

Connected:
a community
approach to bullying
prevention within
the school gates
and beyond

EVALUATION REPORT

South Australian Bullying
Prevention Strategy May 2024



Government of South Australia
Department for Education

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Executive Summary

Background

Connected: a community approach to bullying prevention within the school gates and beyond (“the Strategy”) was released in 2019 and formally ran to the end of 2022. The Strategy was a partnership of the three education sectors, along with other South Australian government departments and non-government organisations. These organisations sought to raise the profile and focus on bullying in their work, to help children feel safe and cared for, and ultimately contribute to a reduction in bullying for children and young people.

This report is the final stage in evaluating the Strategy and follows on from a 12-month progress report and [Key Achievements Report](#), the latter which provided a summary of the key initiatives implemented across the agencies, including information on the evaluation of some initiatives.

Scope and methodology

This evaluation report is outcomes focused and seeks to inform the extent to which the Strategy contributed to the following key measures:

- Increased staff awareness and understanding around bullying behaviours
- Increased staff confidence in responding to bullying behaviours
- Increased student connectedness and belonging at school and with peers
- Reduced incidence of bullying.

The methodology is centred on the analysis of both centralised system-wide data collections relevant to bullying and student connection to school, and data collection directly linked to school and educator engagement with the bullying resources and initiatives. Data from non-government sector data sources was not available.

To reduce impact on schools, particularly given COVID-19 constraints during much of the life of the Strategy, data used was primarily based on existing Department for Education collections. This restricted the ability for follow-up data collection of educators beyond initial engagement.

Findings

The evaluation findings are organised according to the listed key measures, with the staff awareness/understanding bullying measure grouped with the staff confidence measure given the similar data sources informing these.

Increased staff awareness, understanding and confidence around bullying behaviours

- Bullying prevention training modules were undertaken by over 2,500 educators/ staff in the state. Positive feedback was obtained on the quality of the modules, along with evidence to support the impact upon educator understanding of bullying, and confidence in responding to bullying.
- Bullying prevention lesson plans were accessed by 856 educators with positive feedback provided.
- The online policy tool, allowing development of a local bullying prevention policy in government schools, has seen strong and maintained usage in terms of site visits, but limited completions via the tool itself. Given that all government schools must have such a policy, this suggests that many schools use the tool to commence and structure their policy but complete it outside the template.
- The main public-facing bullying website associated with the Strategy is not serving as an effective channel to direct educators to the resources available to them. Much greater engagement with resources and accessing training is channelled through direct communication to educators.

- An increased number of government schools have been funded over the course of the Strategy to undertake promotion and awareness raising as part of the National Day of Action. To the extent that schools used this funding as intended, this points to raised awareness in both school staff and students.
- Site-based departmental staff indicated positive trends (outside of a COVID-19 downturn in 2020) on aspects of their site's approach that may assist student safety, including bullying.

Increased student connectedness and belonging at school and with peers

- The Strategy does not appear to have had any material influence on student self-reporting of school connectedness and friendship/peer belonging sub-domains, with these recording year-on-year declines (i.e. a reduction in high wellbeing).
- Conversely, student self-reported bullying has slightly reduced over the time of the Strategy (see under "[Reduced incidence of bullying](#)").
- The expected relationship between bullying and these engagement factors may have been interrupted by other factors, like the impact of COVID-19 on schooling and usual social engagements.

Reduced incidence of bullying

- A reduction in self-reported bullying by students occurred over the life of the Strategy. This was the case for bullying overall and for the most prevalent forms of bullying assessed (physical, social, verbal), whilst the trend of experiencing cyberbullying remained flat.
- Despite this positive trend, experience of bullying remains concerningly high, with over 50% of students annually reporting having experienced regular bullying (weekly or monthly) during the school year.
- A distinct contrast was evident in the trends of system-recorded bullying incidents and student self-reported experience of bullying.
- Staff reporting of bullying, particularly critical incidents, but also for incidents resulting in a behavioural consequence, has seen an increase over the life of the Strategy and post-Strategy. Given student self-reported bullying has slightly declined over the same period, it suggests that site-based staff are more inclined to report bullying and apply behavioural consequences for bullying. It could also reflect students being more inclined to both recognise and report bullying behaviour.
- This is indicative of the Strategy having an influence on the awareness of, and responses to bullying. School staff would appear less willing to ignore bullying incidents and apply behavioural consequences.

Conclusion and future considerations

In summarising the findings, there is evidence to support the role of the Strategy in contributing to improved staff understanding and awareness of bullying, and some indication of improved confidence in addressing or responding to bullying.

The public system is reporting more incidents of bullying, despite a marginal reduction in student self-reported experience of bullying, indicating a reduced system tolerance of bullying. Despite the reduction in self-reported experiences of bullying, overall bullying experience rates remain concerningly high.

The Department for Education will continue to refresh and promote its resources to educators. In April 2024 the department released the [Safe and supportive learning environments – Plan of action 2024-2026](#). This includes several actions relevant to bullying prevention and response, which will be pursued from mid-2024 through to 2026.

Continued effort, both in refinement of existing approaches, and consideration of new approaches is required from the agencies and education sectors involved in the Strategy. It is vital that the vision of the Strategy continues to be pursued – for children and young people to thrive in safe environments that promote positive relationships, safety and wellbeing so that they can achieve their full potential.

Background

Connected: a community approach to bullying prevention within the school gates and beyond ("the Strategy") was released in 2019 to strengthen responses to children's bullying both inside and outside the school gates.

The Department for Education, Catholic and Independent school sectors, South Australian government departments and non-government organisations worked together to form the Strategy, which was informed by extensive community feedback, available evidence and good practice.

The Strategy formally ran from 2019 to 2022, although many initiatives and resources borne out of the Strategy are embedded in ongoing practice across the various agencies and schooling sectors. This includes the continued availability of resources (online training, lesson plans, guidance documents) to educators across the schooling sectors.

The vision of the Strategy was for South Australian children and young people to thrive in safe environments that promote positive relationships, safety and wellbeing so that they can achieve their full potential. Reflecting this vision, 5 principles were developed to underpin the more than 40 resources and initiatives implemented across the three years of the Strategy.

Key Principles of Strategy:

1. Visible leadership inspires positive environments for children
2. Communities are inclusive and connected
3. Children and young people are active participants
4. Educators, families, professionals and community members work together in partnership
5. Communities model, promote and support positive and respectful behaviour.

Evaluation activity commenced in 2020, with the release of the 12-month progress report, which found meaningful contributions from agencies towards all five principles of the strategy.

Further reporting was undertaken with the development of [The Key Achievements Report](#), which highlighted specific achievements across the 5 strategy principles and summarised some evaluation of individual initiatives.

Methodology

Evaluation scope

The Strategy set an agenda for several agencies and the education sectors to raise the profile and focus on bullying in their work. This involved some shared initiatives but largely set priorities for the respective agencies to pursue.

[The Key Achievements Report](#) provides a summary of the key initiatives implemented, and in some cases, information on the evaluation of these initiatives. Agencies/sectors can be contacted for further information on the implementation of specific initiatives.

This outcomes-focused evaluation is centred on existing Department for Education data sources that can inform the key evaluation measures (see "[Data sources used for the evaluation](#)" on the following 2 pages). These include centralised data collections and bespoke data collection related to particular initiatives.

In some cases the Department for Education data sources also include non-government sector students or staff. However, in most instances that was not the case. Non-government sector data sources were not available for this evaluation.

Given the focus on existing departmental data to inform outcomes, this evaluation has been undertaken internally.

Key evaluation measures

The Strategy sought high-level outcomes of:

- Increased social connections between a child or young person and their community; and
- Reduction in bullying behaviour by children and young people.

The following key evaluation measures have been developed to inform these outcomes:

- Increased staff awareness and understanding around bullying behaviours
- Increased staff confidence in responding to bullying behaviours
- Increased student connectedness and belonging at school and with peers
- Reduced incidence of bullying.

Data sources used for the evaluation

Centralised data across all sites

The Department for Education has a variety of data sources relevant to bullying which were utilised for this evaluation, including:

- the **Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC)**, which:
 - is a survey undertaken by students in years 4 – 12 across all three school sectors
 - covers non-academic factors relevant to learning and participation
 - contains direct questions on the extent of bullying behaviour experienced, connectedness to school and student wellbeing. The bullying questions cover 4 types of bullying: physical, verbal, social, cyber (an explanation of these categories is provided at Appendix 1, on page 36).
- The staff **Perspective survey**, which:
 - seeks feedback from all employees at government schools, preschools and children's centres on their experiences at work and is undertaken biennially.
 - contains questions relevant to bullying and student safety (i.e. through behaviour support and protective factors against bullying like school climate).
- Critical incident reports via the **Incident and Response Management System (IRMS)**, which:
 - requires a limited field of school employees to enter information on incidents that may involve acts of crime, including incidents of violence and bullying, injuries and impact on school assets
 - Includes bullying as an overall category, along with sub-categories of cyberbullying, harassment/intimidation, physical, verbal, and written.
- Centralised school data systems, **EDSAS and EMS¹**, which:
 - are used to record a range of school administration data, including enrolments, attendance, and behavioural incidents that result in a formal disciplinary consequence (i.e. take-home, suspension, exclusion etc.).
 - Behavioural incident information covers several types of bullying.

