

# SCHOOL OF SOFT KNOCKS

## NEW GOVERNMENT POLICY TO STOP SUSPENSIONS

*EXCLUSIVE*  
*BETHANY HIATT*  
*Education Editor*

The McGowan Government will pour \$250,000 into a research project encouraging WA public schools to take a more “thoughtful” approach to naughty kids’ behaviour.

The ground-breaking pilot study, to be launched tonight at the University of WA, will investigate how schools can turn around unruly or aggressive children without resorting to punishment such as suspensions.

Starting in a handful of schools next year, the Education Department-funded “Thoughtful Schools Project” will focus on helping teachers understand the reasons why some students are violent or bully others.

It comes after figures released yesterday reveal the rate of pupils expelled from public schools for poor or violent behaviour has more than trebled since last year.

UWA academic Karen Martin, who is leading the project, said it would use “trauma-informed practice” to guide schools in early intervention strategies to prevent bad behaviour.

Trauma informed practice is based on the premise that ongoing dysfunctional behaviour is generally a result of adversity or past trauma.

“Unless it’s a personality disorder, then most children who are quite dysfunctional in their behaviour have experienced some sort of adversity,” Dr Martin said.

“It can be over-controlling parents, or it can be neglect, sexual abuse or domestic violence.”

“It’s about trying to change the narrative from ‘these are bad kids’ to ‘what have these kids experienced and how can we help them’.”

“We need to reframe it and understand why these children are being violent and what we can do to support them, rather than just label them as bad children.”

A recent crackdown on violence in public schools has resulted in 52 students being expelled so far this year, up from 16 at the same time last year.

Dr Martin said the rise in suspensions and exclusions was not surprising because of the widespread belief that imposing negative consequences would lead to changed behaviour. But it was becoming increasingly clear other approaches were needed.

Researchers from Curtin, Edith Cowan and Notre Dame universities will also take part in the project. If successful, the program could be expanded to other schools.

“This project is still in the very early stages, but it will hopefully give us some strategies for working with at-risk young people to improve their overall wellbeing,” Education Department Statewide services executive director Kellie Properjohn said.