



Critical Friends Network Evaluation Consultation

EVALUATION REPORT



Evaluation Report for Critical Friends Network Evaluation Consultation

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Introduction..... | 2 |
| Who attended the forum? | 3 |
| Engagement trends..... | 3 |
| Support satisfaction..... | 4 |
| Consultation evaluation data..... | 5 |
| Key themes..... | 6 |
| Beyond Evaluation Questions..... | 7 |
| Quotes from Critical Friends..... | 7 |
| Conclusion and summary..... | 8 |

Introduction

Respectful Relationships (RR) is a whole-school approach to the prevention of family and gender-based violence. It aims to create a culture of respect and equality now, and to change the story of family violence for future generations.

The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence highlighted the critical role schools play in preventing and responding to family violence. Recommendation 189 from the Royal Commission mandated the introduction of a Whole School Approach to Respectful Relationships Education into every government school in Victoria.

A 'critical friend' is an evidence-based term used in Educational Leadership research describing someone who will ask provocative questions about data from an experienced perspective and provide insight into someone else's work. In the Respectful Relationships context, the 'Critical Friend Network' (CFN) is an innovative strategy which utilises local family violence prevention and PVAW practitioners to offer schools best-practice advice and guidance to improve their Respectful Relationships implementation.

Post-COVID lockdowns, schools in the region have prioritised the reintegration of students to face to face learning and have had limited capacity to work with critical friends. Frequent staff movements in the areas of PVAW, health promotion and FV prevention have also impacted the continuity of RR in schools. To ensure continued successful implementation of RR WHISE aimed to reconnect with all its critical friends and to strengthen the critical friends' network. WHISE and DET recruited local professionals with PVAW, health promotion and FV prevention expertise from SMA and BPA and established a network to ensure RR work is supported in schools.

As part of this project WHISE developed an Expression of Interest (EOI) process to encourage professionals interested in gender equity, PVAW, youth services and health promotion to sign up to the Critical friends Network. This provided an overview of RR and the critical friends program and enabled WHISE to understand their areas of interest, expectations, and catchment areas of the EOI respondents. To further support critical friends' capacity to work with schools, WHISE organised a termly community of practice for current CFN's, one evaluation consultation workshop. For potential critical friends, WHISE organised a training session on Gender Equity with an Intersectional lens and Family Violence 101 session with a view to offering Respectful Relationships and 'How to be a Critical Friend training in Term 3 2024.

This report will provide insight into the Critical Friends Network evaluation consultation, which took place on the 7th of February 2024 with the objective to:

- Evaluate the way in which WHISE has supported the Critical Friends by hosting the network and organising the Community of Practice.
- Evaluate the ways in which Critical Friends Network has contributed to the RR whole of school approach.
- Understand what actions need to be taken in the future.

Who attended the forum?

The consultation consisted of eight participants from five organisations including: Better Health Network, Frankston Council, Wellsprings for women, Caulfield Community Health and Jewish Care. Of these eight, six participants responded to the accompanied survey which reported on engagement trends and support satisfaction. It was also reported that most attendees attended at least two CFN/DET training sessions between April 2023- Jan 2024 (see figure 1).