1. Education Department School Administration System (EDSAS); Education Management System (EMS).

School and educator engagement with bullying resources and funding

The resources listed below cover professional development, online resources and funding provision.

- Engagement with the online **bullying prevention modules** and **bullying lesson plans**, including:
 - The six dedicated online training modules covering topics like “Understanding Bullying”, “Providing effective interventions and support” and “Cyberbullying”.
 - bullying prevention lesson plans (covering laws about bullying, cyberbullying and online safety).
- Engagement with the **Local Policy Implementation Tool (LPIT)**, which:
 - is a dedicated guidance tool to assist school leaders to create site specific policies and plans for bullying prevention, attendance and behaviour support. All schools must have a local bullying prevention policy, with the LPIT assisting schools to ensure this complies with the department’s behaviour support policy.
- Extent of accessing **direct school funding** associated with the National Day of Action

(NDA) against bullying and violence, which includes two categories:

- provision of up to \$5,000 for government schools towards student-led bullying prevention initiatives, community engagement approaches or protective physical environment measures
 - provision of \$500 to each government school registered with the national “Bullying. No Way!” website, to support awareness activity associated with the NDA.
- Access of other **departmental online resources**, including:
 - direct bullying related pages and document downloads, such as two targeted bullying videos covering diversity and inclusion and racist bullying
 - a range of resources that may be relevant to bullying or contain a bullying-related component.

Table 1 summarises the data sources used to inform the respective key evaluation measures.

Table 1: Key measures by data source

Key measure	WEC (student survey)	Perspective survey (site-based staff)	Incidents (IRMS and EDSAS/EMS)	LPIT engagement	Engagement with modules/lessons	Uptake of NDA funding	Accessing other online resources
Increased staff awareness/understanding of bullying behaviours							
Increased staff confidence in responding to bullying behaviours							
Increased student connectedness and belonging at school with peers							
Reduced incidence of bullying							

Evaluation limitations

A range of challenges exist in evaluating the Bullying Prevention Strategy, centred on the following:

- Data collection/impost
 - To reduce the impost of this evaluation on schools, only data collected from the mechanisms listed above were used – which are primarily based on existing departmental collections.
 - The onset of COVID-19 also limited the ability to access schools for non-essential purposes, meaning follow-up data collection (beyond initial engagement) was not possible with staff.
 - It was not possible to directly assess student awareness and understanding around bullying behaviours, or student confidence in reporting bullying (The Strategy involved some student-led or participatory initiatives as outlined in [The Key Achievements Report](#)).
- Data timing challenges
 - Timing of data collections for some key items have changed. This is most notable for the WEC, where the questions on frequency of experiencing bullying prefaced with 'this school year' (but the survey variously held in term 1, 2 or 3).
 - Comparability of data sets over time. For example, the EDSAS/EMS data on suspensions is not compatible pre versus post 2018 (this restricted the ability to compare any reduction in repeat bullying behaviour by students across a period aligned with the Strategy and a period prior to this).
- Reporting practices
 - The input of data into departmental systems and thresholds on when to report incidents is managed at a local level which may differ from school to school. Community context may also influence the extent to which bullying is reported.
 - These thresholds may also vary over time as staff in sites change, or at a system level as awareness and tolerance levels of bullying change.
- Line of sight, causation and external influences
 - Schools are involved in many initiatives at any one time, both system led and external programs.
 - Schools and the system are also both impacted by external events, such as COVID-19.

Findings

The evaluation of the bullying prevention strategy specifically looked at data informing the following key evaluation measures:

- Increased staff awareness and understanding around bullying behaviours
- Increased staff confidence in responding to bullying behaviours
- Increased student connectedness and belonging at school and with peers
- Reduced incidence of bullying.

Given the close intersection of the first two measures (staff awareness and staff confidence) with many of the same sources informing (see [Table 1](#) on page 7), these will be addressed together in this Findings section.



Increased staff awareness and understanding around bullying behaviours / Increased staff confidence in responding to bullying behaviours



Key points/findings:

- Bullying prevention training modules were undertaken by over 2,500 educators/ staff in the state. Positive feedback was obtained on the quality of the modules, along with evidence to support the impact upon educator understanding of bullying, and confidence in responding to bullying.
- Bullying prevention lesson plans were accessed by 856 educators with positive feedback provided.
- The online policy tool, allowing development of a local bullying prevention policy in government schools, has seen strong and maintained usage in terms of site visits, but limited completions via the tool itself. Given that all government schools must have such a policy, this suggests that many schools use the tool to commence and structure their policy but complete it outside the template.
- The main public-facing bullying website associated with the Strategy is not serving as an effective channel to direct educators to the resources available to them. Much greater engagement with resources and accessing training is channelled through direct communication to educators.
- An increased number of government schools have been funded over the course of the Strategy to undertake promotion and awareness raising as part of the National Day of Action. To the extent that schools used this funding as intended, this points to raised awareness in both school staff and students.
- Site-based departmental staff indicated positive trends (outside of a COVID-19 downturn in 2020) on aspects of their site's approach that may assist student safety, including bullying.

This measure is informed by the following data sources:

- Online bullying prevention training
- Bullying lesson plans
- Online policy tool
- Online information for schools
- National Day of Action funding
- Perspective survey.

Online bullying prevention training

Context

Six online bullying prevention training modules were delivered as part of the Strategy from August 2021 and are still available for educator access. These are listed to the right, with their estimated completion times. Modules 5 and 6 were released and available from May 2022.

Module 1

Understanding bullying
(40 minutes)

Module 2

Strengthening relationships for safe and supportive communities
(30 minutes)

Module 3

Providing effective interventions and support
(60 minutes)

Module 4

Cyberbullying
(40 minutes)

Module 5

Preventing and reducing bullying for children and young people at highest risk
(40 minutes)

Module 6

Working with parents to prevent and respond to bullying
(40 minutes)

Level of completion

Across all three education sectors and corporate staff, individual modules were accessed over 9,600 times since becoming available, with over 7,000 modules completed. Over 2,500 discrete staff completed at least one module, with an average of two modules completed across these staff, as presented in Table 2.

Around one-third of those accessing modules did not go on to complete a module. This attrition rate is consistent with other optional online training courses offered by the department.

The 2,287 public sector employees completing at least one module represents a very high response rate relative to other optional courses available on Plink, the department's online training platform.

Encouraging is the strong follow through of staff from one module to the next after completing the first module (2,244 completions), as presented in [Table 3](#), on page 15.

Whilst the modules remain available for staff training, 2023 has seen a marked drop off in modules completed (1,095) compared to the 2,884 modules completed in 2022, and 2,333 modules completed in the last four months of 2021 following launch. However, given minimal promotion, compared to the strong coverage in the first months of the Strategy's launch, this highlights that the modules are still reaching educators.

Table 2: Bullying Prevention Strategy modules completion

Category of completion	Public sector	Non-government sectors	Total
Total modules accessed	8,643	976	9,619
Total modules completed	6,312	761	7,073
Discrete individuals accessing at least one module	3,174	373	3,547
Discrete individuals completing at least one module	2,287	258	2,545

Impact of training

Upon completion of each module, training participants were given the opportunity to answer five questions relating to the training. These questions had a 5-point response scale ranging from strongly disagree through strongly agree. Three of these questions directly relate to staff understanding of bullying behaviours or confidence in responding to bullying behaviours and provide insight into the impact of the training. Two questions related to the resource quality. The results are presented in [Table 3](#), on page 15.

These results point to a very strong endorsement of the training by educators, both in the quality of the resource and importantly on its impact on increasing their understanding of bullying and confidence in responding to bullying.

Enhanced understanding was consistently experienced by over 80% of training recipients across each module (85% and above for 5 of the 6 modules). Confidence to intervene and find practical ways to do so was also reported by over three-quarters of training recipients (and as high as 90% in some modules).

However, supporting the training having directly improved staff confidence are the training recipients' responses to the following open-ended question asked at the completion of each module: *What is the FIRST thing that you plan to implement from what you have learned in this resource?*

This question elicited a response from over 300 training recipients post-module 1, reducing to 125 responses for module 2 and between 70 and 100 responses for each of the other modules. Overwhelmingly (above 95%) the responses highlighted active steps intended to be implemented by the training recipients.

These pointed to an increased understanding and confidence in dealing with bullying. The most common themes in response to this "First thing planned" question varied slightly across modules, but can be summarised across the modules as involving:

- Implementing a whole school response (including reviewing school's bullying policy)
- Utilising tools/strategies explicitly covered in the training (to guide staff or educate/support students)
- Lesson based responses, including social skills
- General engagement with students about bullying
- How to recognise bullying (including looking for covert signs of bullying and changes in behaviour)
- Engaging and empowering students as part of the school's approach to bullying (including peer support)
- Data collection including recording and reporting bullying.

Generally, the proportion of respondents agreeing to the understanding and confidence statements increased from modules 1 through 6 as more engaged educators would also more likely find the time to continue onto the following modules.

