnected public systems are designed, resourced and operate. It is reflected in inequitable access to the conditions required for children to live safely, develop, remain connected to identity and culture, and realise their inherent right to self-determination and full participation in society.

The OATSICC will consult with external stakeholders about this proposed definition. The Australian Productivity Commissionⁱⁱ has found that while

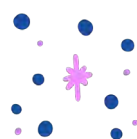
ii The Productivity Commission defined poverty in terms of income. The threshold applied was 50% of the median equivalised household disposable income after taking into account housing costs. 'Disposable' means that income is measured after tax. 'Equivalised household income' takes into account people's household size and composition (p.50).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a higher income poverty rate than non-Indigenous people (18% compared to 14%), after considering other factors, barriers and challenges like racism and discrimination are driving poverty for First Nations peoples.²¹

Where families include members with disability who are not receiving sufficient support to engage in social or economic life, the likelihood of experiencing poverty is increased.²² Poverty rates can also be higher in certain regional and remote locations than in capital cities, if there are fewer services or employment opportunities.²³

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People analysed the causes and impacts of education exclusion and recommended that work on SDAs must be part of a 'bigger ambition' to address cycles of disadvantage.²⁴ Exclusionary discipline was found to affect children's wellbeing, aspirations and social mobility. Adults who were suspended or excluded as children found their negative self-belief about education lasted well into adulthood. Family ability to support or advocate for an excluded child is highly limited if they are struggling financially or socially. Suspension or exclusion entrenches the social and economic exclusion already experienced by a child and their family living in poverty.²⁵

A study into rates of school suspension in 'socially disadvantaged' neighbourhoods found that students in communities with middle to higher socio-economic status (SES) were more protected against the likelihood of being suspended from school.²⁶ The association between suspension and area level SES remained when analyses controlled for antisocial behaviour, gender, and age, as well as when 'poor family management', interaction with antisocial peers, and academic failure were included in the analyses. Relative to schools in the lowest SES quartile, students in mid-level SES communities had one-third lower suspension rates and in high SES communities the reduction in suspension was two-thirds, after adjustment for other influences. Importantly, there





was considerable community variation in rates of student suspension within levels of disadvantage. Schools in low SES areas did not necessarily have high school suspension rates. The study called for more research into how these schools keep suspension rates down.²⁷

It is the intention of this program of work to learn about how and why some Queensland state schools successfully lower the use of SDAs.

What the data tells us

We identified Queensland state schools that issued at least one SDA in 2025 and calculated the number of students who received an SDA as a proportion of the total number of students enrolled for each school.ⁱⁱⁱ The Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA scores) of the 10 schools with the highest proportion of SDA use per student population and the 10 with the lowest proportion were then compared. Although the OATSICC definition of poverty is multidimensional, SEIFA uses the measures of ‘advantage’ and ‘disadvantage’ based on indicators including income, level of education, unemployment, type of employment, disability and housing. These indicators are more focused on economic deprivation, and do not incorporate indicators of advantage such as strength in identity, culture, and community relationships, and access to required supports and universal services, or the disadvantage caused by loss of these. The current SEIFA scores are also based on the 2021 Census, meaning population and location-level changes since then are not reflected. A full explanation of SEIFA can be found in the Appendix.

Six of the 10 schools with the lowest proportion of students receiving an SDA had the highest SEIFA score, indicating the highest levels of advantage. The other four schools had SEIFA scores of two or three, though it is important to note that three of these schools are specialist, non-traditional or alternative schools.²⁸

For the 10 schools with the highest proportion of students receiving an SDA, seven had a SEIFA score of one, indicating they are in areas considered the most disadvantaged. Two schools had a SEIFA score of two, also indicating disadvantage, and another had a SEIFA score of 4, indicating a more advantaged area. It is important to note that this

ⁱⁱⁱ Calculation: (Number of students who received an SDA in 2025)/ (Number of students enrolled in 2025) ×100

school has very few students, though the majority of students in this school receiving an SDA in 2025 is concerning.²⁹

