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EXCLUSIVE

Education Minister Tony Buti reveals new plans to combat violence in schools and empower principals

Bethany Hiatt The West Australian
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Bethany Hiatt



Education Minister Tony Buti (inset) has unveiled a raft of measures designed to help stop violence in WA schools. Credit: The West Australian



Principals will be empowered to use “the full letter of the law” to ban abusive parents and violent intruders from public schools as surging rates of aggression force the Cook Government to ramp up protections for staff and students.

School leaders will get more support to kick aggressive adults off school grounds and bar them from classrooms for firing off abusive remarks on social media as part of a new anti-

Students who share video footage of other students punching, kicking or stomping on each other will now face automatic suspension, along with those who start or film fights.

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And parents are being warned they should model respectful behaviour for their children as students return to school for the start of Term 3.



The West Live

Newsbreak: Andrew Forrest cleared & Green Hea

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Aimed at appeasing principals' and teachers' groups, who claim the Government's 10-point plan to combat school violence released in 2018 did not provide enough support for school leaders, the updated plan encourages principals to make better use of existing legislative tools.

Education Minister Tony Buti said even though principals could previously apply for a prohibition order banning an adult from a school site for up to 60 days, the option was rarely used.

Similarly, an average of just one violence restraining order or misconduct restraining order had been issued to school staff each year for the past five years.

“There’s been a reluctance to use these powers previously for adults on school sites,” he said. “We’re empowering the principal, if you need to use the full letter of the law to make your school a safe, nurturing environment for education ... we’re providing clear guidance

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“We are also saying that this can be used for social media abuse.”

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Dr Buti said principals responding to abuse, threats or violence would have access to a new dedicated email and phone helpline, as well as extra training on managing students with complex and challenging behaviours.

“What we’ve been told is that principals felt alone,” he said. “So we’re providing them with this support now.”

The number of alternative learning settings, where the State’s most aggressive students are temporarily sent after being excluded from their own school for violence, will also increase from 10 to 12.

Principals will now have the power to suspend a student for posting footage of a fight on social media or sharing it with others, even if they didn’t film it. Under the previous rules, students faced automatic suspension for filming a fight.

The West has reported on a string of violent incidents in public schools this year, including allegations a 21-year-old man armed with an axe and a hammer threatened students and staff at Sevenoaks Senior College in February.

An investigation found shocking cases of student violence branded as “smashes” or “fights” were frequently posted to platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram, including images from Kiara College, Thornlie Senior High School and Warnbro Community High School.

Harrowing footage emerged in May of teachers under attack as they tried to stop a brutal assault against a student by intruders at Churchlands Senior High School.

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Dr Buti said student behaviour was strongly influenced by the way adults conducted themselves.

Some parents were setting a bad example by sending “inflammatory” emails and social media communications, or barging into schools “demanding to meet a staff member without an appointment and becoming aggressive”.

He pointed to one example of a parent at a high school in a well-off area who had persistently abused staff, both online and in person for months, “by constantly coming into the school office engaging in verbal aggression”.

The updated plan includes new “connect and respect” expectations outlining parent

It warns parents and carers they should not expect to be allowed on a school site if they have “harassed or been aggressive towards school staff”.

And it spells out that communication with or about a school should not include speaking to staff “disrespectfully or aggressively, especially in front of your child or other students”, using social media “inappropriately or disrespectfully” or engaging in “malicious or judgmental gossip”.

New figures show that schools reported 127 incidents of verbal, written or cyber threats by adults against staff in the first half of this year compared with 199 for all of 2019.

And there have already been 102 reports of physical assaults or intimidation involving parents or adults against school staff this year compared with 199 in 2019.

“What we have seen is particularly an increase in the online bullying and threats by parents,” Dr Buti said.

“That’s why I feel that I have to, as Minister, come down strongly by saying that violence is not acceptable, that principals have the right to use the full force of the law if they need to, but also to help teachers, students and parents come together to create an enhanced, safe learning environment.”

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