Table 3: Staff module completion and immediate perceptions of impact and resource quality

Response to module	Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4	Module 5	Module 6
Number of completed modules	2,244	1,404	1,209	997	666	553
Number completing post-module survey	493	243	188	146	99	83
Proportion agreeing with following statements:						
I have a better understanding of bullying behaviours	85%	81%	86%	85%	88%	92%
I can identify practical ways to successfully intervene if bullying does happen	77%	77%	88%	82%	90%	90%
I feel confident intervening if bullying does happen	79%	80%	87%	83%	91%	90%
Proportion agreeing with statements of quality:						
The resource held my attention	78%	77%	81%	76%	80%	86%
The content was easy for me to follow	87%	85%	88%	85%	90%	92%

Bullying lesson plans

Given the interaction between bullying behaviours and the law can be complex, the department partnered an external organisation, Youth Law, to develop lessons for students about South Australian laws relating to:

- bullying (years 4-12)
- cyberbullying (years 4-12)
- online safety (years 7-12).

These lessons complement the bullying prevention modules for educators. From March 2021, 16 lessons were made available for download with age-appropriate material tailored for Years 4 through 12.

Up to October 2023, 856 staff from across the schooling sectors registered to access lessons and downloaded lesson material (749 public sector/107 across non-government sector). Together, they accessed over 3,600 lessons and over 9,700 documents downloaded – all lessons contain three documents (presentation, student worksheet, teaching materials).

Cyberbullying was the most frequently downloaded module across all year level groupings.

What this data cannot show is to what extent staff in a school may have downloaded material and then shared with other teachers, who then utilised the materials.

Online policy tool

All government schools are required to have a local bullying prevention policy. The online local policy implementation tool, or LPIT, can be used by school leaders to assist in the creation of a site-specific bullying prevention policy (also available for developing a school's behaviour support policy and attendance policy) to meet this requirement.

The LPIT for bullying became available to schools in July 2020. Through to the end of 2023, the overall LPIT webpage has been visited approximately 5,000 times by 3,000 unique visitors.

In this time, 55% of government schools (280 in all) have commenced and/or completed a bullying prevention policy and plan via the LPIT. As the use of this tool is optional, it is not possible to identify how extensively schools utilised the LPIT. Schools may have commenced using the LPIT however finalised their policy outside the online tool structure.

In addition to using the LPIT, 112 schools used the staff survey resource, and 30 schools have created an action plan via the template.

An encouraging aspect of school engagement with the LPIT is that despite minimal promotion to schools, the year-on-year unique visits to the site has remained quite consistent since launch in July 2020 (1,232 in the year to June 2021, 1,001 in the year to June 2022, and 984 in the year to June 2023). Whilst numbers of school bullying prevention policies finalised through the LPIT is relatively low, the consistent visitation to the site indicates the resource is being accessed to support policy development.

As part of a planned review of bullying prevention requirements in government schools (see "[Future considerations](#)"), the Department for Education will consider the role of the LPIT and how this supports bullying prevention policy development at a school level.

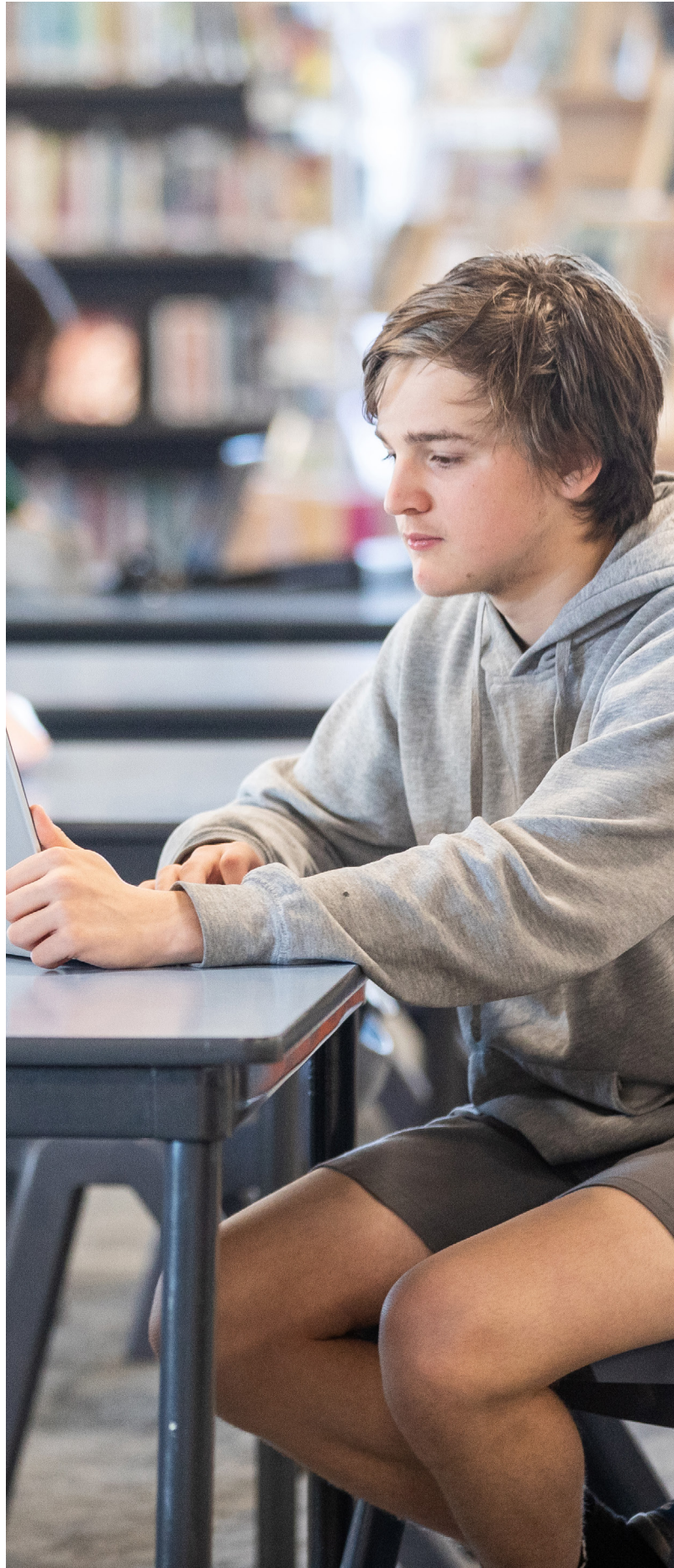
Online information for schools

An analysis of departmental webpage views and downloads related to bullying is confounded by the varying dates at which various webpages have been developed, amended and replaced.

However, the analysis clearly indicated that the main bullying website associated with the Strategy, hosted on the public facing department website, is not serving as an effective channel to direct educators to the resources available to them.

Very low website hits and document downloads occurred for those bullying prevention resources only linked through this site and not the subject of specific all-of-staff communications. This included targeted resources for educators, such as an induction checklist for staff to have current knowledge of the breadth of policy and training resources available, and evidence-based guidance documents for teachers on racist bullying and student cohorts at high-risk of bullying.

The importance of direct promotion to staff was evidenced by increases in training completions and resource downloads following staff communications (such as Update, the whole-of-staff weekly online newsletter).



National Day of Action funding

Since the commencement of the Strategy in 2019 \$1,516,314 has been provided to government schools, preschools, behaviour centres, and community organisations (2020 only) to support bullying prevention as part of the National Day of Action (NDA) against Bullying and Violence.

The number of government schools funded under the two separate NDA streams is presented in Table 4.

The funding stream offering \$500 to each government school to support low-cost awareness raising activity associated with the NDA has seen an increase in schools funded across the life of the Strategy. The process for funding these schools has varied between directly applying to the department or simply receiving funding if registered with the national “Bullying No Way!” website. This has influenced the number of schools funded each year, with COVID-19 also having a significant impact in 2020 and 2021, when it was difficult for schools to plan and undertake NDA related activities in their sites.

Overall, the increase in schools funded the \$500 grants, points to wider awareness of the NDA’s messaging regarding bullying over time in both staff and students.

Annual applications for grant funding of up to \$5,000 have had different focal areas each year, covering student-led bullying prevention initiatives, community engagement approaches or protective physical environment measures. Applications have fluctuated year on year, with between 40 and 75 applications in the last three years (2020 was the first year of this funding stream, which was significantly interrupted by COVID-19). Schools deliver on the initiatives outlined in successful applications. The drop in applications in 2023 may be explained by less promotion occurring compared to the prior two years.

In 2023, common themes in NDA projects funded and undertaken in schools included:

- structured lunchtime activities
- peer education on the impacts of bullying
- engaging an external program provider
- minor works to increase visibility and safety, or to support positive interactions.

In the 2024 funding round for the NDA, the maximum funding will be increased to \$15,000. This will include a greater onus on reporting outcomes to better assess the nature of school activities funded and the impact associated with this annual funding stream.

Table 4: Government schools funded under the two NDA funding streams

NDA funding stream	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Schools funded \$500 for NDA associated engagement	55	267	95	107	339	415
Schools funded up to \$5,000 for bullying prevention activities student-led, community engagement, physical environment measures)	N/A	N/A	21*	73	74	46

*An additional 20 community organisations were funded in this year, which only occurred in 2020.

