

CLASSROOMS IN CRISIS

Australian teachers' perspectives
on disruptive student behaviour

Blaise Joseph





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 **McKinnon**



Analysis Paper 115

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Executive summary

- Student misbehaviour is widespread in Australian classrooms, disrupting teaching and learning, and reducing the amount of lesson time available for instruction. This report presents the results of a new national survey of a representative sample of 377 Australian school teachers, adapted and abridged from England's National Behaviour Survey, including asking teachers to estimate the amount of learning lost due to student misbehaviour.
- Teachers reported losing an average of approximately nine minutes per 30 minutes of teaching time — almost one-third of lesson time — due to student misbehaviour. This is equivalent to 12 weeks of lost learning per year.
- The estimated loss of teaching time was higher on average among younger/middle-aged teachers and female teachers. Teachers aged 18–34 and 35–54 estimated losing approximately nine minutes, compared with seven minutes among teachers aged 55 and older. Female teachers also estimated losing about nine minutes per 30 minutes of teaching time, compared with seven minutes among male teachers.
- More than half of teachers (54%) estimated losing at least one-fifth of teaching time, 16% of teachers reported losing the majority of the lesson, and only 3% reported losing no teaching time due to student misbehaviour.
- The scale of this learning loss is reinforced by the frequency of disruption. Four in 10 teachers (40%) said misbehaviour interrupted teaching in most or all lessons during the previous week, while a further 39% said this occurred in some lessons.
- Classroom disruption is widespread. 57% of teachers reported students talking when they were not supposed to in most or all lessons, while 45% reported students calling out in most or all lessons.
- These findings contrast with teachers' generally more positive assessments of behaviour and their own ability to manage it. 56% rated student behaviour as good or very good, 62% said their school was calm and orderly every day or most days, and 82% were confident in managing misbehaviour.
- One possible explanation for this contrast is that a substantial amount of low-level classroom disruption has become normalised in Australia. Teachers may be highly experienced and confident at managing misbehaviour while still losing considerable teaching time responding to it.
- Student misbehaviour affects teachers themselves. One in 10 teachers reported that student misbehaviour had negatively affected their health and wellbeing to a great extent during the previous week.
- Addressing student behaviour is not about blaming teachers, principals, parents or students. The objective is to establish high expectations for behaviour across the school system and provide schools with effective approaches to create calm and orderly classrooms.
- Australia should establish a regular national teacher survey of student behaviour, drawing on England's National Behaviour Survey, to systematically measure classroom disruption and track whether behaviour is improving or deteriorating.
- Australian governments and school systems should also support the implementation of a behaviour curriculum, in which expected behaviours and routines are clearly defined, explicitly taught, and consistently reinforced.

Introduction

Student behaviour is a fundamental determinant of learning. Even the best curriculum and teaching methods may have limited impact if classrooms are routinely disrupted and teachers are required to spend substantial amounts of lesson time managing student behaviour. Poor behaviour can reduce the time available for instruction, disrupt the learning of other students, and negatively affect teachers' wellbeing, contributing to burnout and attrition.

Student misbehaviour can range from relatively low-level but frequent disruption — such as talking or calling out when students are not supposed to, arriving late to lessons, or challenging teachers' instructions — through to more serious incidents of disruptive or unsafe behaviour.

This report provides new evidence on student behaviour in Australian schools through a national 10-question survey of 377 primary and secondary school teachers, adapted and abridged from the UK National Behaviour Survey. It examines teachers' overall assessments of student behaviour, their confidence in managing misbehaviour, the amount of teaching and learning time they estimate is lost to disruption, the frequency of common forms of classroom misbehaviour, and the impact of poor behaviour on teacher wellbeing. The report aims to provide a clearer picture of the scale and impact of classroom disruption in Australia and argues for systematically measuring student behaviour through a regular teacher survey to identify problems and evaluate the efficacy of policy responses.

A substantial body of international evidence demonstrates a clear relationship between classroom behaviour and student achievement.¹ Analysis of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data has found students in classrooms with a better disciplinary climate tend to have higher academic achievement, although higher achievement may itself

also contribute to better behaviour.² An international study using PISA data from 65 countries and economies found a significant positive relationship between classroom disciplinary climate and school-level reading achievement in 53 of them.³ Other international research using PISA data has similarly identified school discipline as an important correlate of educational performance, even relatively more important than school funding in explaining student achievement.⁴ Australian research has also found associations between students' behavioural problems and lower academic achievement, including lower NAPLAN performance.⁵

Australian classrooms perform relatively poorly on international measures of disciplinary climate. OECD PISA data shows comparatively high levels of noise, disorder and other behaviours interfering with learning in Australian classrooms.⁶ Analysis of PISA results has similarly highlighted concerns about disciplinary climate and students' classroom experiences, especially for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous students.⁷ The challenges around student behaviour are considerable in every school sector in Australia while being particularly pronounced in the public school system.⁸

These concerns have been highlighted for over a decade. Research in 2017 estimated around 40% of Australian students were unproductive in a given year, with disengagement encompassing both disruptive and passive behaviours, such as avoiding work or being late for class.⁹ Importantly, it highlighted the challenge posed by routine low-level disruption and disengagement, rather than focusing solely on extreme behavioural incidents.