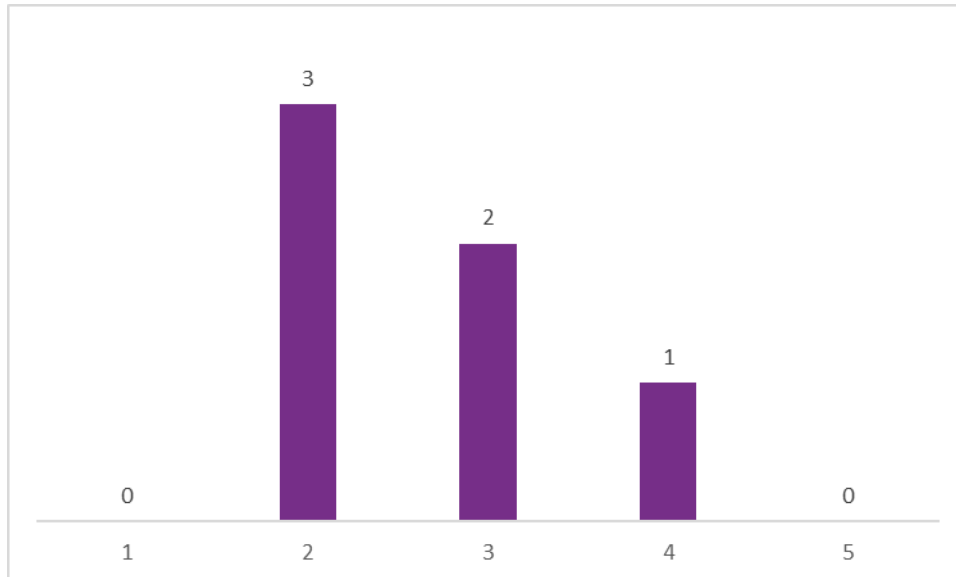


Figure 1. Number of CFN/DET training sessions participants attended between April 2023- Jan 2024

Engagement trends

- When participants were asked how many schools you have continued to support, all attendees answered *6-10 schools*.
- When participants were asked how many new schools have been engaged with through the Critical Friends Network, all respondents selected *1-3 schools*.
- When participants were asked whether you have engaged schools outside the CFN, two attendees provided examples:

I have engaged schools via other work priorities.

I have engaged an additional two schools outside CFN, just through reaching out to them as they fall within my catchment area.

- When attendees were asked how often did they contact schools between April 2023 - Jan 2024, most people selected monthly or bimonthly (see figure 2).

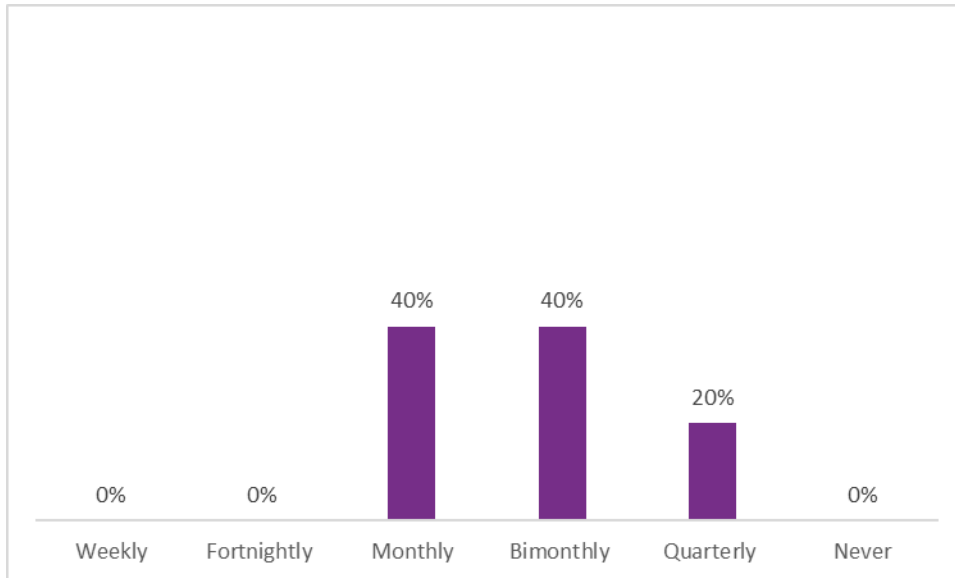


Figure 2. Number of times participants contacted schools between April 2023 - Jan 2024.

Support satisfaction

- When attendees were asked to assess their level of satisfaction regarding WHISE's support in the role of a critical friend, most attendees selected *well supported* (see figure 3).

