

Key Issues Paper No. 3



Use of Exclusionary Practices in Australian Government Schools ¹

This Key Issues paper presents an overview of the publicly available data concerning the use of fixed-term and permanent exclusions in four states: Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia.

In each state and territory, schools are required to record instances in which school exclusionary practices are applied. These records are stored and collated by each department as part of their school enrolment or behaviour management data. Reports detailing the number of fixed-term and permanent exclusions within their jurisdictions are released annually by state and territory education departments, with data for 2019 accessible through the following links:

- [Australian Capital Territory](#)
- [New South Wales](#)
- [Northern Territory](#)
- [Queensland](#)
- [South Australia](#)
- [Tasmania](#)
- [Victoria](#)
- [Western Australia](#)

Data Availability

There is significant variation between states and territories in terms of the quality of data provided around the use of exclusionary practices. Some, like Western Australia, only give information regarding the number of students who experienced fixed-term or permanent exclusions, while others, including Queensland and South Australia, provide a more detailed disaggregation, including the reasons for and length of fixed-term and permanent exclusions, as well as details of the student(s) involved. Table 1 presents the data currently available in Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia relating to the use of exclusionary practices in government schools. As the Table illustrates, the

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variability in the data released precludes any direct comparisons between the four states, therefore the use of exclusionary practices are discussed individually for each state within this Key Issues paper.

	Qld	SA	Vic	WA
Fixed-Term Exclusions				
Number of fixed-term exclusions	✓	✓		
Number of students suspended/excluded		✓		✓
Proportion of students suspended/excluded		✓		✓
Grounds for fixed-term exclusions	✓	✓		
Number of suspensions/exclusions by sex		✓		
Number of suspensions/exclusions by year	✓	✓		
Number of suspensions/exclusions by Indigenous status	✓			
Number of suspensions/exclusions by disability				
Permanent Exclusions				
Number of permanent exclusions	✓	✓	✓	
Number of students permanently excluded		✓		✓
Proportion of students permanently excluded		✓		
Grounds for permanent exclusions	✓	✓		
Number of permanent exclusions by sex			✓	
Number of permanent exclusions by age/year	✓	✓	✓	
Number of permanent exclusions by Indigenous status	✓		✓	
Number of permanent exclusions by disability			✓	

Table 1: Availability of data on fixed-term and permanent exclusions in Qld, SA, Vic & WA

Queensland

The Queensland Department of Education provides data on the use of four exclusionary measures in state schools: Short suspensions (up to 10 days), long suspensions (10-20 days), exclusions and cancellations of enrolment. Figure 1 displays the proportion of exclusionary practices implemented in government schools relative to total student enrolments between 2015 and 2019.