Previous research by The Centre for Independent Studies into high-achieving, disadvantaged schools found that strong school discipline, high expectations, and orderly learning environments were common characteristics of academically

successful schools serving low-socioeconomic communities.¹⁰

Student behaviour also has important implications for teachers themselves. A 2022 national survey found almost one in four Australian teachers did not feel safe at work — with student behaviour a prominent reason — while 2025 national teacher wellbeing research found ease of behavioural management was the strongest driver of teachers' positive feelings about their work.¹¹ More recent Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) workforce data also indicates student behaviour is an increasingly important factor in teacher retention, with the proportion of teachers intending to leave the profession before retirement age — who identified student behaviour as a reason — increasing from 25% in 2020 to 47% in 2024.¹²

Student behaviour has consequently become an increasingly prominent education policy issue in Australia. In 2023, the Senate Education and Employment References Committee conducted an inquiry into the growing disruption in school classrooms. Its interim report concluded that disruptive behaviour was having a significant impact on teaching and learning and recommended among other measures the development of a national behaviour curriculum and the establishment of mechanisms to regularly survey students and teachers about classroom behaviour.¹³

A key challenge is that Australia still does not systematically measure student behaviour. The OECD data on student behaviour comes from a sample of students surveyed only once every three years. Administrative measures of behaviour such as suspensions and expulsions provide important information about serious misbehaviour, but reveal much less about routine, lower-level disruption that can consume teaching time without ever resulting in a formal disciplinary incident.

This distinction is important because effective behaviour policy should not only respond to serious incidents after they occur, but establish clear expectations and address lower-level misbehaviour before it becomes habitual or escalates. Previous Australian and international work has emphasised the importance of explicitly teaching expected behaviours, establishing consistent routines and creating a strong school-wide culture of behaviour.¹⁴

England provides a useful model for both improving and measuring student behaviour. Its approach has included a stronger emphasis on behaviour culture and explicitly teaching expected behaviour, alongside the establishment of the National Behaviour Survey.¹⁵ The survey regularly collects the experiences and perceptions of teachers, school leaders, students and parents, providing information about everyday behaviour that cannot readily be captured through administrative or international measures alone.¹⁶

The UK Behaviour Survey

England provides an established model for systematically measuring student behaviour in schools.

Since the 2021–22 academic year, the UK Department for Education has conducted a National Behaviour Survey, designed to provide regular and consistent evidence on student behaviour in state-

funded schools in England.¹⁷ The survey collects data from multiple perspectives, including school leaders, teachers, students, and parents. The latest report, covering the 2024–25 academic year, is the fourth National Behaviour Survey.

The National Behaviour Survey examines a broad range of issues relating to

behaviour, including school behaviour culture and policies, behaviour management, the school environment, and the frequency and impact of misbehaviour.

Data is collected across multiple survey waves during the school year, allowing the Department for Education to monitor changes in behaviour and attitudes over time.

The survey provides insights that cannot readily be obtained from administrative measures such as suspensions, expulsions, or recorded serious incidents.

In particular, teachers are asked about their everyday experiences of classroom behaviour, including their confidence in managing misbehaviour, whether their school is calm and orderly, how frequently misbehaviour interrupts teaching and learning, and how much teaching time is lost because of misbehaviour. This provides a means of measuring the cumulative impact of routine classroom disruption that may not result in a formal disciplinary incident.

The results demonstrate the importance of distinguishing teachers' confidence in managing behaviour from the prevalence of misbehaviour itself.

In 2024–25, 95% of teachers in England reported being very or fairly confident in managing misbehaviour, but at the same time only 63% reported their school was calm and orderly every day or most days.¹⁸ The survey also measures the amount of teaching time teachers estimate is lost to misbehaviour,¹⁹ providing an indication of the potential effect of classroom disruption on learning.

The National Behaviour Survey therefore provides both a useful model for systematically monitoring student behaviour and a benchmark against which Australian results can be considered. The Australian teacher survey of student behaviour conducted for this report adapts and abridges the UK survey with a selection of 10 questions, with a particular focus on teachers' experiences of classroom behaviour and its impact on teaching and learning.

Australian teacher survey methodology

To provide new evidence on the extent and impact of student misbehaviour in Australian classrooms, The Centre for Independent Studies commissioned quantitative research firm Fox & Hedgehog (a member of the Australian Polling Council) to conduct a national survey of school teachers.

The survey was conducted between 24 June and 3 July, 2026, with respondents recruited from online panels. The target population was teachers in Australian primary and secondary schools. Quotas were applied to ensure an even split between teachers in primary and secondary schools, proportional to the population of each state and territory, and reflective of the age and gender distribution of primary and secondary teachers. The sample was therefore

designed to be broadly representative of the Australian teacher population on these key demographic and geographic characteristics.

