Safe Spaces in Australian Schools

The Role of Bathroom and Cubicle
Design in Minimising Bullying

Duracube®
Specialists in Wet Area Solutions

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, around 543,000 individuals are responsible for instigating over 35 million bullying incidents each year, impacting close to 25% of school students.[1] A considerable number of these incidents occur in school toilet areas, which have long been identified as common sites for bullying and other anti-social behaviours. Unlike classrooms or open common areas, school toilets are highly private spaces with minimal supervision, making them particularly prone to such issues.
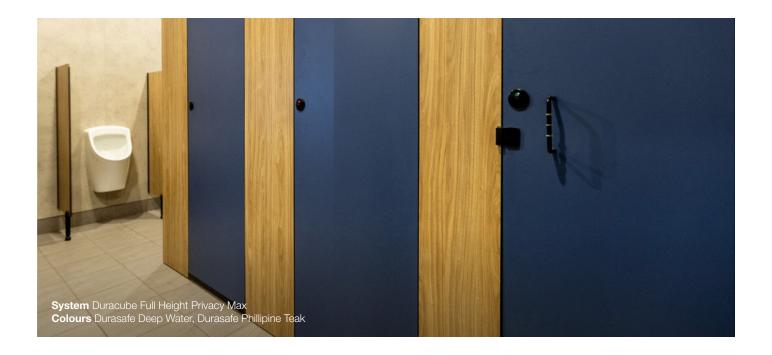
The lack of oversight in these areas allows students to congregate in secluded, unmonitored spaces where bullying can often go undetected. To effectively address this issue, it is essential to understand the specific dynamics that contribute to bullying in these environments. Architects, designers, and specifiers must carefully consider how to balance privacy, safety, and supervision in their designs to reduce these risks.

Recent innovations in washroom design, such as open-plan layouts, have been instrumental in mitigating bullying by increasing visibility and reducing opportunities for anti-social behaviour in unsupervised spaces. However, it is vital to balance improved supervision with the need for student privacy. Full-height partitions provide an effective solution, reducing opportunities for bullying by creating a more enclosed, secure and private environment for users.

Full-height partitions provide an effective solution, reducing opportunities for bullying by creating a more enclosed, secure and private environment for users.

The facts about bullying

Bullying is a harmful behaviour that can take physical, verbal, or social forms. Physical bullying involves actions that cause harm to an individual or their belongings, including stealing or damaging personal items. Verbal bullying includes spoken or written words aimed at insulting or causing emotional pain to the victim. Social bullying, while less visible, is equally damaging and involves actions such as exclusion, spreading rumours, or manipulating social relationships to harm someone.

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) in 2016 revealed the prevalence of bullying among young Australians. The study shows that 7 in 10 children aged 12–13 experienced at least one bullying-like behaviour within a year.[2] In addition, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) reported that 1 in 5 Year 4 students face bullying on a weekly basis.[3]

The impacts of bullying extend far beyond the school environment. While the bullying may cease after students leave school, the trauma often persists, affecting not only the individual but also their families, communities, and the health system. Research highlights that victims of bullying are more likely to suffer from anxiety, which can continue into adulthood and increase the risk of developing personality disorders.[4] The long-term costs associated with bullying are substantial, with estimates reaching $2.4 billion for each school year group, covering the time children are in school and up to 20 years after graduation.[5]

Why is the bathroom a hotspot for bullying?

A study published in 2013 involving over 150 student responses highlights the most common locations where bullying occurs in schools.[6] The playground and classroom, particularly when unsupervised by teachers, are the most frequently reported areas, with 34.8% of students identifying these as primary bullying spots. However, bathrooms were also reported as significant locations for bullying, with 25.3% of students noting them as problem areas.

Several factors contribute to the bathroom being a hotspot for bullying. One of the primary issues is the lack of supervision. Bathrooms are typically unsupervised spaces, offering a place where negative behaviours can occur without immediate adult intervention. This allows for bullying to go unnoticed, providing the conditions for students to act out in ways that they might not in more monitored areas of the school.