Perspective survey

The Perspective survey of site-based staff includes three questions under a “Student safety climate” dimension, which could be relevant to a school’s approach to bullying, including confidence in responding to bullying behaviours.

The survey has solid staff participation ranging between 54% and 68% across the 2018, 2020 and 2022 surveys. The survey uses a six-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with Table 5 presenting the proportion of staff agreeing with the listed statements.

Staff agreement declined in 2020 compared to 2018 across the above statements, before rising in 2022 over and above the 2018 result. The 2020 result may reflect pressures, stresses and disruption due to the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whilst the improvement from 2018 to 2022 cannot be directly aligned to the Strategy, it highlights improved staff views on aspects of their site’s approach that may assist student safety. This could include responses to bullying behaviour. The improvement identified also aligns with the reduced self-reported experience of bullying highlighted in the WEC analysis (see [“Reduced incidence of bullying”](#) measure).

Table 5: Proportion of staff agreeing with student safety climate statements – Perspective survey

Perspective survey statement	2018	2020	2022
“Our site maintains a supportive environment to deal with the needs of children/ students”	72%	66%	75%
“A site-wide behavioural support policy is consistently applied”	57%	50%	57%
<i>(New question)</i> “Our site provides effective individualised interventions to support challenging and complex behaviours of concern among children/students”	N/A	N/A	68%



Increased student connectedness and belonging at school and with peers



Key points/findings:

- The Strategy does not appear to have had any material influence on student self-reporting of school connectedness and friendship/peer belonging sub-domains, with these recording year-on-year declines (i.e. a reduction in high wellbeing).
- Conversely, student self-reported bullying has slightly reduced over the time of the Strategy (see under "[Reduced incidence of bullying](#)").
- The expected relationship between bullying and these engagement factors may have been interrupted by other factors, like the impact of COVID-19 on schooling and usual social engagements.

This measure is exclusively informed by data from the annually administered WEC, which has four domains.

One of these is engagement with school, which encompasses the following sub-domains:

- Important adult at school
- School belonging
- Verbal bullying
- Connectedness to school
- Peer belonging
- Social bullying
- Emotional engagement with teachers
- Friendship intimacy
- Cyberbullying
- School climate
- Physical bullying

The bullying sub-domains are covered in detail under the "[Reduced incidence of bullying](#)" measure, and all other sub-domains are covered in the following analysis. Full details of the wording of questions that inform the above sub-domains is provided at [Appendix 1](#), on page 36.

The data presented on the WEC in this report covers all South Australian students surveyed, with the majority (around 80-85%) being government school students. The survey has had between 70,000 and 105,000 student survey responses each year since 2018.

Engagement and connection with school

As demonstrated in Figure 1, across a range of question items relating to engagement and connection with school, students completing the WEC recorded a decline in high wellbeing.

Note that the WEC was administered in term 1 in 2019, 2021 and 2022, but later in 2018, 2020 (term 3) and 2023 (term 2). This could have some influence on responses given the interaction of time passed in a school year and resulting level of connection.

The Strategy does not appear to have had a material influence on these areas of school engagement. Of the below five WEC sub-domains, since 2019 slight improvement was only seen in students feeling they have an adult at their school they see as “important”.

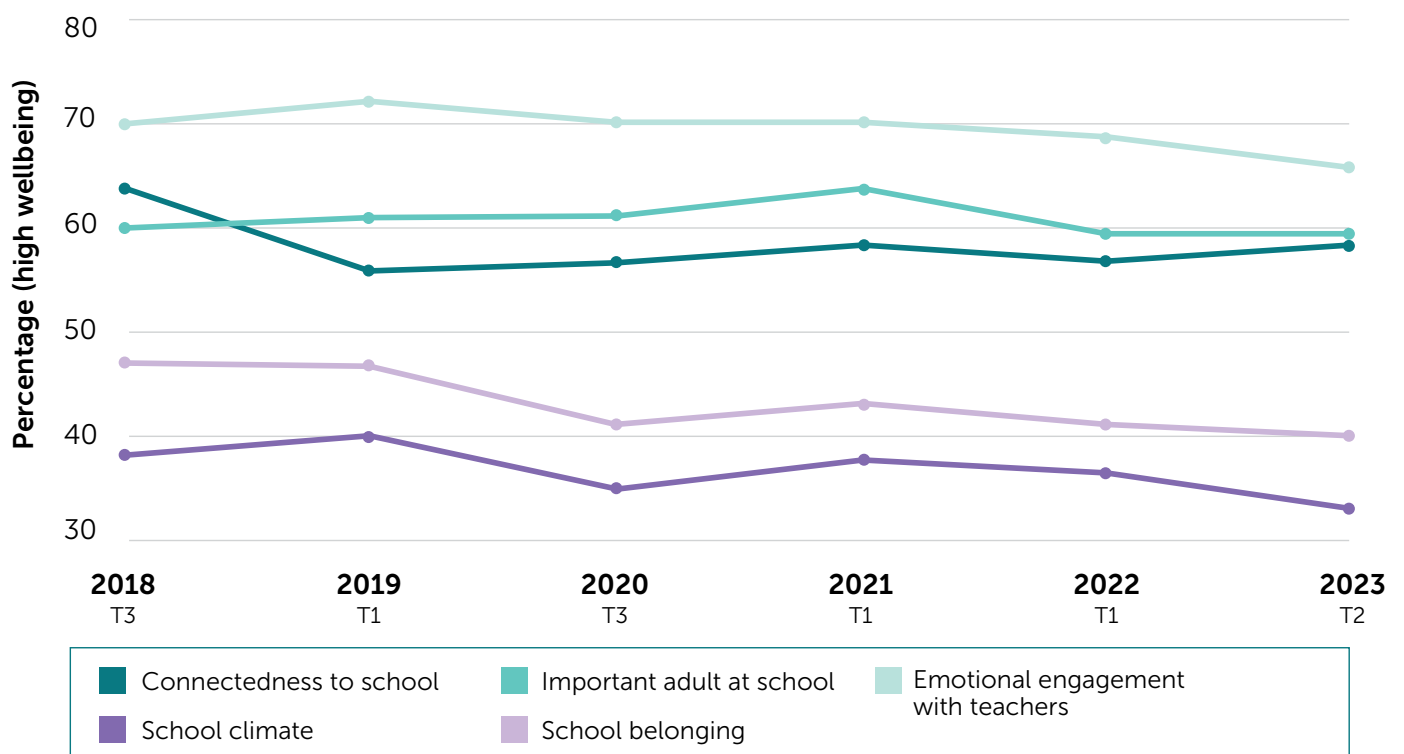
The other school connection/engagement measures had overall declines, and mostly declines each year. This was particularly so for:

- school belonging – the degree to which young people feel connected and valued at their school
- school climate – overall tone of the school environment, including the way teachers and students interact and how students treat each other
- emotional engagement with teachers - support and relationships with teachers.

The above factors, particularly school belonging and school climate, are known as protective factors against bullying. With some declines in these protective factors, it could be expected that the experience of bullying would increase. However, this was not found to be the case (as presented under the “Reduced incidence of bullying” measure below).

Figure 1: Proportion of SA students with high wellbeing scores on engagement with school sub-domains

(Source: 2022 and 2023 wellbeing engagement collection results, “All SA students” available at education.sa.gov.au)



Friendship and peer belonging

The WEC also includes a series of questions to examine:

- friendship intimacy – quality of social support from peers
- peer belonging – feeling that the child belongs to a social group.

