

# AUSTRALIAN PARENTS SUPPORT SCHOOL-BASED RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION: FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST NATIONAL SURVEY

## Authors:

Hendriks J<sup>1,2</sup>, Marson K<sup>3</sup>, Walsh J<sup>4</sup>, Lawton T<sup>5</sup>, Saltis H<sup>1,2</sup>, Burns S<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Curtin School of Population Health, Curtin University, Perth, Australia;

<sup>2</sup>Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health, Curtin University, Perth, Australia; <sup>3</sup>Law School, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia; <sup>4</sup>The Hum Academy, Melbourne, Australia; <sup>5</sup>Talk Revolution, Queensland, Australia.

**Background:** Despite significant worldwide evidence that parents support school-based delivery of relationships and sexuality education (RSE), Australian data has generally lacked larger, nationally representative samples. Such data is vital, as perceptions of parental attitudes are known to influence RSE delivery.

**Methods:** An online survey examined the attitudes of Australian parents towards school-based RSE. Items closely replicated a recent Canadian study, and a market research company was engaged to recruit a representative sample.

**Results:** Data was collected from 2,247 parents (56.5% female) nationwide. Most had a child enrolled in a government school (65.3% primary, 55.7% secondary); reporting diverse religious affiliations (38.7% no religion, 21.3% Catholic, 11.1% Anglican) and voting preferences (26.7% Australian Labor Party, 25.1% Liberal/Coalition, 23.6% undecided). Overall, 89.9% of parents supported the provision of school-based RSE (female > males,  $p=0.04$ ), with some state/territorial differences. Islamic parents ( $p<0.001$ ) and those who deemed religion to be *very important* ( $p<0.001$ ) were least supportive. Supporters of the Australian Labor Party were more likely to endorse RSE than supporters of other parties ( $p=0.04$ ). Parents strongly endorsed schools to address a range of RSE-related topics ( $n=40$ ), and even topics with the lowest levels of support were extremely well supported overall: *information about masturbation* (87.0%), *gender identity* (86.0%) and *sexual pleasure* (84.0%). Grades 7-8 were nominated as the most appropriate time to commence lessons. Most parents rated the quality of current RSE delivery to be *very good/good* (47.5%), however 21.0% were unsure if RSE was currently being addressed by their child's school. Open-ended comments revealed a negligible but vitriolic level of dissent.

**Conclusion:** Australian parents are overwhelmingly supportive of school-based RSE, with some notable differences associated with gender, locality, religion, political affiliation, grade level for implementation and RSE topic. These findings support RSE advocacy efforts and contest overstated levels of parental dissent.

**Disclosure of Interest Statement:** This research was supported by the Western Australian Department of Health, Communicable Disease Control Directorate, Sexual Health and Blood-borne Virus Program. We also acknowledge and thank the Canadian research team who provided permission for us to adapt their survey instrument, and the participants who responded to our survey.