The final sample comprised 377 respondents, including 185 primary school teachers, 170 secondary school teachers, and 22 teachers classified as Both/Other. Respondents were drawn from all states and territories. The headline margin of error for all teacher respondents was 5.0%. The composition of the survey sample is shown in Appendix Table A11.

Results were also analysed by school level, gender, and age. Detailed cross-tabulations of the results across these demographic characteristics are provided in the Appendix tables.

As with other perception-based surveys, the results reflect teachers' assessments of their experiences rather than direct observational measures of classroom behaviour. However, teachers' repeated exposure to classroom behaviour makes their perspective particularly valuable for measuring the everyday disruption that may not be captured in administrative measures such as suspensions, expulsions or recorded serious incidents.

Teachers were asked the following 10 questions:

1. Thinking about the past week of term, how would you rate the behaviour of students at your school?
2. Thinking about the past week of term, how often would you say that your school has been calm and orderly?
3. How confident, if at all, do you personally feel about managing misbehaviour in your school?
4. Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week of term, how many minutes do you think were lost due to misbehaviour per 30 minutes of teaching/lesson time?
5. Thinking about students' behaviour during the lessons you taught during the past week of term, in how many did student misbehaviour stop or interrupt teaching or learning?
6. Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students talk when they were not supposed to?
7. Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students call out when they were not supposed to?
8. Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students answer back or challenge instructions when they were not supposed to?
9. Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students arrive to lessons late when they were not supposed to?
10. Thinking about the past week of term, to what extent has student misbehaviour had a negative impact on your health and wellbeing?

For Question 4, respondents reported the amount of teaching time lost to student misbehaviour using five-minute ranges (0 minutes, 1–5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20, 21–25, and 26–30 minutes). To estimate the average number of minutes lost per 30 minutes of teaching time, responses of zero were assigned a value of zero, while responses within each range were assigned the midpoint of that range. A mean was then calculated across respondents who provided an estimate, weighted by the number of responses in each category.

Teachers' overall assessment of student behaviour

The survey first asked teachers for their overall assessment of student behaviour at their school, how frequently their school had been calm and orderly during the previous week, and how confident they felt personally about managing misbehaviour. Taken together, the results present a mixed but seemingly positive picture of teachers' perceptions of behaviour and their capacity to manage

it. When asked to rate the behaviour of students at their school during the past week of term (Figure 1), 56% of teachers rated behaviour as either good or very good, comprising 42% who said good and 14% who said very good. By comparison, 23% rated behaviour as poor or very poor, while 21% considered it neither good nor poor.

Figure 1: Thinking about the past week of term, how would you rate the behaviour of students at your school?



Teachers were also asked how often their school had been calm and orderly during the past week (Figure 2). 62% reported that their school had been calm and orderly either every day (13%) or most

days (49%). However, more than one-third (34%) said their school had been calm and orderly only on some days, while 4% said it had never been calm and orderly during the previous week.

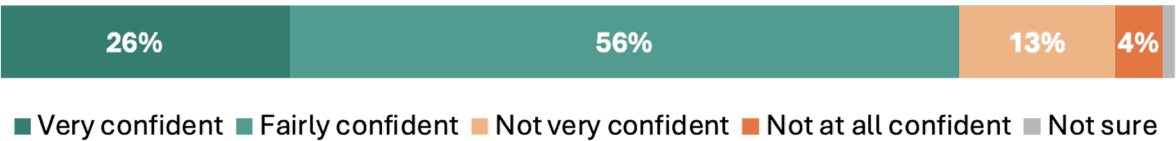
Figure 2: Thinking about the past week of term, how often would you say that your school has been calm and orderly?



Teachers nevertheless expressed considerable confidence in their own ability to manage student misbehaviour (Figure 3). More than four in five (82%) said they were either very confident

(26%) or fairly confident (56%) in managing misbehaviour at their school. Only 17% reported being not very confident or not at all confident.

Figure 3: How confident, if at all, do you personally feel about managing misbehaviour in your school?



These findings suggest most Australian teachers surveyed do not perceive their schools as being characterised by uniformly poor behaviour. A majority rate student behaviour positively, almost two-thirds report their schools are calm and orderly on most or all days, and a large majority are confident in their ability to manage misbehaviour.

However, the results also indicate that disruption is far from uncommon. Almost half of teachers did not rate student behaviour as good or very good, while

more than one-third reported their school was calm and orderly only some days or never in the past week.

Most importantly, teachers' self-rated confidence in managing misbehaviour should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that misbehaviour itself is infrequent or has little impact on learning. The following section examines this distinction more directly by considering teachers' estimates of how much teaching and learning time is lost because of student misbehaviour.

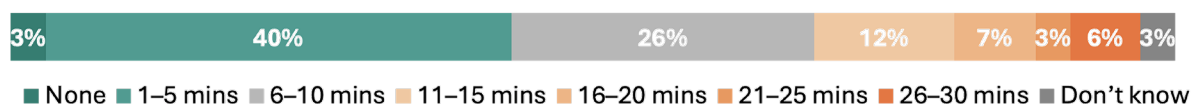
Estimating the learning loss due to student misbehaviour

While teachers' overall assessments of student behaviour provide an important indication of the climate within Australian schools, the educational consequences of misbehaviour ultimately depend on the extent to which it disrupts teaching and learning. The survey asked teachers to estimate how many minutes of lesson time were lost per 30 minutes of class due to student misbehaviour during the previous week (Figure 4).