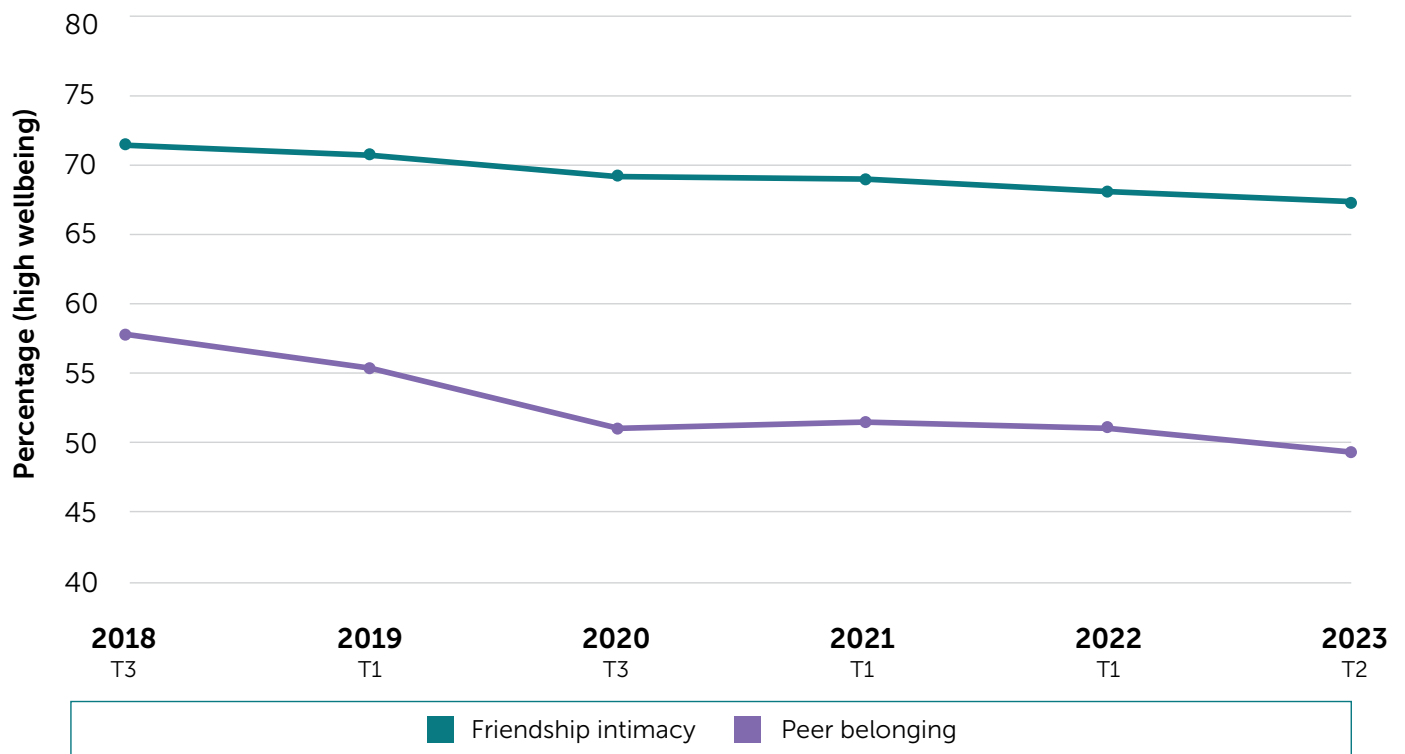
These items may act as protective factors against bullying.

Figure 2 showed a decline in high wellbeing scores each year across these two domains. This decline preceded the Strategy years (2019-2022) and has continued since. Peer belonging has particularly declined.

The decline in most school engagement domains and the friendship/peer belonging domains did not align with self-reported bullying trends (as presented further below). Other factors would appear to be behind this decline that are stronger than any relationship to bullying. The interruptions to schooling and usual social engagements presented by COVID-19 could be a central factor, with this linked closely to student wellbeing (various national and international research has consistently demonstrated a negative impact of COVID-19 upon the mental health and wellbeing of young people).

Figure 2: Proportion of SA students with high wellbeing scores on peer and friendship domains

(Source: 2022 and 2023 wellbeing engagement collection results, "All SA students" available at education.sa.gov.au)



Reduced incidence of bullying



Key points/findings:

- A reduction in self-reported bullying by students occurred over the life of the Strategy. This was the case for bullying overall and for the most prevalent forms of bullying assessed (physical, social, verbal), whilst the trend of experiencing cyberbullying remained flat.
- Despite this positive trend, experience of bullying remains concerningly high, with over 50% of students annually reporting having experienced regular bullying (weekly or monthly) during the school year.
- A distinct contrast was evident in the trends of system-recorded bullying incidents and student self-reported experience of bullying.
- Staff reporting of bullying, particularly critical incidents, but also for incidents resulting in a behavioural consequence, has seen an increase over the life of the Strategy and post-Strategy.
- Given student self-reported bullying has slightly declined over the same period, it suggests that site-based staff are more inclined to report bullying and apply behavioural consequences for bullying. It could also reflect students being more inclined to both recognise and report bullying behaviour.
- This is indicative of the Strategy having an influence on the awareness of, and responses to bullying. School staff would appear less willing to ignore bullying incidents.

This measure is informed by the following data sources:

- Wellbeing Engagement Collection student self-reported bullying experience
- Critical incident reports involving bullying recorded in IRMS
- Bullying incidents with a behavioural consequence recorded in EDSAS/EMS.

WEC student self-reported bullying experience

Each year the WEC asks students to report on the frequency with which they have experienced the following four types of bullying during the school year:

Physical bullying

described as “someone hit, shoved, or kicked you, spat at you, beat you up, or damaged or took your things without permission”

Verbal bullying

described as “someone called you names, teased, embarrassed, threatened you, or made you do things you didn’t want to do”

Social bullying

described as “someone left you out, excluded you, gossiped and spread rumours about you, or made you look foolish”

Cyberbullying

described as “someone used the computer or text messages to exclude, threaten, embarrass you, or to hurt your feelings”.

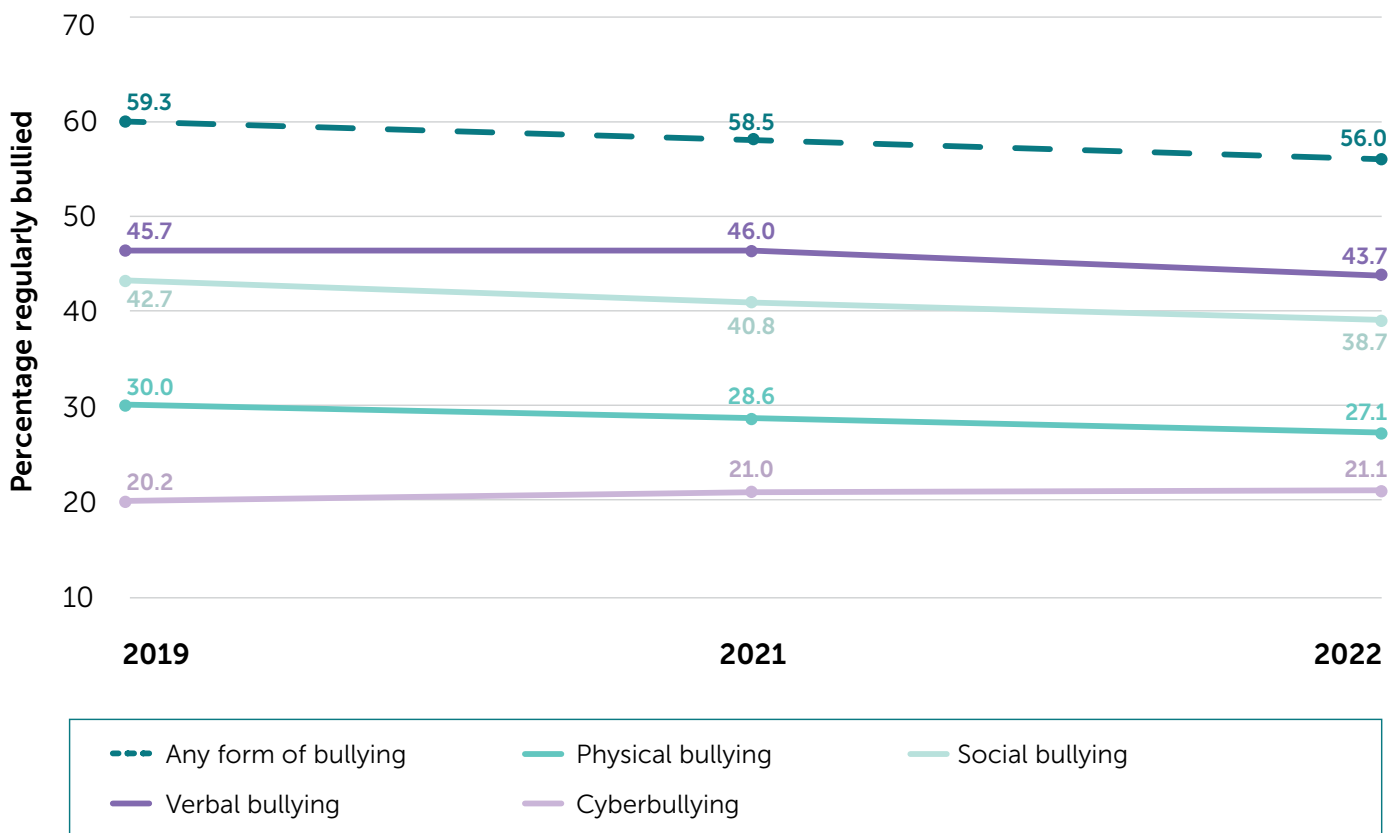
The frequency options available are rarely, monthly, and weekly. The analysis on the following page has grouped weekly and monthly experience of bullying and defined this as regularly bullied.

It is critical to note that the question on each type of bullying is prefaced with “this school year, how often have you been bullied by other students....?” It is evident that the term of the school year in which the WEC is administered is highly influential on the results obtained – the later in the year the administration, the more likely students are to report having been bullied more frequently.

Therefore, in presenting these results, [Figure 3](#), on page 27, provides only those years with a term 1 WEC administration (2019, 2021, 2022), which aligns with the Strategy timeframe (2019-2022).

Figure 3: Proportion of SA students regularly bullied (weekly or monthly), Term 1, 2019-2022

(Source: 2022 and 2023 wellbeing engagement collection results, "All SA students" available at education.sa.gov.au)



When viewing the years with a term 1 WEC administration only, regular bullying (monthly or weekly) across at least one of the four listed bullying categories was reported by 59.3% of students in 2019, with this reducing to 56.0% of students by 2022. Physical, social and verbal bullying largely showed year on year improvements in student self-reported experience across the life of the Strategy.