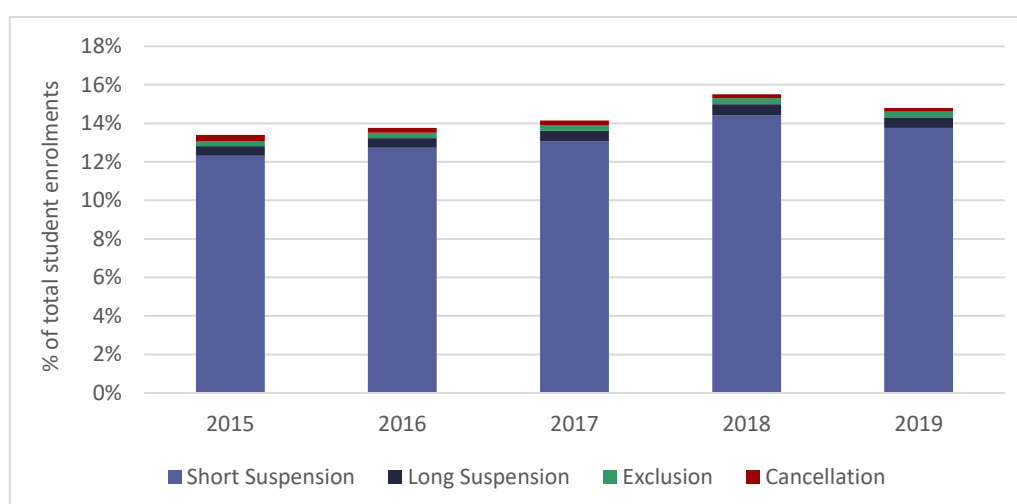


Figure 1: Exclusionary Practices in Queensland 2015-2019

The use of exclusionary practices rose by 2.1% between 2015 and 2018, with most recent data showing that in 2019, a total of 82,944² incidents were recorded, comprising 77,167 short suspensions, 3,132 long suspensions, 1,674 exclusions and 971 cancellations of enrolment.

Of *all* exclusionary measures applied in 2019, 64% were on the grounds of threats to safety or violence and a further 23% for disruption to the good order. According to type of exclusion the data shows:

- Two thirds of fixed-term exclusions (65%) were applied on the grounds of threats to safety or violence, and 23% for disruption to good order.
- Fewer than 10% of all fixed-term exclusions were in relation to disobedience or noncompliance (7%), antisocial behaviour (3%) or illegal activity (1%).
- Permanent exclusions were most commonly issued for disobedience or noncompliance (38%) followed by threats to safety or violence (31%).
- A further 17% of permanent exclusions were on the grounds of disruption to the good order, and 12% for illegal activity.

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of students who experienced exclusionary practices in Queensland government schools in 2019. No data is reported according to gender or disability however the Department does record the year level and Indigenous status of the students.

	Short Suspension	Long Suspension	Exclusion	Cancellation
Year Group				
P to 2	7410 (9.6%)	61 (1.9%)	13 (0.8%)	n/a
3 to 5	14309 (18.5%)	210 (6.7%)	61 (3.6%)	n/a
6 to 7	18218 (23.6%)	544 (17.4%)	248 (14.8%)	n/a
8 to 10	31785 (41.2%)	1946 (62.1%)	1155 (69.0%)	75 (7.7%)
11 to 12	5445 (7.1%)	371 (11.8%)	197 (11.8%)	896 (92.3%)
Indigenous Status				
Indigenous	19463 (25.2%)	820 (26.2%)	398 (23.8%)	275 (28.3%)
Non-Indigenous	57688 (74.8%)	2312 (73.8%)	1276 (76.2%)	696 (71.7%)

Table 2: Characteristics of students who experienced exclusionary practices in Queensland 2019

The data reveal two distinct trends in the use of fixed-term and permanent exclusions:

Firstly, exclusionary practices were most often used for students in Years 8 to 10, who received 40% of short suspensions, and 60-70% of long suspensions and exclusions. While short suspensions were commonly used for younger students, the most severe exclusionary practices, including long suspensions and exclusions, were more often reserved for those in the Year 8 to 10 age group.

Secondly, Indigenous students were greatly overrepresented across all four exclusionary measures. Despite Indigenous students making up just over 10% of all Queensland's full-time state school enrolments³, they received more than a quarter of all fixed-term and permanent exclusions in 2019.

²Departmental statistics record each fixed-term or permanent exclusion as a separate incident therefore figures do not reflect the actual number of students who experienced exclusionary measures.

³ Queensland Department of Education (2018) Indigenous Enrolments by Region. Retrieved from: <https://qed.qld.gov.au/det-publications/reports/earlyyears/Documents/february-indigenous-student-enrolments-by-region.pdf>

South Australia

The South Australian Department for Education publishes annual data on the number of exclusionary measures applied in government schools, as well as the as the number of students who received suspensions (between 0-5 days) or exclusions (20 days or longer). Figure 2 shows the proportion of students who were suspended or excluded relative to total student enrolments between 2012 and 2019.