The results indicate a substantial loss of teaching time. Only 3% of teachers

reported losing no teaching time to misbehaviour. The largest group, 40%, estimated they lost between one and five minutes per 30 minutes of teaching time, while 26% reported losing between six and 10 minutes, and 12% reported losing between 11 and 15 minutes. A further 16% reported losing more than 15 minutes in every 30 minutes of teaching time. Overall, more than half of teachers (54%) estimated losing at least six minutes per 30 minutes of teaching time — equivalent to at least one-fifth of lesson time.

Figure 4: Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week of term, how many minutes do you think were lost due to misbehaviour per 30 minutes of teaching/lesson time?



Based on these responses, teachers estimated losing an average of approximately nine minutes for every 30 minutes of teaching time due to student misbehaviour — equivalent to almost one-third of lesson time. This represents

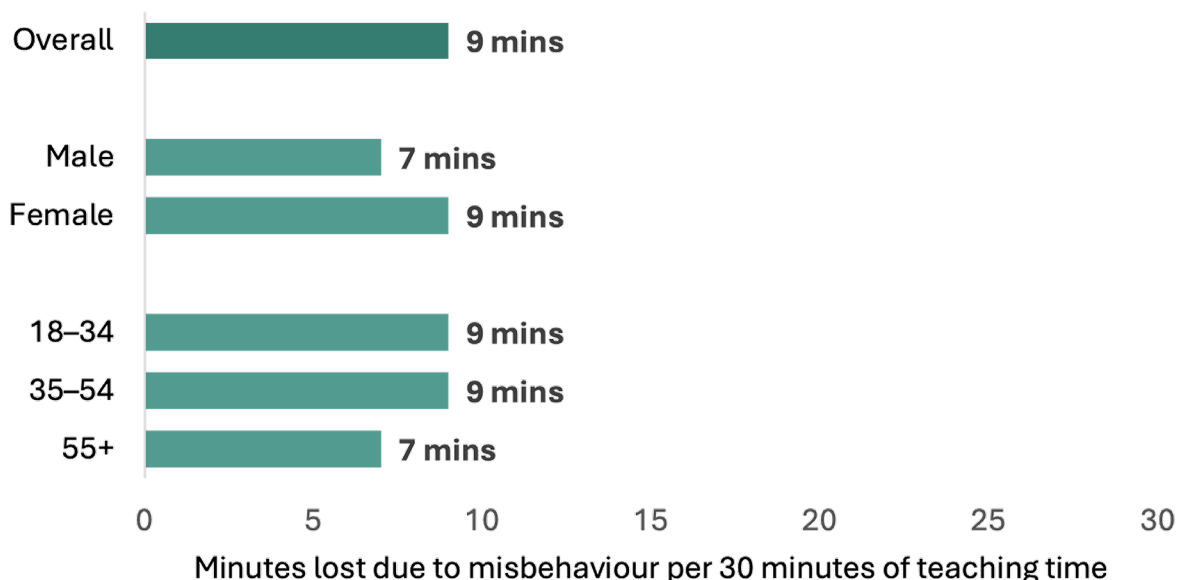
a substantial cumulative loss of opportunities for teaching and learning.

There were relatively modest differences in the estimated average amount of time lost across the major demographic

groups (Figure 5). The average was approximately nine minutes for teachers aged 18–34 and 35–54, compared with seven minutes among teachers aged 55 and older. Female teachers on average

estimated losing approximately nine minutes per 30 minutes of teaching time, compared with seven minutes among male teachers.

Figure 5: Average minutes lost due to student misbehaviour per 30 minutes of teaching time, by gender and age



The estimated loss of teaching time in Australia is also higher than the latest comparable estimate from England. Teachers in England estimated losing approximately 7 minutes per 30 minutes of teaching time due to student misbehaviour,²⁰ compared with approximately nine minutes in the Australian survey — around 30% more teaching time lost in Australia.

While differences in survey context and implementation mean this comparison should be interpreted cautiously, it nevertheless provides useful international context for the scale of classroom

disruption reported by Australian teachers. A separate question provides further evidence of the frequency with which behaviour interferes with learning (Figure 6). Teachers were asked in how many of the lessons they taught during the previous week student misbehaviour had stopped or interrupted teaching or learning. Four in 10 teachers (40%) reported this occurred in all or most lessons, including 12% who said all lessons and 28% who said most lessons. A further 39% reported disruption in some lessons. Only 18% said it occurred rarely and just 3% said it never occurred.

Figure 6: Thinking about students' behaviour during the lessons you taught during the past week of term, in how many did student misbehaviour stop or interrupt teaching or learning?