Table 1: Queensland state schools with the lowest use of SDAs or highest use of SDAs, with SEIFA score comparison

| School | SDAs per student | SEIFA score |
|--------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Lowest proportion | 1.* 1 in 1000 (0.1%) | 2 |
| | 2. 1 in 1000 (0.1%) | 3 |
| | 3. 1 in 1000 (0.1%) | 5 |
| | 4. 1 in 500 (0.2%) | 5 |
| | 5.* 1 in 500 (0.2%) | 3 |
| | 6. 1 in 500 (0.2%) | 5 |
| | 7. 1 in 500 (0.2%) | 5 |
| | 8. 1 in 500 (0.2%) | 5 |
| | 9.* 1 in 500 (0.2%) | 3 |
| | 10. 1 in 500 (0.2%) | 5 |
| Highest proportion | 11. 3 in 10 (28.0%) | 1 |
| | 12. 3 in 10 (29.1%) | 1 |
| | 13. 3 in 10 (30.0%) | 1 |
| | 14. 3 in 10 (31.1%) | 1 |
| | 15. 3 in 10 (31.4%) | 1 |
| | 16. 3 in 10 (33.3%) | 1 |
| | 17. 2 in 5 (34.9%) | 2 |
| | 18. 2 in 5 (42.8%) | 1 |
| | 19. 2 in 5 (42.9%) | 2 |
| | 20. 1 in 2 (71.4%) | 4 |

* denotes specialist, non-traditional or alternative school

Positively, 18 per cent of schools (226) did not issue a single SDA in 2025. These schools vary in:

- enrolment numbers, from three students to 456 students
- regions, spanning every region across Queensland
- SEIFA score, with some schools in areas considered the most disadvantaged, and some the most advantaged.³⁰



This initial analysis shows an apparent disparity across schools with differing levels of advantage and disadvantage. The schools using SDAs the most were primarily located in areas considered by SEIFA to be disadvantaged, while the schools using SDAs the least were mostly in advantaged areas. The finding of many schools not issuing any SDAs, and of some alternative schools or schools in more disadvantaged areas using fewer SDAs shows that there is an opportunity to change this disparity.

Further analysis is being undertaken to explore the possible correlation between poverty and high use of SDAs, particularly focused on differences across primary and secondary schools, different sized schools and changes in SDA use over time.

Why does this matter?

Children's universal right to a high-quality education

The 4As framework outlines that for education to be realised as a universal right of every child, it must be:

› Available

- Education is adequately resourced for not only the number of children, but also their diversity. There are enough appropriately trained educators.

› Accessible

- Education is non-discriminatory, ensuring children have equitable access regardless of identity, culture, finances, background or location.

› Acceptable

- Education respects the diversity of children, their right to learn, standards of discipline, and professional education of teachers.

› Adaptable

- Education evolves with the changing needs of society and individual children.

This framework is a useful tool to analyse how education is implemented as a right for all children and will be applied in more detail in the OATSICC's next paper.

Poor outcomes for children

In *Include me, don't exclude me*, children told us that SDAs have both short- and long-term effects. These included effects on their:

- › emotions and mental health
- › impressions of justice and fairness
- › perceived value of and commitment to learning, receiving feedback and participating.³¹

"Feel like loneliness [...] Um, just made my mental health worse."

"Um, everybody gets – you know, everyone should get support, instead of, you know, just like the ones who are easy to help. Because I wanted to finish school, but they didn't see that. That was the biggest problem."

Children also voiced the importance of being involved in the conversations around their behaviour. They shared that there were reasons why they were acting in a particular way at school, and shared that if teachers or principals had spoken to them earlier or provided them with better support, this may have made a difference.³²

"I would say like don't jump straight to suspending the student, like sit down and have an actual like conversation about what they're struggling with and why they're doing it."

"Honestly, talking to us, like, and seeing what the f--k is actually wrong."



These consequences are echoed in the literature. Research both in Australia and internationally shows that SDAs:

- › negatively affect emotional and mental health, including contributing to experiences of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem
- › reduce engagement in education, immediately and long-term
- › break down relationships between peers and with teachers, and reduce feelings of connection and belonging
- › increase stress at home
- › exacerbate behaviours of concern
- › increase the likelihood of youth justice contact
- › perpetuate disadvantage into adulthood, through:
 - lower school attainment, leading to reduced social and economic participation
 - reduced employment opportunities and subsequent income gaps
 - ongoing poor mental health and self-esteem
 - increased risk of homelessness
 - negative perceptions of the education system
 - higher risk of contact with the criminal justice system.³³

In line with the Queensland data, the literature discusses the disproportionate use of SDAs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disability, and children in out-of-home care. This overrepresentation is consistent over time and across national and international jurisdictions.³⁴ It is not simply the result of differences in the behaviour of these children, but rather structural inequalities embedded within education systems and other intersecting systems.³⁵

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability, and students in care who receive SDAs experience more severe impacts due to the compounding experiences of racism, historical marginalisation, exclusion and segregation, ongoing neglect of their rights, intergenerational and personal experiences of trauma, and multisystemic inequity including

inequitable access to health, housing, and disability supports.³⁶

School attendance rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Queensland are consistently nine to 10 per cent lower compared to all students, suggesting that these systemic matters may influence whether students see school as a welcoming place.³⁷ When considering both lower attendance and higher rates of SDAs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' right to access education is considerably undermined.