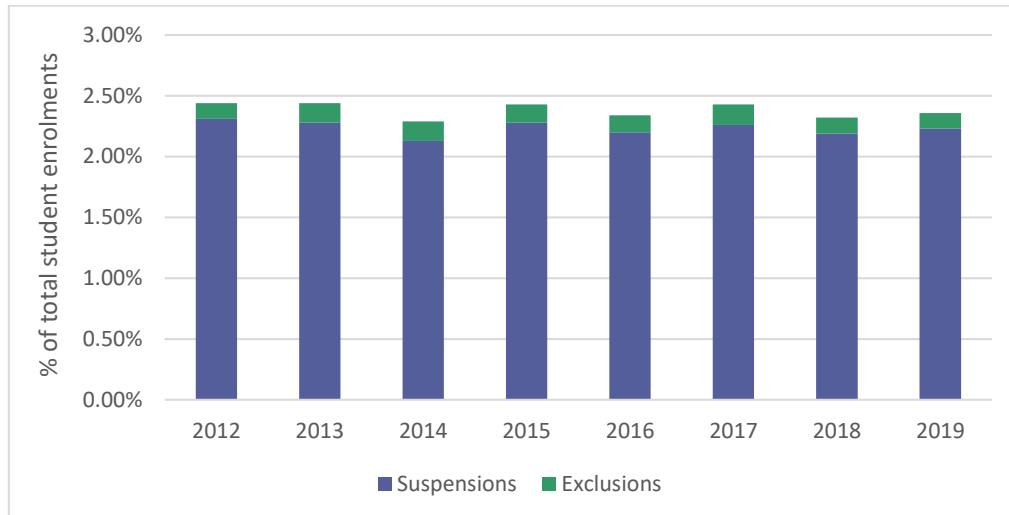


Figure 2: Fixed-term exclusions in South Australia 2012-2019

There has been little variation in the use of fixed-term exclusions, with on average 2.24% of students receiving a suspension and 0.15% an exclusion between 2012 and 2019. No student received a permanent exclusion over the same time period.

Data from 2019 recorded a total of 5,252 suspensions, involving 3,934 students, and a further 229 exclusions among 227 students. Of the 3,934 students suspended, three quarters (76.0%) had been suspended once, 17% twice, 7% between 3 and 4 times and 0.4% on 5 or more occasions.

Considering the grounds on which students were suspended from school, data from 2019 show that almost two thirds of all suspensions (64%) were on the grounds of threats to safety or violence, with a further 22% in relation to disruption to good order. Among the remainder, 7% were for indifference or inattention, 5% illegal activity and 2% for disruption to teaching and learning.

Although the department does not release data pertaining to Indigenous status or student disability, it does report the use of suspensions according to year group and sex, with this data shown in Figure 3

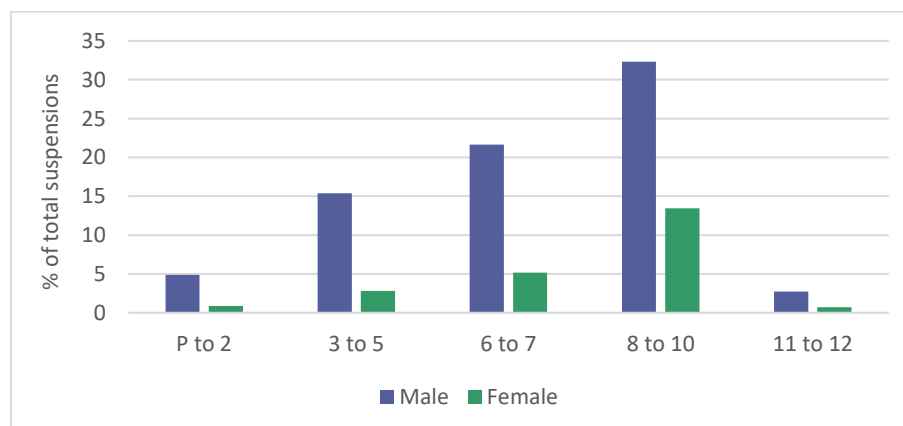


Figure 3: Suspensions by student year level and sex

Notably, the figures show a dramatic increase in the use of fixed-term exclusions with age, whereby students in Years 8 to 10 account for 45% of all suspensions in 2019. The rise in fixed-term suspensions is evident for both males and females.

