



7 March 2022

Mrs Lucy Wicks MP
Chair
House of Representatives
Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into Social Media and Online Safety

Dear Chair

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body representing the Independent schooling sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISA represents 1,187 schools and over 667,000 students, accounting for almost 17 per cent of Australian school enrolments. ISA's major role is to bring the unique needs of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

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ISA appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry on the range of online harms that may be faced by Australians on social media and other online platforms, and the potential impacts on the health and wellbeing of young Australians.

Independent schools are very mindful of the many ways in which social media and online interaction can impact the mental health and wellbeing of students. Students have access to a growing number of different online and social media platforms for the purposes of learning and recreation from an increasingly younger age. Online safety is an important area in which Independent schools can, and do, provide advice and resources to educate students about the potential dangers and negative consequences of online interactions.

Tools and information developed through organisations such as eSafety provide invaluable resources for schools to use to help embed safety messages. The eSafety's Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education¹ for example, establishes a consistent national evidence based approach that supports education systems across Australia to deliver high quality programs. The accompanying eSafety Toolkit² allows flexibility in its design so that schools can tailor how they use the materials, based on the needs of their community. This flexibility is particularly important to a diverse Independent school sector. The Toolkit was developed in consultation with government and non-government education sector representatives. ISA values the opportunity to contribute to this and similar resources and encourages the government to continue this collaborative approach.

¹ 'Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education', eSafety Commissioner, accessed 7 March 2022, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/best-practice-framework>.

² 'Toolkit for Schools', eSafety Commissioner, accessed 7 March 2022, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/toolkit-schools>.

The eSafety website also provides vital information to parents with age-appropriate advice and resources. This is of great assistance to Independent schools who partner with families to reinforce safety measures.

ISA recognises the ongoing and significant effort from the Australian Government to identify and investigate issues related to online safety, provide resources to educate Australians on the importance of online safety and develop a regulatory environment to protect Australians from online harms. We also recognise that this effort must be sustained into the future as information and communication technologies continue to evolve and their use becomes more widespread inside and outside schools.

The Independent sector also values the Online Safety Charter³. We welcome the clear community-led expectations for technology firms and digital platforms to support law enforcement efforts that protect citizens, especially children and vulnerable members of the community, from harmful online experiences; and to take meaningful action to address and prevent harms being incurred by those using their products or services. We also acknowledge the importance of the Online Safety Act 2021⁴ to protect Australians from serious online abuse and harmful or dangerous online content. The subsequent media campaign “We’ve Got Your Back”⁵ plays a vital role in ensuring all Australians understand their protections and can be used by Independent schools in their work with students.

ISA and state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) strongly advocate for legislative protections as well as the provision of programs and resources to students, families and schools, to safeguard young people as they navigate a rapidly changing online environment. AISs rely on the legislation, policies and resources of government and expert agencies to underpin the support and professional learning they provide to Independent schools.

During COVID-19 many Independent schools experienced a range of complexities in providing safe online communication and learning experiences for their students. Across Australia schools and learners were impacted differently depending on access to the internet, IT security measures and user skills. This experience highlighted the criticality of safe environments for online interactions across a range of varied conditions, not only during emergency events but on a daily basis as schools and families increasingly engage in online services to provide and enrich education.

This is particularly so for rural and remote students many of whom rely on online education or who are living away from home in boarding facilities. As indicated in the Inquiry submission from the Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Australia⁶, children from rural and remote areas may not have the experience and awareness of the dangers of online and social media platforms that children living in metropolitan areas have. Access to age-appropriate resources on cyber safety is vital for isolated students and their families while living at home or in boarding facilities.

In consultations with young people to inform the eSafety Commissioner’s Engagement Strategy For Young People⁷, more safety education, tools and resources that directly

³ Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, ‘Online Safety Charter’, accessed 4 March 2022, <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-centre/publications/online-safety-charter-0>.

⁴ eSafety Commissioner, ‘Learn about the Online Safety Act’, 3 March 2022, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/whats-on/online-safety-act>.

⁵ eSafety Commissioner, ‘Online Safety Campaign’, 3 March 2022, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/whats-on/online-safety>.

⁶ Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association, ‘Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association’, accessed 30 August 2021, <https://icpa.com.au/>.

⁷ Lilly Moody, Linda Marsden, and Betty Nguyen, ‘Consultations with Young People to Inform the eSafety Commissioner’s Engagement Strategy for Young People’, n.d., 40.

address the key issues young people face online, was called for. These consultations also proposed eSafety work closely with young people on an ongoing basis to identify and respond to new and emerging concerns.

ISA supports the Australian Government's efforts to ensure that young Australians can contribute to online safety conversations by sharing their experiences and opinions. The Australian Government's announcement of an Online Safety Youth Advisory Council for young people aged 13 to 24 years⁸, will give a welcome voice to young people about their online experiences and enable advice to go to Government directly from them about how best to support a positive online experience.

ISA encourages the ongoing efforts by the Australian Government in developing a suite of legislative regulatory measures to minimise the risk and harm to young people using online environments and their initiative to hear directly from young people about a topic that is of such relevance to them. The development of evidence-based, age-appropriate resources and training for students, families and teachers in addition to access to quality in-person and online counselling services, will provide a comprehensive national response for the protection of young Australians.

Yours sincerely



Margery Evans
Chief Executive Officer

⁸ 'The Online Safety Youth Advisory Council', eSafety Commissioner, accessed 7 March 2022, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/consultation-and-cooperation/online-safety-youth-advisory-council>.