Moreover, bathrooms serve as congregation points during breaks, increasing the likelihood of group dynamics leading to bullying or intimidation. These spaces also place students in vulnerable positions, making them easier targets for harassment or teasing. The limited escape routes within a bathroom further elevate the risk, as it can be challenging for victims to quickly remove themselves from confrontations. Unlike more structured environments, such as classrooms or hallways, the unregulated nature of bathrooms can foster a sense of freedom for students to engage in harmful behaviours without fear of immediate consequences.

Emerging design trends for school bathrooms

In addition to the need to address bullying, bathroom designs are evolving to meet the needs of students and teaching staff. For example, with the rise of phone cameras in schools, privacy has become a top priority in bathroom design. Architects and designers must incorporate features that prevent unauthorised recording, such as full-height partitions that eliminate gaps between doors and walls, ensuring complete privacy for students.

Given the need for privacy, acoustics has also become an important consideration. Designers are increasingly considering materials and layouts that minimise sound transfer between cubicles, enhancing the overall comfort and security of the space. This helps reduce the potential for overheard conversations or unwanted attention, which can contribute to bullying or discomfort.

As schools increasingly prioritise inclusivity, gender-neutral partitioning systems are emerging as a key aspect of modern bathroom design. These systems go beyond traditional layouts, offering adaptable and versatile designs that ensure privacy while accommodating the diverse needs of all students. By creating spaces that promote safety and respect, these partitions help foster a more welcoming environment.

A cost-effective alternative to building traditional stud walls is the use of prefabricated or modular partition systems, which provide durable, easily installed solutions that maintain structural integrity while reducing both construction time and costs. These systems typically feature materials that are easy to clean and low maintenance. High-performance surfaces, such as antimicrobial finishes or smooth, non-porous materials, are gaining popularity, as they help maintain hygiene, reduce upkeep, and prolong the life of the facility.

Unlike more structured environments, such as classrooms or hallways, the unregulated nature of bathrooms can foster a sense of freedom for students to engage in harmful behaviours without fear of immediate consequences.

System Duracube Full Height Privacy Core
Colours Durasafe Evening, Durasafe Phillipine Teak

Strategies to minimise bullying

To combat bullying in school bathrooms, one effective strategy is to reduce the amount of secluded space around cubicle areas. A major advancement in this area is relocating handwashing facilities to open spaces, such as corridors. This allows for passive supervision, creating a safer environment where students are less likely to experience bullying.

Open-plan washrooms are becoming increasingly popular in schools, with some opting to remove entrance doors or install windows that open onto main corridors. These design choices enable teachers to monitor the area without compromising the privacy or safety of students.

Another approach, although still a subject of debate for some parents, is the introduction of unisex bathrooms. In this setup, separate cubicles for boys and girls are paired with shared washbasins. With higher foot traffic in these areas, students are less likely to loiter, reducing the opportunity for bullying. Gender-neutral washrooms are also easier for teachers to supervise, as any staff member can enter to monitor activity. Furthermore, from an operational perspective, shared-use washrooms are easier to clean regularly.

While these strategies enhance supervision, designers must also address students' need for privacy. Stud walls and traditional bathroom cubicles are less effective than full-height partitions in addressing this issue. Traditional cubicles typically leave gaps at the top and bottom, which can compromise privacy and make students feel vulnerable. These gaps provide opportunities for peers to look over or under the cubicle, or hold a phone camera lens over or under the cubicle, increasing the likelihood of bullying or discomfort.

In contrast, full-height partitions that eliminate gaps above and below the door (e.g., Full Height Privacy Max from Duracube) offer a completely enclosed space from floor to ceiling, providing greater privacy and security. Other solutions, such as Duracube's Full Height Privacy Core and Full Height Privacy Ultra, reduce the size of gaps to increase privacy. This level of enclosure helps students feel safer and reduces the chance of bullying behaviours such as intimidation or harassment.

From a design perspective, full-height partitions are more modern and adaptable, allowing schools to create washroom environments that are not only safer but also easier to supervise. They also align with trends towards inclusivity and privacy, particularly in gender-neutral and unisex washroom settings, where the focus is on providing secure, private spaces for all students.