The data also reveals the disproportionality with which fixed-term exclusions are applied relative to sex. Over three quarters of all suspensions were given to male students (77%), a ratio of over 3:1 compared to females. This disproportionality appears to reduce with age: In Years P-2 the ratio of suspensions for males compared to females is 5:1, however, this drops to 4:1 in Years 6-7 and to 2:1 in Years 8-10.

Victoria

Unlike other states and territories, the Victorian Department of Education and Training does not report on the number of fixed-term exclusions applied in departmental schools, however, following an investigation by the Victorian Ombudsman in 2017⁴, the Department now publishes annual data on the number of school expulsions. Most recent data suggest there were 184 expulsions in 2019 (approximately 0.03% of all school enrolments), marking a downward trend from 285 in 2017 and 192 in 2018.

		Number of expulsions
Gender	Male	149 (80.1%)
	Female	35 (19.0%)
Year Group	Years P-2	0
	Years 3-5	5 (2.7%)
	Years 6-7	20 (10.9%)
	Years 8-10	145 (78.8%)
	Years 11-12	14 (7.6%)
Disability	With disability funding	27 (14.7%)
	Without disability funding	157 (85.3%)
Indigenous Status	Indigenous	12 (6.5%)
	Non-Indigenous	172 (93.5%)

Table 3: Characteristics of students who experienced permanent expulsions in Victoria 2019

No data is available regarding the grounds on which expulsions were applied, however the Department does provide information regarding the demographic characteristics of the students involved, which is shown in Table 3.

The data reveal a number of key findings in regard to the proportionality with which exclusionary measures are applied:

- Males received over 80% of the permanent exclusions, a ratio of 4:1 compared to females
- The use of permanent exclusions was highest among students in Years 8 to 10, who received over three quarters of all expulsions in 2019.
- Students with disability funding received 14% of all permanent exclusions despite making up only 4.5% of all government school enrolments in 2019.
- The population of Indigenous students in Victorian schools in 2019 stood at 2.3%, however, this group of students constituted 6.5% of all expulsions.

⁴ Victorian Ombudsman (2017) Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions. Retrieved from: <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/our-impact/investigation-reports/investigation-into-victorian-government-school-expulsions/>

Western Australia

The Western Australian Department of Education reports the number of students who experienced fixed-term suspensions (up to 10 days) and permanent exclusions in its annual reports. While previously the department has provided detailed data including the frequency of suspension, grounds for exclusionary measures and appeal outcomes, since 2016 only the number of students who were suspended or excluded is reported.