This is an encouraging result on the metric that is ultimately key to the success of the Strategy – reducing bullying. However, the fact that over 50% of students experienced bullying behaviour of some form in the first term alone, demonstrates that only marginal progress has been made and reducing bullying must remain a committed focus.

For transparency, the full data series is provided at Appendix 2, on page 38, which shows higher levels of bullying experience in the term 2 (2023) and term 3 (2018,2020) WEC administrations than compared to term 1 administrations.

Further tracking of WEC data, which is now planned to consistently occur in term 2, will help inform if the reductions in reported bullying demonstrated during the life of the Strategy are maintained.

Priority cohorts at-risk of bullying

Further analysis of the WEC was conducted for selected priority cohorts, given some groups of students are known to be more at-risk of experiencing bullying.² Both Aboriginal students and students with a disability experienced all four types of bullying at a higher rate than the broader student population. Gender and sexually diverse students are another group at higher risk of bullying, although the WEC has not previously collected information on this group. From the 2024 administration of the WEC and onwards, this information will be collected, allowing enhanced knowledge of the experience of gender and sexually diverse students.

The higher likelihood of experiencing bullying for Aboriginal students and students with a disability was most pronounced for physical bullying and cyberbullying. In comparison to the general student population, across the last 5 years Aboriginal students were 16% more likely to experience regular physical bullying and 26% more likely to experience regular cyberbullying. Across the last 5 years, students with a disability were 22% more likely to experience regular physical bullying and also 22% more likely to experience regular cyberbullying than the general student population.

Averaged across the last 5 years, these two priority groups were between 4% and 10% more likely to experience verbal and social bullying than the general student population.

Aside from the consistently higher level of bullying experienced by these groups, they otherwise closely tracked the overall year-on-year trends indicated in both Figure 3

and Appendix 2 (i.e. year-on-year declines in physical, social and verbal bullying for the term 1 administration years – 2019, 2021, 2022).

Critical incident reports recorded in IRMS involving bullying

The Incident and Response Management System (IRMS) data is used to record more serious incidents occurring in our schools. Bullying is listed as an overall category, and bullying incidents also list one or more of 5 sub-categories (physical, verbal, harassment/intimidation, cyberbullying, and written).

The IRMS data can be analysed based on both the number of discrete incidents of bullying recorded, and the number of students reported as engaging in the reported bullying incident.

Overall bullying incidents

Incidents reported under the bullying category in IRMS have increased significantly since 2019, as presented in Figure 4.

Bullying incidents in IRMS have more than doubled from 171 in 2019 to 354 in 2023 (up 107%). The number of students recorded across these IRMS bullying incidents has increased at a greater rate, rising from 237 in 2019 to 590 in 2023 (up 149%).

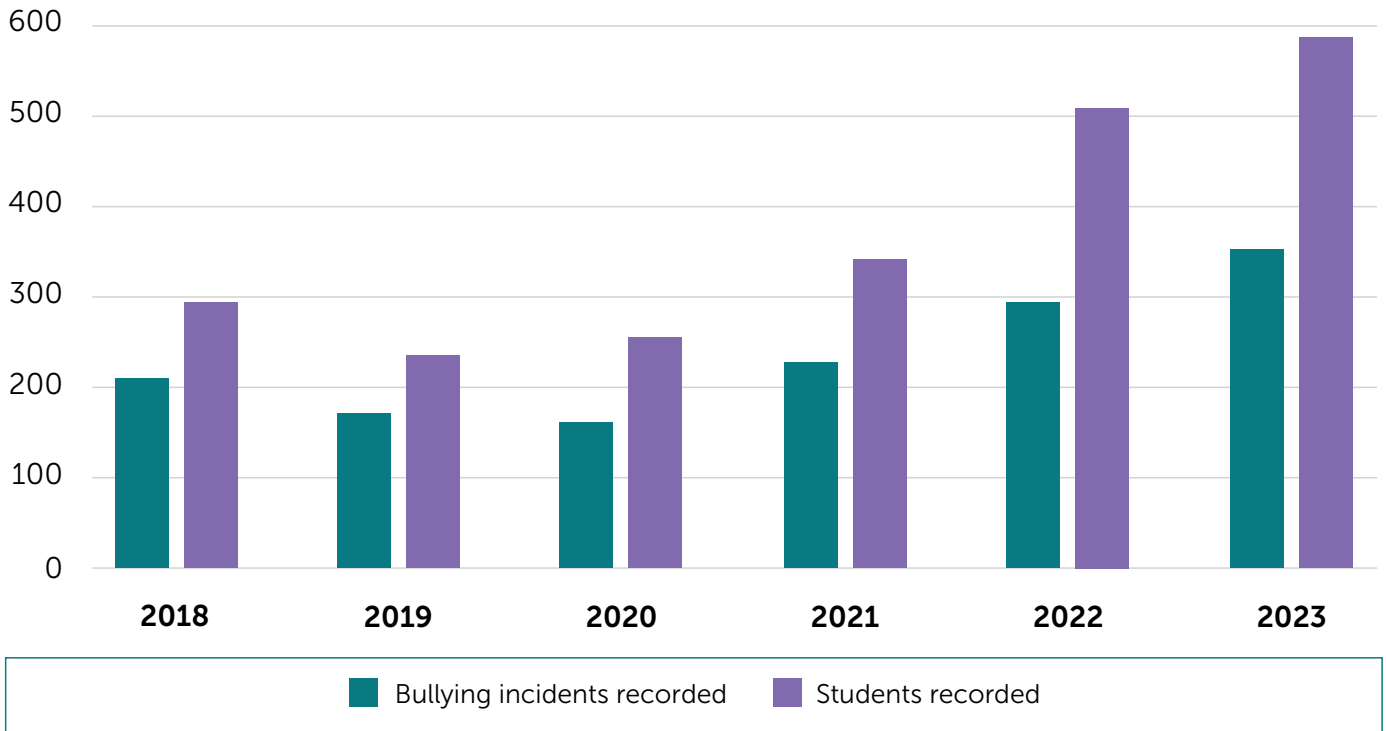
At first view, this data could appear concerning. However, a rise in reporting was a potential outcome anticipated as a result of the Strategy, based on greater awareness of bullying behaviour from students and staff and an understanding of when to report this behaviour. The WEC data reported above, which shows a decline in experienced bullying, gives this interpretation strong support.

2. Unlike the overall WEC analysis that covered students across all 3 sectors and utilised [publicly available data](#), this analysis of priority groups covers government students only and utilises unpublished WEC data. Whilst still acceptable in terms of sample size, note that across the last 5 years in government schools the response rate to the WEC of Aboriginal students (48%) and students with disability (52%) is lower than the response rate of the overall student population (65%).

Some of the rise in IRMS reports is explained by an increase in the number of students recorded as engaged in bullying behaviour per incident – up from 1.4 students per incident to 1.7 per incident. This increased propensity of schools to report more than one student against bullying incidents is a

strong indicator of schools treating bullying incidents seriously, and potentially delving deeper to learn of the students involved (i.e. not just recording one student when more than one is involved). This may support the awareness raising work of the Strategy amongst educators.

Figure 4: Bullying incidents recorded in IRMS and students recorded as involved in this bullying



Sub-categories of bullying recorded

Each bullying incident in IRMS is categorised according to one or more of the 5 bullying sub-categories listed below. Figure 5 represents the number of incidents involving the various sub-categories by year (Note that the sub-categories should not be added to come up with an annual total of incidents, given multiple sub-categories can be recorded per incident).

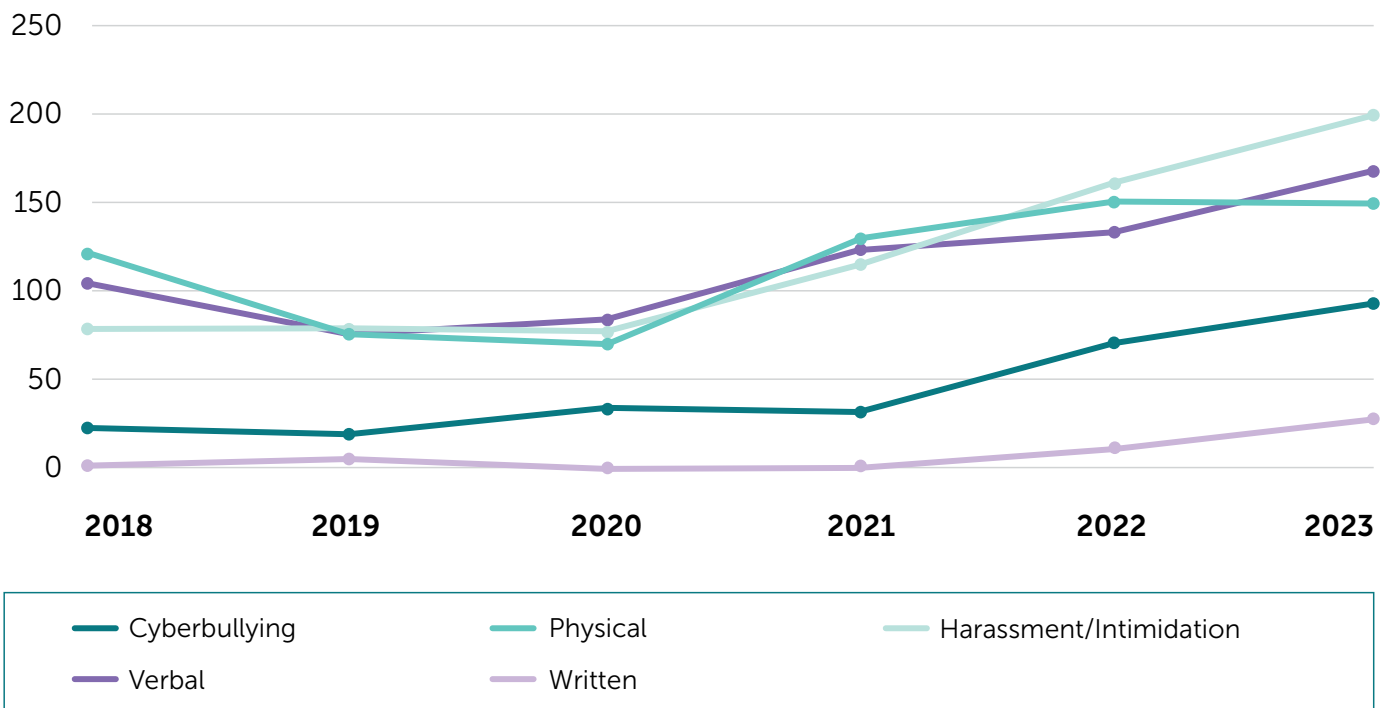
All bullying sub-categories recorded an increase in IRMS since 2019 when the Strategy commenced:

- Physical – up 94%
- Verbal – up 109%
- Harassment/Intimidation – up 138%
- Cyberbullying – up 269%
- Written – up 183%

Cyberbullying and written bullying incidents recorded the greatest increase, albeit off a low base. This may be indicative of these being emerging issues in schools (but note that student-reported experience in the WEC did not indicate any increase in cyberbullying).

The close alignment in the trends of physical, verbal and harassment/intimidation sub-categories is evident, and is influenced by many bullying incidents recorded with more than one of these components. With over 50% of IRMS recorded bullying incidents being recorded with more than one sub-category, this demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of many bullying incidents and experiences.

Figure 5: Bullying sub-categories recorded across IRMS bullying reports



Bullying incidents with a behaviour consequence recorded in EDSAS/EMS

The Department for Education records a range of school data in EDSAS and EMS. An analysis was conducted of bullying behavioural incidents that resulted in a formal disciplinary consequence. Only one behaviour field can be listed. Therefore, note that bullying could be a contributing factor in more incidents with a behavioural consequence applied, even though it is not recorded.

Not included in the analysis were instances of violence and threatened violence, as it is not possible to identify which incidents involved a bullying component or otherwise – many will be the result of unregulated and spontaneous behaviour and would not fit the nationally agreed definition of bullying in schools.³

Similarly, instances of harassment were not included, as whilst many would constitute bullying, a distinction on whether this was student to student or student to staff was not available at aggregated level.

3. The national definition includes reference to an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm. It explicitly excludes from bullying single incidents and conflict or fights between equals. The full national definition can be accessed on the "Bullying. No Way!" website.

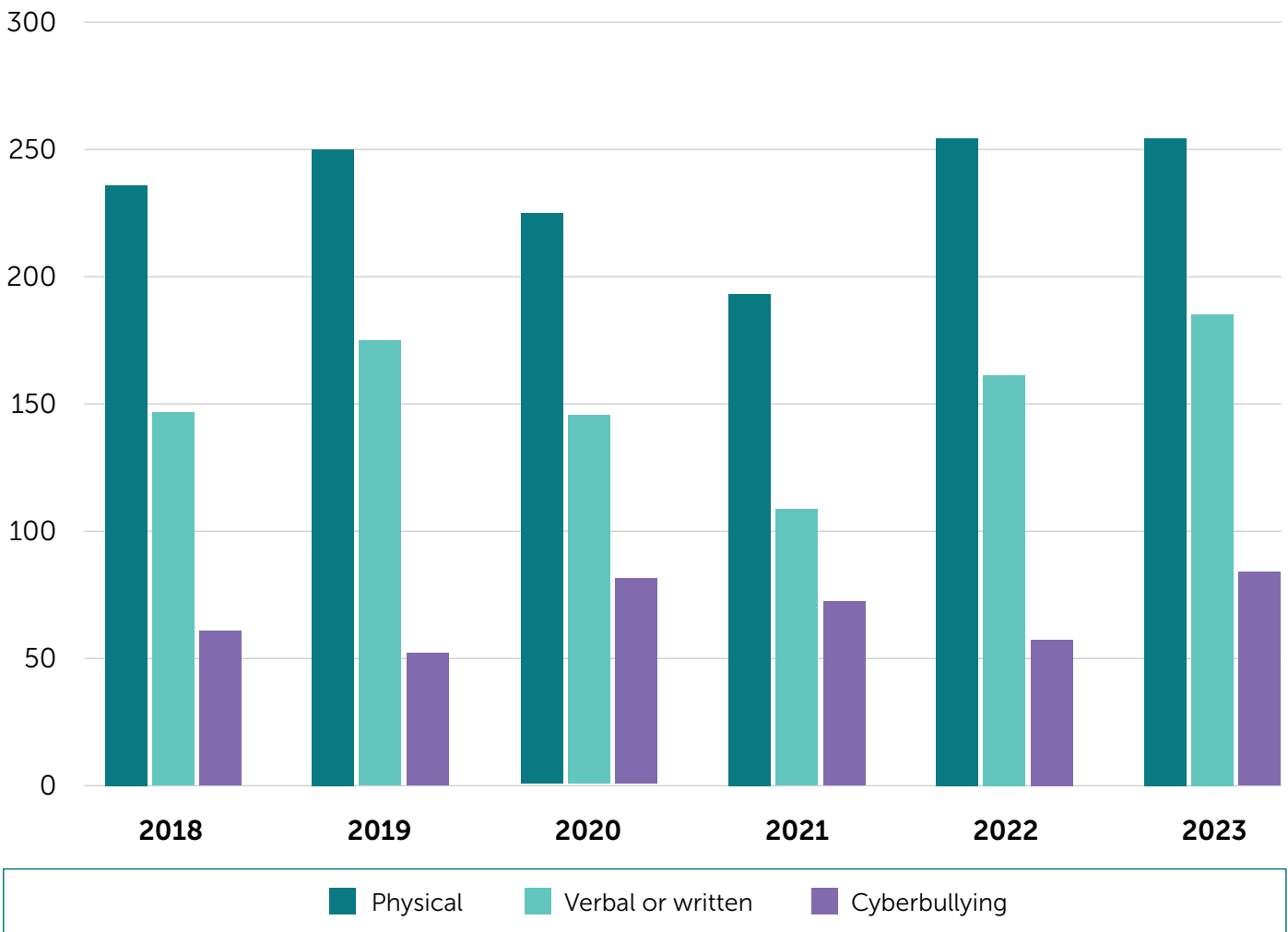


Figure 6 presents bullying incidents recorded in EDSAS and resulting in a formal disciplinary consequence.

This demonstrates no consistent trend in recorded incidents across these 3 bullying categories. Aggregated, recorded incidents across these 3 categories rose from 479 in 2019, to 529 in 2023 (a 10% increase), with high schools contributing heavily to the increase recorded.

The increase in IRMS incident reporting and also in the behavioural consequence of bullying in high schools are strong indicators of the system responding to bullying behaviour. This in turn could be an influence upon the declining level of bullying experienced by students across the life of the Strategy.

Figure 6: Bullying incidents with a behavioural consequence recorded in EDSAS/EMS



Conclusion and future considerations

This evaluation reviewed the contribution of the Strategy to increasing staff awareness and understanding of bullying behaviours; increasing staff confidence in responding to bullying behaviours; increasing student connectedness and belonging at school; and ultimately, reducing incidents of bullying.

Assessing the Strategy's contribution exclusively used departmental data, given comparable data sources were not available, or do not exist, in other schooling sectors. The evaluation was exclusively outcomes focused. Elements of process evaluation have been covered in [The Key Achievements Report](#), which summarised the range of initiatives implemented across schooling sectors and in other government agencies.



Evaluation key findings

- The online bullying prevention training modules developed as part of the Strategy strongly engaged several thousand staff. Positive feedback was received on the extent to which the training influenced staff understanding of bullying and their confidence in responding to incidents of bullying.
- Schools have engaged well with other resources developed under the banner of the Strategy, including the local policy implementation tool, bullying lesson plans, and National Day of Action bullying funding.
- The department's dedicated webpage for the Bullying Prevention Strategy has not been effective in reaching school staff and communicating the wide range of resources available. This demonstrates the value of more direct engagement methods to school staff.
- Encouragingly, bullying experienced by students slightly declined over the life of the Strategy.
 - This occurred despite students reporting a decline in school engagement and peer connectedness factors, which were anticipated as protective factors against bullying.
 - The expected relationship between bullying and these engagement factors may have been interrupted by other factors, like the impact of COVID-19.
- Whilst self-reported bullying showed slight declines during the life of the Strategy, a marked increase occurred in instances of bullying reported in major departmental datasets.