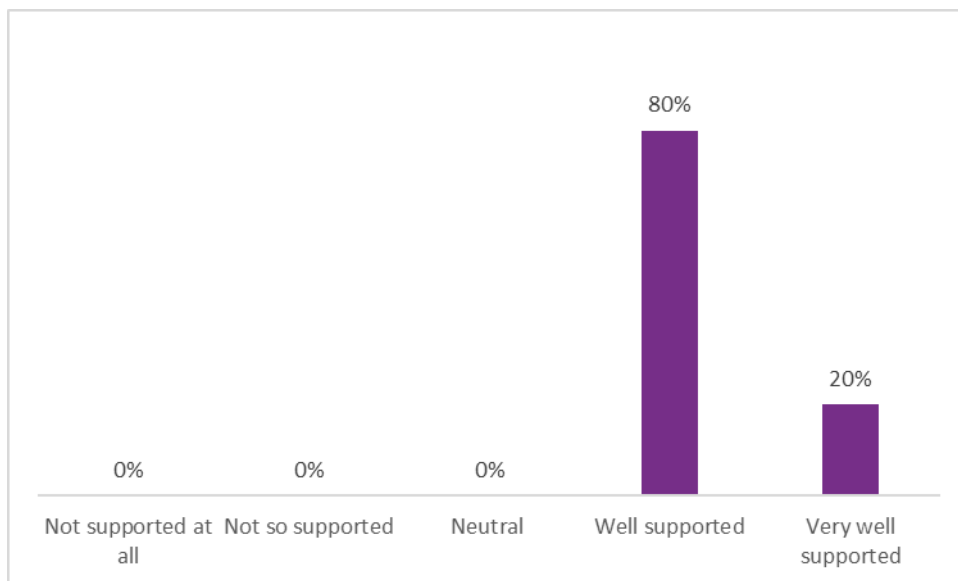


Figure 3. Ratings of how well WHISE has supported participants as a critical friend.

- When attendees were asked whether they would like to continue their role as a critical friend, all responded selected *yes*. One respondent stated that they are not supporting any school at the moment, but they been waiting to connect as a critical friend.
- Other comments included:

It's great being part of the network and sharing insights.

Has been really beneficial to be a community connection for RR, and see it in action in schools.

It's great to connect with others who are working in this space to build our capacity as CFs and hear about others' experiences (be it barriers and enablers, success stories or just updates).

Schools are definitely still needing support with RR and the critical friends network is super beneficial in building my capacity as a critical friend.

Consultation evaluation data

Consultation findings

It appears that while there were challenges and areas for improvement identified, CFN demonstrated significant success in fulfilling its objectives of supporting the RR whole-school approach and influencing actions for preventing violence.

a. Objective One: To support the Critical Friends Network

Achievement: CFN contributed significantly to increasing awareness, confidence, and capacity among the various practitioners supporting schools. WHISE brought together DET staff, experienced CFN's and new practitioners together to share resources and tools to support RR implementation.

Opportunities: To liaise between DET staff and Critical Friends to coordinate on offering opportunities for schools. the DET liaisons coordinate the schools who are implementing RR and encourage them to contact their CFs for support.

Challenges: Some challenges, such as non-engagement of schools due to existing RR efforts or limited capacity, and staff shortages affecting RR implementation consistency, were identified. However, these challenges did not negate CFN's overall impact.

b. Objective Two: Impact of Critical Friends on the implementation of the whole of school approach to RR.

Positive Aspects: CFN created opportunities for schools to engage with RR through regular meetings and outreach efforts. They facilitated collaboration with key stakeholders and encouraged parent and student involvement.

Negative Aspects: There were concerns about inconsistent RR messages in schools, potential stress on teachers dealing with RR issues alone, and staff turnover affecting CFN's continuity.

Actions Influenced: CFN motivated schools to address violence prevention, encouraged RR discussions with parents, and highlighted the importance of mental health alignment with RR efforts.

c. Objective Three: Actions for Future Work

Proposed Changes: CFN suggested integrating intersectionality and diversity training, updating RR content, actively reaching out to schools, and collaborating with community health organisations.

Future Role of CF: CFs expressed willingness to support schools in mental health alignment, participate in workshops for trend identification, maintain school relationships, and actively reach out to schools.

Future RR Conversations: Suggestions were made to engage with all-boy schools, specialist schools, multicultural communities, and community health organisations for RR discussions.