These findings are particularly striking when considered alongside teachers' responses in the preceding section. Most teachers reported being confident in managing misbehaviour, and 62% said their schools were calm and orderly every day or most days. Yet simultaneously, on average, teachers estimated losing almost one-third of lesson time to misbehaviour, while four in 10 reported that misbehaviour stopped or interrupted teaching or learning in most or all lessons.

Assessments of whether a classroom is 'calm and orderly' may vary according to teachers' experience, expectations, and the behavioural environments to which they have become accustomed.

One possible explanation for this apparent contradiction is that a substantial amount of low-level classroom disruption has become normalised. Teachers may have adapted their expectations of what constitutes a calm and orderly classroom to an environment in which some loss of teaching time to misbehaviour is routine.

This should not be interpreted as a criticism of teachers or their classroom management. The finding that 82%

of teachers are confident in managing misbehaviour may indicate that teachers have become proficient at managing and responding to the disruptions that routinely occur.

Confidence in managing misbehaviour is not the same as an absence of misbehaviour. Even where a teacher responds effectively to students talking, calling out, challenging instructions or engaging in other disruptive behaviour, doing so still consumes time and attention that could otherwise be devoted to teaching and learning. A classroom may therefore appear manageable and relatively orderly while still experiencing repeated interruptions that impose a substantial cumulative cost on learning.

This distinction is important for understanding the scale of the challenge. Student behaviour should not be assessed only by the prevalence of extreme incidents or classrooms that are visibly chaotic. Repeated, seemingly minor disruptions can individually consume only a small amount of time but collectively result in a significant loss of teaching and learning. The following section examines the frequency of some of these forms of classroom misbehaviour.

Frequency of types of student misbehaviour in the classroom

The loss of teaching time identified in the previous section can result from repeated forms of relatively low-level disruption that may individually appear minor but cumulatively interfere substantially with teaching and learning. The survey asked teachers how frequently they experienced four common forms of classroom misbehaviour during the previous week: students talking when they were not supposed to, calling out, answering back or challenging instructions, and arriving late to lessons.

The most frequently reported form of misbehaviour was students talking when they were not supposed to (Figure 7). More than half of teachers (57%) reported this occurring in all or most lessons, comprising 22% who experienced it in all lessons and 35% in most lessons. A further 33% reported it occurring in some lessons. Only 10% said inappropriate talking occurred rarely or never.

Figure 7: Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students talk when they were not supposed to?



Students calling out in class is also widespread (Figure 8). Almost half of teachers (45%) reported students called out when they were not supposed to in all or most lessons, including 17% who

reported this in all lessons and 28% in most lessons. Another 33% experienced calling out in some lessons, while 22% said it occurred rarely or never.

Figure 8: Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students call out when they were not supposed to?



Teachers reported somewhat lower frequency — but still substantial — of students answering back or challenging instructions (Figure 9). One-quarter (25%) experienced this in all or most lessons, while another 33% reported it

occurring in some lessons. Overall, this means 58% of teachers experienced students answering back or challenging instructions in at least some lessons during the previous week, compared with 42% who said it occurred rarely or never.

Figure 9: Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students answer back or challenge instructions when they were not supposed to?



Teachers were also asked about students arriving late to lessons when they were not supposed to (Figure 10). Just over one-quarter (26%) reported this

occurring in all or most lessons, while 37% experienced it in some lessons. Only 10% reported that students never arrived late.

Figure 10: Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students arrive to lessons late when they were not supposed to?



These findings illustrate how classroom disruption can accumulate even in the absence of serious behavioural incidents.

Students talking when they were not supposed to was the most common, reported by 57% of teachers in most

or all lessons, followed by calling out at 45%. By comparison, answering back or challenging instructions (25%) and arriving late to lessons (26%) were considerably less likely to occur in most or all lessons. This suggests that the most pervasive behavioural challenge for teachers is not necessarily serious or confrontational behaviour, but frequent low-level disruption that repeatedly interrupts the normal flow of teaching and learning.

These behaviours may appear relatively minor when considered individually. However, their frequency is important considering the findings in the previous section. Each time a teacher has to stop instruction, regain students' attention, respond to a student calling out, repeat an instruction or otherwise redirect behaviour, some teaching time can be lost. Managing misbehaviour can also generate additional work outside lesson

time, including recording incidents, communicating with parents and administering consequences such as detentions, adding to teachers' broader workload. Repeated low-level disruption can therefore have a substantial cumulative effect, both by reducing opportunities for student learning and by increasing teacher workload, even where individual incidents would be unlikely to result in a suspension or other formal disciplinary record.

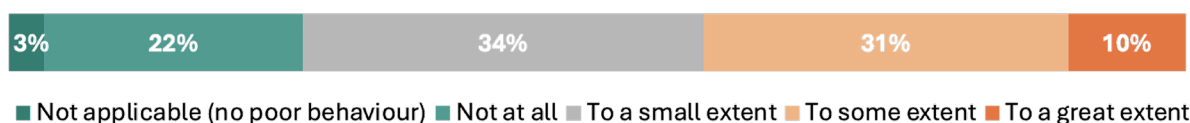
This helps explain why measuring student behaviour solely through serious incidents provides an incomplete picture of the behavioural environment in schools. The educational cost of misbehaviour is not confined to extreme cases. The routine disruption of lessons also matters, particularly when it occurs repeatedly across the school day and school year.