Issuing SDAs, particularly for young students, can have significant impacts on their development. At this age, children are learning to regulate themselves, their emotions and their behaviour. How teachers respond to 'negative' emotions and related behaviours has been shown to affect the emotional regulation and knowledge of a child. If they respond punitively, this has a negative effect on how a child can regulate in the future.³⁸

The aim of education under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) includes the teaching of life-skills, such as the ability to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner.³⁹ Using SDAs in response to the behaviour of a prep student, especially behaviour deemed violent, does not show adaptability to the age and developmental stage of the child or take into account the child's evolving capacities. A child (aged 4–5) in prep should not be receiving the same disciplinary response to behaviour as a 16- to 17-year-old.

The range of reasons given for SDAs across all year levels raises concern that SDAs are not always being used as a 'last resort', especially for young children. Again, education must be acceptable and adaptable, meeting the needs of individual students and respecting their diversity in expression of identity. It must always be considered whether SDAs are the most appropriate response to a particular behaviour. Defiance, disrespect and academic misconduct, for example, are not dangerous and there are other ways to respond to such behaviours that involve the child in conversation, and which identify and address the needs and wants of that child. It is not acceptable or adaptable, or even effective, to conflate and use the same disciplinary response to all behaviours deemed problematic.





Lack of system accountability

The Queensland Government is responsible for providing universal access to high quality education to every Queensland child. This is outlined in the *Queensland Human Rights Act 2019* and the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (the Act).⁴⁰ The Act states this is to be achieved by 'ensuring education programs are responsive to the individual needs of children and young people'. Further, in its guiding principles, the Act highlights the importance of:

- › improving the social, educational and employment outcomes of children, especially those at risk of disengaging
- › providing positive learning experiences and a safe and supportive learning environment
- › including children and their families in decisions that affect them.⁴¹

As we know from children and from the literature, SDAs result in outcomes contrary to the guiding principles of the Act.

The UNCRC, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) further outline the responsibility of the government to provide appropriate education for all children, including children with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.⁴²

The UNCRC requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child are a primary consideration, and that children must have education that is directed to the development of their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential. Under the UNCRC, the government also has a responsibility to ensure 'school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity'.⁴³ Frequent or prolonged exclusion from school through SDAs does not allow fulfillment of these obligations, particularly considering the impacts of SDAs already discussed.



Article 24 of the CRPD states the right of people with disability to education that:

- › is inclusive, accessible, quality and on an equal basis with others
- › does not exclude them from the general education system based on disability
- › ensures they receive the support required to facilitate an effective education, including:
 - reasonable accommodation of an individual's requirements
- › individualised support measures consistent with the goal of full inclusion.⁴⁴

This establishes a clear obligation on the government to ensure the education system meets the needs of students with disability. Where a student's behaviour is linked to disability or unmet support needs, removing the student from education through an SDA, instead of providing accommodation and support for those underlying factors, undermines the rights of the student.

The UNDRIP highlights the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination, including for economic, social and cultural development, of which education is a major part. Article 14 specifically refers to the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to establish and control their own educational systems and institutions, and states that the government has the responsibility to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to education in their own culture and language.⁴⁵

This creates a corresponding obligation on the government to provide a culturally safe, responsive and appropriate education system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Education provided must not only be accessible, but also culturally relevant and respectful of identity, community and connection to culture. The ongoing disproportionate use of SDAs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children undermines these rights and further disconnects students from the education system; a system that already structurally excludes them.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and CRPD further discuss the obligation of states to eliminate racial and disability-based discrimination,



including through amending and abolishing any laws or regulations that create or perpetuate discrimination. They also describe the need for governments to put special and concrete measures in place that ensure the adequate development and protection of certain racial groups and individuals, and individuals with disability, to guarantee the equitable enjoyment of their human rights.⁴⁶

Ultimately, these domestic and international frameworks establish that **education systems must be inclusive, equitable and responsive to the diverse needs of children so that they have the best chance of becoming fulfilled and productive members of society**. Where SDAs are used instead of appropriate supports, cultural responsiveness, or disability- and trauma-informed practice, they are inconsistent with the requirement to provide accessible, high-quality education for all students and clearly do not align with the “4As” framework.