- This apparent disparity may be explained by greater awareness of bullying behaviour from students and staff and an understanding of when to report and act on this behaviour – a potential impact or influence from the various initiatives of the Strategy.

Future considerations

Bullying prevention and response to bullying is a complex area requiring a multi-faceted response. The Strategy has contributed to improvements in terms of the information and training available to educators, and resources for schools. However, the persistent prevalence of bullying at concerning levels requires continued effort, both in refinement of existing approaches, and consideration of new approaches.

Improving data

This outcomes-focused evaluation highlighted various data challenges. Work is continuing to improve data sources and understanding of bullying trends. For example, the 2023 WEC included a dedicated supplementary section across a subset of schools that asked students additional questions relevant to understanding bullying, including:

- the experience of bullying (frequency, how long occurring for, who they spoke to, results of asking for help etc.)
- the extent of student's own participation in bullying behaviour
- student perceptions of teacher approaches to bullying in their school
- the ability to report bullying at their school and receive assistance.

Future asking of these more detailed questions as part of the WEC will offer more insights into bullying trends in South Australian schools, the contribution that system and school initiatives may be making, and areas requiring improvement at either, or both, a system and school level.

Greater promotion

The online bullying prevention training modules received exceptional feedback from educators across the schooling systems, including demonstrated impact on educator awareness and confidence. With the materials remaining current and relevant, regular promotion of these resources across the schooling sectors is warranted, along with updating for currency as required.

The evaluation demonstrated that expecting educators to seek out training and other bullying prevention resources on the Department for Education website is largely unviable. Without targeted promotion, less educators will be reached over time. A dedicated annual sequence of promotion for available bullying prevention training and educator resources is now being undertaken in 2024. Consideration will also be given to cross-sector communication.

Safe and supportive learning environments: Plan of action

In April 2024, the department released the [Safe and supportive learning environments – Plan of action 2024-2026](#). This was in response to concerns around safety and violence in schools, including bullying. The plan's 15 actions are centred on 6 key themes, one of which is bullying prevention and response. Bullying-related actions to be undertaken progressively from mid-2024 through to 2026 include:

- student training around understanding and preventing bullying
- additional training for staff to increase awareness of challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ students
- an update to the department's bullying prevention requirements for all schools
- funding for schools to address areas of safety as a part of the NDA.

Final word

The Department for Education will continue to review our approach to this complex social issue and deliver and update resources developed as part of the Strategy, along with considering new evidence-informed approaches. We encourage other agencies involved in the Strategy to continue their work on bullying prevention and response for the benefit of South Australian children and young people.

Appendix 1

WEC questions relevant to bullying

Core bullying questions

The bullying questions asked in the WEC on bullying are presented below:

Physical bullying	This school year, how often have you been bullied by other students in the following ways? Physical bullying (for example, someone hit, shoved, or kicked you, spat at you, beat you up, or damaged or took your things without permission).
Verbal bullying	This school year, how often have you been bullied by other students in the following ways? Verbal bullying (for example, someone called you names, teased, embarrassed, threatened you, or made you do things you didn't want to do).
Social bullying	This school year, how often have you been bullied by other students in the following ways? Social bullying (for example, someone left you out, excluded you, gossiped and spread rumours about you, or made you look foolish).
Cyberbullying	This school year, how often have you been bullied by other students in the following ways? Cyberbullying (for example, someone used the computer to text messages to exclude, threaten, embarrass you or to hurt your feelings).

Friendship and peer belonging questions

Friendship and peer belonging information is important to understand as it highlights aspects of student wellbeing but are also protective factors against bullying. Relevant questions asked of students in the WEC are:

Peer belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I feel part of a group of friends that do things together.• I feel that I usually fit in with other kids around me.• When I am with other kids my age, I feel like I belong.
Friendship intimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I have at least one really good friend I can talk to when something is bothering me.• I have a friend I can tell everything to.• There is somebody my age who really understands me.

Engagement with school questions

Looking at engagement with school is relevant when considering bullying incidents and trends. The relevant questions asked of students in the WEC are:

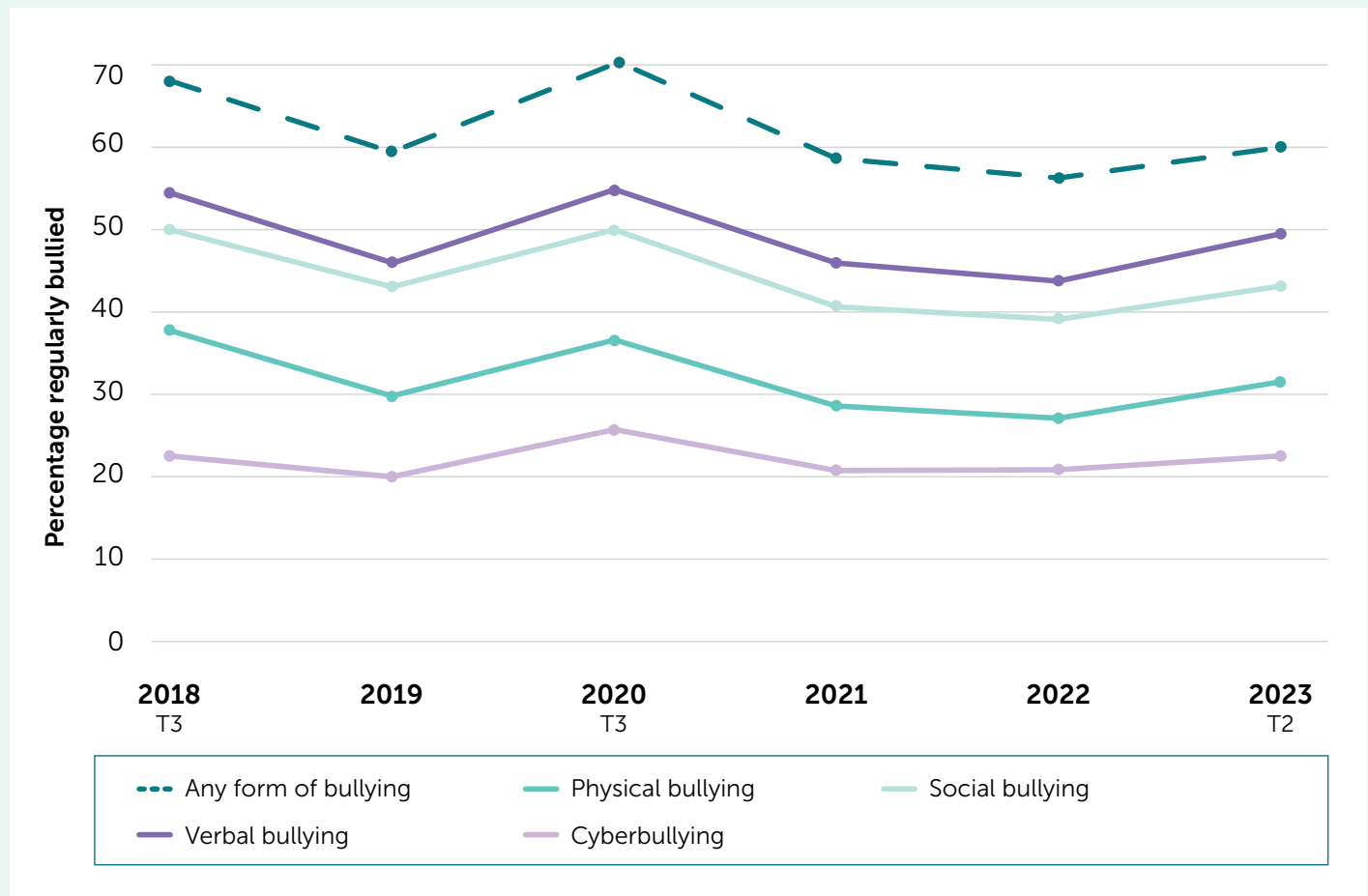
Important adult at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there any adults who are important to you at your school?
Connectedness to school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• At my school, there is a teacher or another adult who really cares about me.• At my school, there is a teacher or another adult who believes that I will be a success.• At my school, there is a teacher or another adult who listens to me when I have something to say.
Emotional engagement with teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I get along well with most of my teachers.• Most of my teachers are interested in my well-being.• Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say.• If I need extra help, I will receive it from my teachers.• Most of my teachers treat me fairly.
School climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers and students treat each other with respect at this school.• People care about each other in this school.• Students in this school help each other, even if they are not friends.
School belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I feel like I belong in this school.• I feel like I am important to this school.

Appendix 2

WEC bullying data 2018-2023

Cyberbullying, the least reported form of bullying, showed no discernible trend across the Strategy timeframe or broader 5-year timeframe. The other more commonly experienced forms of bullying (physical, social and verbal) all showed similar peaks in level of bullying when the WEC was administered later in the school year – 2018 (term 3), 2020 (term 3) and 2023 (term 2).

Proportion of SA students regularly bullied (weekly or monthly), 2018-2023







Government of South Australia
Department for Education