Impact of student misbehaviour on teachers

Student misbehaviour can affect not only the amount of time available for teaching and learning, but also teachers personally. The final survey question therefore asked teachers to what extent student misbehaviour during the previous week had negatively affected their health and wellbeing (Figure 11).

The results indicate this impact is widespread, although its reported severity varies considerably. Three-quarters of teachers (75%) reported at least some negative impact on their health and wellbeing: 34% to a small extent, 31% to some extent, and 10% to a great extent. By comparison, 22% reported no negative impact, while 3% selected "not applicable (no poor behaviour)".

Figure 11: Thinking about the past week of term, to what extent has student misbehaviour had a negative impact on your health and wellbeing?



The finding of particular concern is that 10% of teachers reported student misbehaviour negatively affected their health and wellbeing “to a great extent”. While representing a minority of teachers, this is nevertheless a substantial proportion of the teaching workforce reporting a significant negative effect from student behaviour in just the previous week of term.

This result is particularly disturbing when considered alongside the frequency of disruption identified in the preceding sections. Teachers are responsible not only for delivering lessons but also for maintaining an environment in which students can learn. Where teachers are repeatedly required to respond to talking, calling out, challenges to instructions and other forms of misbehaviour, the consequences may extend beyond the loss of instructional time to teachers’ own wellbeing. Student misbehaviour appears to be a significant workplace wellbeing issue for at least 10% of teachers.

This finding is consistent with broader Australian evidence on the relationship between student behaviour and teacher wellbeing. AITSL’s national teacher wellbeing research found that 80% of teachers agreed managing student behaviour takes a lot of time and effort.²¹ Its analysis also identified ease of behavioural management as the strongest driver of positive feelings about their role, while difficulty managing behaviour was among the strongest drivers of negative feelings.

Improving student behaviour therefore has potential benefits beyond increasing the amount of time available for learning. Creating calmer, more orderly classrooms can support students while also providing teachers with a working environment in which they can devote more of their time and attention to their central task of teaching, potentially reducing teacher burnout.

Conclusions and policy implications

Taken together with Australia’s poor performance on international measures of school disciplinary climate, these findings reinforce the conclusion that student behaviour is one of the most significant challenges facing Australian schools. Poor behaviour is not simply a problem when it escalates into violence, suspension or other serious disciplinary incidents. Routine and comparatively low-level disruption can cumulatively consume a substantial proportion of the time available for teaching and learning, thereby reducing student academic achievement.

The term ‘crisis’ should not be used lightly, but it is a reasonable description of a situation in which Australian teachers estimate that almost one-third of lesson time on average — the

equivalent of approximately 12 weeks per year — is being lost to student misbehaviour. More than half of teachers (54%) estimated losing at least one-fifth of teaching time. Schools exist to enable teaching and learning, and disruption on a scale that substantially interferes with that purpose should not be regarded as normal or inevitable. These findings therefore warrant an urgent response from governments, school systems and schools.

The apparent contrast between teachers’ generally positive assessments of behaviour and the amount of teaching time reported lost to misbehaviour is also important. One possible interpretation is that a significant amount of low-level disruption has become normalised in Australian classrooms. Many teachers

may have become proficient at managing disruption while adapting their expectations of what constitutes a calm and orderly classroom. Effective classroom management practices can limit the consequences of poor behaviour, but time spent responding to disruption is time that cannot be devoted to teaching.

This is not about assigning blame to teachers, principals, parents, or students. Many teachers and schools successfully manage challenging circumstances every day. Rather, the challenge is to establish a school system in which high expectations of behaviour are normal, schools have effective approaches for teaching and maintaining those expectations, and persistent disruption is neither accepted as inevitable nor allowed to escalate. Government and system-level policies also matter: expectations and policies governing responses to serious misbehaviour, including suspensions and expulsions, can either support or constrain schools in establishing consistent approaches to behaviour.

An important first step is to improve the measurement of student behaviour in Australia. Existing measures such as suspensions, expulsions and recorded serious incidents are important but inevitably concentrate on the most severe manifestations of poor behaviour.

They provide much less information about the everyday classroom disruption that this research suggests consumes substantial teaching time and reduces student learning.

The 2023 Senate inquiry into increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms recommended establishing a national survey of classroom behaviour, including regular surveys of teachers and students.

The findings of this report strengthen the case for implementing this recommendation. Australia should establish a regular national survey of teachers regarding student behaviour — drawing on the model developed in the UK — to provide consistent and comparable measures of behaviour.

A national survey would allow governments, school systems, and schools to determine whether behaviour is improving or deteriorating, identify areas of concern, evaluate the effectiveness of teacher professional development, and establish a more meaningful evidence base for future policy.

State and territory government school systems, Catholic school systems, and individual schools should also use a similar teacher survey to measure behaviour. As most schools and school systems already conduct staff surveys, these questions could potentially be incorporated into existing surveys without creating a significant additional administrative burden.