Queensland Government priorities

Closing the Gap

As well as domestic and international legislation, the Queensland Government has committed to several priorities associated with education. At a national level, Queensland is a party to Closing the Gap. Closing the Gap is underpinned by four Priority Reforms, which shift the focus from individual outcomes to system accountability. The priority reforms include:

- › formal partnerships and shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- › strengthening the community-controlled sector
- › transforming government organisations
- › improving access to and use of data.⁴⁷

Priority Reform Three requires governments to transform systems to ensure they are accountable, culturally safe, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁴⁸ This reflects an understanding that **disparities in outcomes are not simply the result of individual behaviour** but are instead produced and maintained by the structures and practices of government systems.

In the context of education, this creates an obligation on the Queensland Government to examine how existing policies and practices may contribute to inequitable outcomes. The disproportionate use of SDAs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children shows a systemic issue exists within the education system. Reducing the use of SDAs, and implementing more effective and culturally appropriate alternatives, is consistent with the intent of the Priority Reforms and would improve system accountability and progress towards Closing the Gap targets. This would result in improved outcomes across not only compulsory education-focused targets, but also for targets relating to justice system overrepresentation, further education and training, employment, and health and wellbeing.

Priority Reform One also reinforces the importance of the meaningful involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities in the development and implementation of school discipline policies.⁴⁹ Without this, any changes will simply reinforce the same issues that Closing the Gap seeks to address.

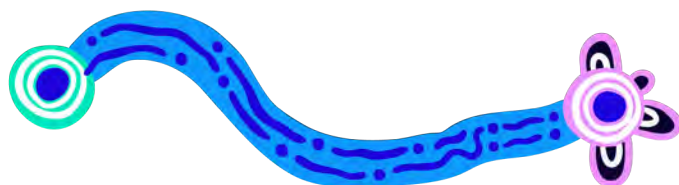
Queensland Government policies

Better and Fairer Schools Agreement

In 2025, the Queensland Government signed the Queensland Bilateral Agreement under the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (the agreement), an agreement between Queensland and the Commonwealth relating to education reform.

The agreement outlines the terms under which the Queensland Government must comply to receive Commonwealth funding for schools, including:

- › meeting the agreed funding shares for government and non-government schools
- › committing to actions that give effect to the National Reform Directions, including delivering:
 - equity and excellence for all students
 - a safe environment for students fostering wellbeing, belonging and engagement
 - a strong and sustainable workforce.





- › committing to actions that give effect to the National Enabling Initiatives, including:
 - contributing to understanding of socioeconomic diversity, its impact on schools and students, and best practice approaches to addressing these impacts
- › developing stronger measures of student engagement, equitable learning, and access, participation and outcomes for students with disability.⁵⁰

The agreement also acknowledges the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledges and how First Nations peoples are fundamental to shaping and improving the education system. The agreement makes mention of the importance of reform being undertaken in a way that will meet the Priority Reforms of Closing the Gap, and the commitment to the vision of Australian schooling outlined in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*.⁵¹

Making Our Community Safer Plan

The Queensland Government has several plans and strategies focused on or including mentions of the education system. The *Making Our Community Safer Plan* specifically discusses the importance of children being in school and recognises the connection between disengagement from school and the youth justice system. The plan states that the government aims to:

- › reengage children who have disengaged from school and are at risk of contact with the youth justice system
- › help young people learn employment skills.⁵²

Brighter Futures Strategy

In response to the goals outlined by the *Making Our Community Safer Plan*, the government released the *Brighter Futures Strategy* (the strategy). The strategy states:

*Education is a truly equalising force
- empowering young people with
opportunities for the future.*

One of the priorities of the strategy is to 'respond to each student's learning needs, with high expectations for every student to grow in their learning and achieve'. The government recognised the need to support students as individuals who have 'unique contexts and needs' and committed to

providing a 'continuum of supports and alternative learning options' for students.⁵³

Department of Education's strategic plan

The Department of Education's proposed *Strategic Plan 2025–29* echoes the need to support students to stay engaged in school. The plan highlights the benefits of high-quality education including preventing children from becoming involved in the youth justice system and investing in children's education to better their future lifestyles and build a strong economy. The strategic plan also commits to working with Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.⁵⁴

Behaviour Boost investment

A key initiative related to the Queensland Government's commitment to education is the Behaviour Boost investment. This provides funding to state schools to be spent on behaviour supports, including school-based behaviour specialists, teacher aides and support staff or staff training and mentoring.⁵⁵ Focusing on reducing SDAs, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability and students living in out-of-home care, clearly aligns with the Queensland Government's focus on improving education for all students through keeping them engaged, providing individualised support, and increasing behaviour support capacity and capability in schools.