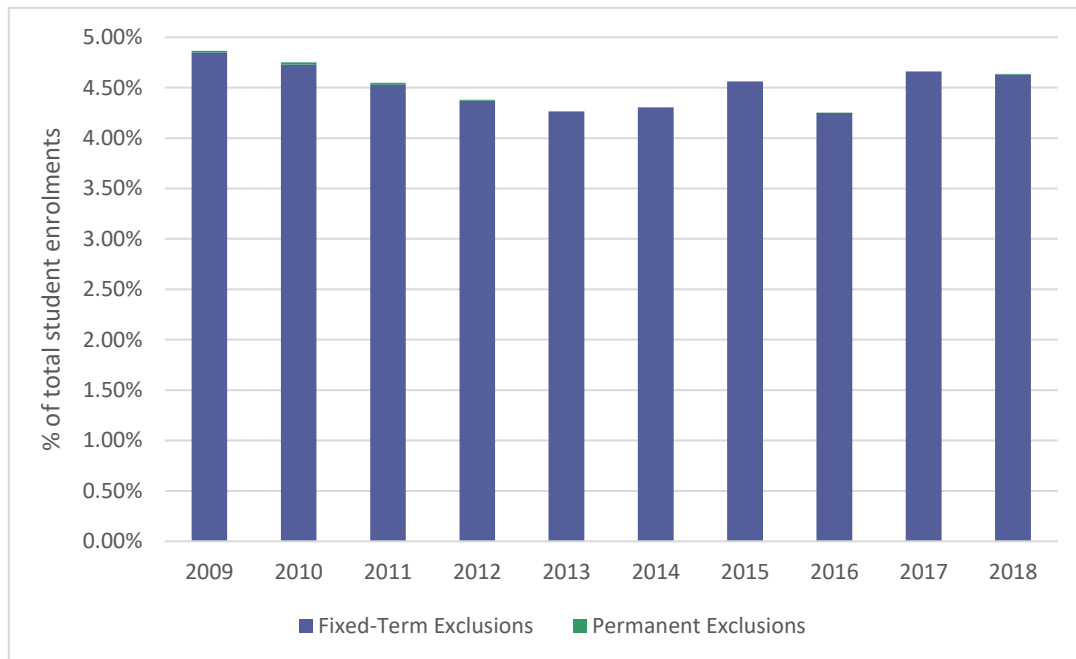


Figure 4: Exclusionary practices in Western Australia 2009–2018

Figure 4 shows the number of students suspended and excluded from government schools from 2009 to 2018. The rate of fixed-term exclusions has remained at approximately 4.5% of all student enrolments, albeit with slight annual variations. Permanent exclusions are used in only a handful of cases, ranging from 54 instances in 2010 to only 8 in 2016 and 2017.

Most recent data show that in 2018, a total of 14,243 students were suspended and a further 24 students were permanently excluded. Considered against the total number of government school enrolments, the rate of fixed-term exclusions sits at 4.5%, and permanent exclusions at just under 0.01%. No further information regarding the grounds for exclusions or characteristics of the students involved is published by the department.

Summary

The different ways in which state and territory departments report the use of fixed-term and permanent exclusions present difficulties in determining how these practices are being used at a national level. Unlike the UK, where each country offers somewhat comparable data, there is no common measure used by all state and territory departments. To further obfuscate our understanding, some states, such as Victoria, do not even report on the number of suspensions enacted within their schools. At present, the data that is available paints an uncertain picture:

- The rate of fixed-term and permanent exclusions has seen little change in South Australia and Western Australia, however, Queensland has seen a rise in the use of short-term suspensions over recent years.

- In both Queensland and South Australia, fixed-term exclusions were most often applied on the grounds of threats to safety and violence or disruption to the good order. No comparable data was available from Victoria or Western Australia.
- The use of exclusionary practices increases relative to the age of students, with the most severe forms including long suspensions and permanent exclusions being used most often for students in Years 8 to 10.
- Piecemeal data suggests that exclusionary practices are being disproportionately applied to particular groups, including males, Indigenous students, and students with disability funding.

The lack of available data is currently a major barrier to understanding the extent and impact of school exclusionary practices in Australia. The findings above are based on scant and inconsistent information, and only hint at some of the issues that require more thorough investigation. Greater alignment between states and territories in how they report the use of fixed-term and permanent exclusions would enable side-by-side comparisons and provide a national picture which shows how exclusionary practices are being used in Australian schools. In doing so, this would bring Australia in line with international research which is currently examining the efficacy of exclusionary measures as a mean of managing student behaviour.

School Exclusions Study Overview

The School Exclusions Study aims to investigate the extent to which exclusionary practices such as suspensions and exclusions are used by schools across Australia to discipline students and manage diverse student populations; the reasons why students are suspended and excluded; the profile of students who are suspended and excluded; and the impact on the health, welfare and academic achievement of children who are suspended and excluded from Australian schools. The research will provide the evidence base for policy and school-based interventions that enhance the success of vulnerable children in our schools.

An initial pilot study is focussing on Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia to examine the policies and practices that shape and influence the use of school exclusions to address problematic student behaviour. Data includes legislative constructions guiding school disciplinary practices, and publicly available school exclusions data.

For further information please see www.schoolexclusionsstudy.com.au

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- [UNICEF Australia](#)
- [The Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia](#)
- [Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia](#)
- [Commission for Children and Young People, Victoria](#)
- [Australian Secondary Principals Association](#)
- [Australian Primary Principals Association](#)
- [South Australian Secondary Principals Association](#)
- [South Australian Primary Principals Association](#)
- [Queensland Secondary Principals' Association](#)
- [Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association](#)