Better measurement must be accompanied by policies that improve behaviour itself. Australian governments and school systems should support the implementation of an explicit behaviour curriculum, as recommended by the Senate inquiry and advocated in previous Australian research.²²

A behaviour curriculum starts from the principle that appropriate behaviour should be explicitly taught rather than simply assumed. Schools should clearly identify the behaviours and routines expected of students — including how students enter classrooms, listen while others are speaking, respond to instructions, move around the school and interact respectfully with teachers and students — plus teach and reinforce these expectations consistently. This also leads to less variation in teacher expectations and student behaviour between classrooms of the same school.

Early intervention is also crucial. Low-level misbehaviour should not need to develop into serious disruption before it attracts attention. Clear expectations, explicitly taught routines, and consistently applied consequences can address inappropriate behaviour early and reduce opportunities for it to become habitual or escalate into more serious incidents. There is no single approach that will eliminate student misbehaviour. However, evidence

from successful schools demonstrates that high expectations for behaviour are compatible with supportive school environments and can be particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The scale of learning time being lost to student misbehaviour means Australia's behaviour crisis requires urgent attention. Almost one-third of lesson time being lost to misbehaviour should not become a statistic that is merely acknowledged and then accepted as

an unavoidable feature of Australian schooling. Establishing a regular national behaviour survey and supporting schools to implement clear, evidence-informed behaviour curricula would provide a strong foundation for improvement. Reducing classroom disruption should be an urgent priority: teachers need more time to teach, students need more time to learn, and schools need the conditions necessary to fulfil their fundamental educational purpose.

Appendix: survey crosstabs tables

Table A1: Q1 - Thinking about the past week of term, how would you rate the behaviour of students at your school? Please select one.

	Very good	Good	Neither good nor poor	Poor	Very poor
All	14	42	21	20	3
Primary School	11	39	23	23	4
Secondary School	14	46	19	19	2
Male	24	42	16	16	2
Female	10	42	22	22	4
Age 18-34	14	40	20	21	5
Age 35-54	13	42	21	20	4
Age 55+	16	44	20	19	1
NSW	19	42	14	21	4
VIC	16	44	18	21	1
QLD	7	45	32	13	3
Other States	10	37	21	25	7

Table A2: Q2 - Thinking about the past week of term, how often would you say that your school has been calm and orderly? Please select one.

	Every day	Most days	Some days	Never
All	13	49	34	4
Primary School	8	47	42	3
Secondary School	18	49	28	5
Male	21	45	31	3
Female	10	49	36	5
Age 18-34	10	51	37	2
Age 35-54	14	46	35	5
Age 55+	16	51	28	5
NSW	16	50	28	6
VIC	14	47	35	4
QLD	10	55	31	4
Other States	12	41	44	3

Table A3: Q3 - How confident, if at all, do you personally feel about managing misbehaviour in your school? Please select one.

	Very confident	Fairly confident	Not very confident	Not at all confident	Not sure
All	26	56	13	4	1
Primary School	23	57	15	3	2
Secondary School	29	54	13	4	0
Male	35	48	13	4	0
Female	23	59	13	4	1
Age 18-34	22	60	15	2	1
Age 35-54	28	53	12	6	1
Age 55+	26	56	15	3	0
NSW	36	47	12	4	1
VIC	25	58	10	6	1
QLD	15	65	16	3	1
Other States	26	54	17	3	0

Table A4: Q4 - Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week of term, how many minutes do you think were lost due to misbehaviour per 30 minutes of teaching/lesson time?

	26-30	21-25	16-20	11-15	6-10	1-5	0	Don't know
All	6	3	7	12	26	40	3	3
Primary School	7	4	5	11	25	41	2	5
Secondary School	5	1	10	12	28	39	3	2
Male	3	2	4	10	28	44	5	4
Female	7	3	9	12	26	38	2	3
Age 18-34	5	3	9	9	33	37	3	1
Age 35-54	7	4	7	13	24	39	2	4
Age 55+	3	0	6	12	25	45	5	4
NSW	6	2	8	8	31	39	4	2
VIC	4	1	8	17	24	40	3	3
QLD	5	5	4	10	27	42	1	6
Other States	7	4	8	10	25	38	4	4

Table A5: Q5 - Thinking about students' behaviour during the lessons you taught during the past week of term, in how many did student misbehaviour stop or interrupt teaching or learning?

	All lessons	Most lessons	Some lessons	Rarely	Never
All	12	28	39	18	3
Primary School	14	29	41	14	2
Secondary School	8	29	36	23	4
Male	7	20	42	29	2
Female	13	31	38	15	3
Age 18-34	14	30	35	16	5
Age 35-54	12	26	40	21	1
Age 55+	9	29	42	16	4
NSW	9	25	47	17	2
VIC	9	27	41	20	3
QLD	15	25	38	19	3
Other States	16	36	27	17	4

Table A6: Q6 - Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students talk when they were not supposed to?