Child Safe Organisations

Since 1 January 2026, Queensland schools have also needed to be compliant with Queensland's Child Safe Standards and the Universal Principle under the *Child Safe Organisations Act 2024* (Qld). The Universal Principle requires schools to provide an environment that promotes and upholds the right to cultural safety of Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students. The 10 rights-based Standards prioritise the safety and wellbeing of children across all aspects of schooling, from leadership and culture to complaints and procedures. By upholding equity and diversity (Standard 4), schools can build environments where every child feels valued, respected, supported and culturally safe, where schools have fair access to a safe, nurturing environment, and where the unique needs of every child are met.⁵⁶



Conclusion

Our monitoring of SDA data shows that while the number of children receiving an SDA has declined, SDAs continue to be disproportionately issued to First Nations children, children in out-of-home care, and children with a disability. We note that children in out-of-home care have already experienced trauma and rejection at the hands of adults and, frequently, the child protection system. Disappointingly, the number of prep children receiving an SDA has increased from 381 in 2023 to 621 in 2025, with most of these children having a disability. We will continue to closely monitor the SDA rates for very young children.

Our next paper will analyse the links between poverty and the issuing of SDAs in more detail, by reviewing national and international literature and Queensland Department of Education data. We will finalise our working definition of poverty through internal conversations and by seeking advice from external stakeholders. We then intend to explore, using the “4As” framework, the practices implemented by a small selection of schools with low SDAs to understand alternative approaches to behaviour management that keep students engaged in learning.





Appendix

Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas

Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) is used to consider the differences in socio-economic factors between regions. There are four indexes, each measuring levels of advantage and/or disadvantage differently. The indexes are developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) using Census data and each considers different variables including:

- › high or low income
- › education level
- › levels of unemployment
- › occupation type
- › housing type, cost and crowding
- › levels of disability
- › family composition.⁵⁷

The index used for this paper is the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD). This provides a general measure of advantage and disadvantage across regions that ranks areas from most disadvantaged (1) to most advantaged (5).⁵⁸ The factors considered by IRSAD can be seen in Table 2.

SEIFA indexes are also produced for different geographical areas, depicting different region or suburb boundaries and classifications, including local government areas, suburbs, or postal areas. The geographical level that SEIFA is best designed for is called Statistical Areas Level 1 (SA1),⁵⁹ which is what has and will be used for this program of work. SA1 is the smallest geographical measure used by the ABS and generally has a population of around 200 to 800 people (with smaller populations for SA1s in regional, remote or discrete communities).⁶⁰ SA1s allow more granular comparisons of advantage and disadvantage between different areas even within a suburb, local government area or postal area.

Table 2: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas

| Variables | Advantage indicator | Disadvantage indicator |
|--|---------------------|------------------------|
| Income | | |
| High income households | ● | |
| Low income households | | ● |
| Education | | |
| No education | | ● |
| Highest is Year 11 | | ● |
| Highest is Cert. III or IV | | ● |
| Highest education is diploma | ● | |
| University at 15-and-over | ● | |
| Employment and occupation | | |
| Unemployed | | ● |
| Employed (machinery operators and drivers) | | ● |
| Employed (labourers) | | ● |
| Employed (managers) | ● | |
| Employed (professionals) | ● | |
| Employed (low-skill sales) | | ● |
| Employed (low-skill service) | | ● |
| Housing | | |
| Private (4+ bedrooms) | ● | |
| Private (high mortgage repayments) | ● | |
| Private (high rent) | ● | |
| Private (low rent) | | ● |
| Overcrowded dwellings | | ● |
| Other | | |
| Families with children under 15 and unemployed parents | | ● |
| Under 70 needing assistance (disability/health) | | ● |
| Single parent families | | ● |
| Separated or divorced | | ● |



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