Ventilation is essential for student comfort and hygiene, particularly in full-height cubicles. Designers are incorporating cubicle-level ventilation systems that work in tandem with the broader HVAC infrastructure, ensuring proper airflow and reducing odour in enclosed spaces.

Below is a table comparing various design considerations for these cubicle options:

Considerations	Traditional Stud Wall	Ventilated Panel Partition System	Traditional Toilet Partition System
Visual privacy	Gap under door for airflow	No visual gaps	Gap under and above door
Construction time	10 to 14 days	2 to 3 days	< 1 day
Construction cost	$3,300.00 per cubicle	$3,160.00 per cubicle	$1,562.00 per cubicle
Maintenance and cleaning cost	$460.00 per cubicle per year	$130.00 per cubicle per year	$130.00 per cubicle per year
Graffiti Removal	Difficult to remove from painted surfaces and grout	Easy to remove from compact laminate	Easy to remove from compact laminate
Benefits	Acoustic properties	No gaps around nibs, floor, ceiling & doors	Quick and cost-effective
Deficiencies	Construct, maintenance, space	Cost vs. traditional toilet partitions	Sight, sound, smell

Full-height partitions by Duracube

Duracube is renowned for delivering durable, robust, and practical bathroom systems to a variety of clients, including schools, commercial buildings, and public spaces. Their innovative full-height toilet partitions are designed to maximise privacy with minimal or no gaps around panels, ensuring students and users feel secure in these sensitive areas. Duracube's three premier systems—Full Height Privacy Core, Full Height Privacy Ultra, and Full Height Privacy Max—all comply with Australian Standards for unisex bathrooms, providing the perfect balance of privacy and performance.

Key benefits of Duracube systems

Duracube's Full Height Privacy Max offers unparalleled visual privacy by eliminating sight gaps and incorporating a unique Z-shaped ventilation pathway that maintains airflow without compromising privacy. This system not only enhances user comfort but also significantly reduces construction time by up to 400% compared to traditional stud walls, requiring fewer trades and minimising overall management time.

Full Height Privacy Core has ventilation slots through the top panel for increased airflow, while Full Height Privacy Ultra offers the benefits of a stud wall cubicle but with clean lines, a high-quality build and a visually pleasing design. Both of these systems also offer little or no gaps under panels for increased privacy.

Built from compact laminate, Duracube systems are ideal for wet areas, boasting excellent resistance to vandalism, impact, and water damage while being easy to maintain. The advanced design ensures no sight, sound, or smell gaps, thanks to the expertly engineered ventilation panels and rubber floor seals. These features, alongside a compliant door gap and floor seal for emergency removal and drainage, make Duracube's partitions superior in both functionality and privacy when compared to traditional systems.

Sustainability Credentials

Duracube's partitions are crafted from Durasafe Compact Laminate, which is certified by Green Rate Level A and comes with both a Product Health Declaration and an Environmental Product Declaration (EPD). Beyond the product itself, Duracube demonstrates its commitment to sustainability by minimising waste through recycling and repurposing offcuts into new products such as lockers and cut-to-size laminates.

To further promote environmental stewardship, Duracube offers a recycling program for their toilet partitions at the end of their lifecycle. This program encourages responsible disposal and material recovery, reinforcing Duracube's dedication to reducing its environmental impact while delivering high-performance bathroom systems that meet the needs of modern building projects.

REFERENCES

1   PwC. "The economic cost of bullying in Australian schools." PwC. https://www.pwc.com.au (accessed 2 October 2024).

2   Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. "Australia's children." AIHW. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/justice-safety/bullying (accessed 2 October 2024).

3   Ibid.

4   Tzani-Pepelasi, Calli. "Childhood bullying can cause lifelong psychological damage: How to spot the signs and move on." RACGP. https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/childhood-bullying-can-cause-lifelong-psychologica (accessed 2 October 2024).

5   Above n 1.

6   Rapp-McCall, Lisa, Catherine N. Dulmus, Karen M. Sowers and Matthew T. Theriot. "'Hotspots' for bullying: Exploring the role of environment in school violence." Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2013): 131-141.

All information provided correct as of October 2024