	All lessons	Most lessons	Some lessons	Rarely	Never
All	22	35	33	8	2
Primary School	26	34	30	7	3
Secondary School	18	34	39	8	1
Male	12	34	42	9	3
Female	26	35	30	7	2
Age 18-34	25	31	33	9	2
Age 35-54	22	34	35	8	1
Age 55+	19	41	31	6	3
NSW	16	30	44	10	0
VIC	23	33	32	9	3
QLD	21	35	38	3	3
Other States	28	43	20	8	1

Table A7: Q7 - Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students call out when they were not supposed to?

	All lessons	Most lessons	Some lessons	Rarely	Never
All	17	28	33	15	7
Primary School	23	30	34	10	3
Secondary School	14	26	31	20	9
Male	10	24	33	23	10
Female	21	30	33	11	5
Age 18-34	18	35	33	10	4
Age 35-54	18	26	33	15	8
Age 55+	15	27	31	19	8
NSW	13	28	40	10	9
VIC	17	23	31	21	8
QLD	15	28	41	13	3
Other States	26	38	20	11	5

Table A8: Q8 - Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students answer back or challenge instructions when they were not supposed to?

	All lessons	Most lessons	Some lessons	Rarely	Never
All	9	16	33	29	13
Primary School	11	17	36	25	11
Secondary School	6	16	31	32	15
Male	6	14	22	39	19
Female	10	17	38	24	11
Age 18-34	6	22	37	24	11
Age 35-54	13	12	34	29	12
Age 55+	4	17	27	34	18
NSW	7	17	40	26	10
VIC	9	14	30	31	16
QLD	11	13	31	34	11
Other States	10	18	33	25	14

Table A9: Q9 - Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often did students arrive to lessons late when they were not supposed to?

	All lessons	Most lessons	Some lessons	Rarely	Never
All	9	17	37	27	10
Primary School	5	12	31	35	17
Secondary School	13	21	43	19	4
Male	9	17	34	30	10
Female	9	17	38	26	10
Age 18-34	9	20	40	19	12
Age 35-54	10	16	38	28	8
Age 55+	5	16	33	32	14
NSW	7	17	37	29	10
VIC	10	19	32	29	10
QLD	11	12	36	30	11
Other States	6	20	44	19	11

Table A10: Q10 - Thinking about the past week of term, to what extent has student misbehaviour had a negative impact on your health and wellbeing?

	To a great extent	To a small extent	To some extent	Not at all	Not applicable (no poor behaviour)
All	10	34	31	22	3
Primary School	11	37	30	20	2
Secondary School	8	33	31	24	4
Male	6	39	21	30	4
Female	11	32	35	18	3
Age 18-34	10	38	26	22	3
Age 35-54	9	33	36	20	2
Age 55+	11	33	26	25	5
NSW	11	25	36	27	1
VIC	6	37	30	21	5
QLD	8	42	30	19	1
Other States	16	33	28	19	4

Table A11: Teacher Survey Sample

Characteristic	Category	Number of respondents	% of sample
<i>Gender</i>	Male	104	27.6
	Female	273	72.4
	Total	377	100.0
<i>Age</i>	18-34	99	26.3
	35-54	198	52.5
	55+	80	21.2
	Total	377	100.0
<i>School type</i>	Primary	185	49.1
	Secondary	170	45.1
	Both/Other	22	5.8
	Total	377	100.0
<i>State/Territory</i>	NSW	98	26.0
	VIC	124	32.9
	QLD	74	19.6
	WA	34	9.0
	SA	34	9.0
	TAS	5	1.3
	ACT	6	1.6
	NT	2	0.5
	Total	377	100.0

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The Centre for Independent Studies commissioned an exclusive national survey of 377 school teachers across primary and secondary levels of various ages about their experience of classroom behaviour.

The quantitative research — conducted by Fox & Hedgehog (a member of the Australian Polling Council) — was conducted between 24 June and 3 July 2026 in a sample designed to broadly represent the teacher population.

Its findings portray a significant problem with behaviour of students in class. It found teachers reported losing an average of about nine minutes per 30 minutes of teaching time — almost one third of a lesson — due to student misbehaviour. This has its flow-on effects to students' learning and academic performance.

More than half of teachers surveyed online reported students talking when they were not supposed to in most, or all, lessons. They were also asked how frequently they experienced calling out in class, answering back or challenging instructions and arriving late for lessons — the four common forms of classroom misbehaviour.

They were also asked how much teaching time was lost addressing these issues and how it affected their wellbeing.

The objective of our Improving Student Behaviour in Schools research project, using an adjusted version of the UK National Behaviour Survey, is to help establish high expectations for behaviour across the school system and provide schools with guidance on creating calm and orderly classrooms.

About the author



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Related Works

Tom Bennett. *Conduct Becoming. The importance of the Behaviour Curriculum.* CIS Analysis Paper 56, October 2023 cis.org.au/publication/conduct-becoming-the-importance-of-the-behaviour-curriculum/

Tim McDonald. *Teaching Behaviour: How Classroom Conduct Can Unlock Better Learning.* CIS Analysis Paper 55 September 2023. cis.org.au/publication/teaching-behaviour-how-classroom-conduct-can-unlock-better-learning/



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