Key themes

- *Capacity Building and Support:* CFN played a crucial role in building the capacity of schoolteachers and staff by providing resources, professional learning opportunities, and ongoing support. This theme underscores the importance of empowering educators with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective RR implementation.
- *Collaboration and Networking:* CFN served as a platform for collaboration and networking among educators, stakeholders, and community partners. The network facilitated the exchange of ideas, sharing of challenges and solutions, and the establishment of partnerships to enhance RR efforts. CFs highlighted the expertise held by each of these stakeholders and emphasised the value of collaboration in bringing diverse perspectives and engaging young people of all ages and identities. They recognised the significance of continuing RR conversations beyond the school setting and underscored the potential for partnerships to create meaningful opportunities for engagement and intervention. This theme highlights the holistic approach to RR implementation, which involves collaboration across sectors to create supportive and inclusive environments for all young people.
- *Challenges and Barriers:* Despite the successes, challenges and barriers were identified, including school engagement issues, staff turnover, the uncertainty of future funding for RR and the interpretation of RR messages. These challenges highlight the complexities involved in implementing RR programs and the need for tailored approaches to address them.
- *Continuous Improvement and Adaptation:* CFN members emphasised the importance of continuous improvement and adaptation in RR efforts. Suggestions were made to address intersectionality, update RR content, and actively reach out to schools to ensure ongoing support and relevance. CFs highlighted the challenge of staff turnover within the Department of Education and Training (DET), resulting in gaps in delivering Respectful Relationships (RR) training to schools. To address this, CFs proposed the development of an online training package that allows school staff to access RR content at their own pace. Additionally, CFs advocated for the expansion of RR content to include anti-racism and anti-bias education, recognising the importance of addressing discrimination and racism within the broader framework of equality and equity. They stressed the importance of keeping RR content relevant and responsive to the evolving needs and experiences of young people in schools.
- *Student and Community Engagement:* CFN prioritised student and community engagement as integral components of the RR whole-school approach. Strategies included involving students in RR discussions, reaching out to parents and community organisations, and addressing diverse needs and perspectives.

- *Mental Health Alignment:* CFN recognised the intersectionality between RR and mental health and advocated for alignment between the two areas. This theme reflects a holistic approach to promoting well-being and preventing violence by addressing mental health issues in conjunction with RR efforts.

Beyond Evaluation Questions

- *Accessibility and Flexibility of Workshops:* CFs emphasise the importance of workshops being accessible and flexible, both in terms of format (in-person or online) and location. This ensures that participants can easily engage and benefit from the learning opportunities provided.
- *Integration of Mental Health and Well-being:* With a growing focus on student mental health and well-being in schools, CFs recognise the importance of understanding the connections between mental health and Preventing Violence Against Women (PVAW) / Respectful Relationships (RR). They express a willingness to develop this knowledge and articulate it to schools as a valuable aspect of RR implementation.
- *Regional Reflection and Collaboration:* CFs express a desire for regional events that bring together schools and CFs to reflect on successes, challenges, and future directions. This highlights the importance of collaboration and shared learning experiences within the broader community.
- *Capacity Building in Sex Education and Gender Equality:* CFs advocate for workshops aimed at building the capacity of school staff and students in areas such as sex education, gender equality, and family violence prevention. These workshops aim to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to challenge gender norms, recognise family violence, and promote gender equality within school settings.

These themes reflect the broader discussions and interests of CFs beyond the specific evaluation questions, demonstrating a commitment to continuous learning, collaboration, and the holistic well-being of CF, students, and communities.

Quotes from Critical Friends

"I feel supported by joining CFN as sometimes I'm asked by schools for some resources or information regarding gender equality or diversity. Even though those aren't really my specialised areas, I know I can turn to DET RR liaisons and WHISE for help."

"Being connected to other critical friends is super beneficial. And having Paul or Lizzie as they hold the authority and strong knowledge in this space."

"I enjoy being a critical friend. I was nervous and didn't really know how to work with schools, but now they all come to me for directions. It feels great."

Conclusion and summary

The Critical Friend Network Community of Practice has contributed to increased connection and building of capacity of the Critical Friends. By advising schools on the organisation of regular RR meetings and professional learning opportunities, CFN has provided support and encouragement to schools implementing Respectful Relationships. Additionally, CFN's provision of resources has facilitated the implementation of RR strategies tailored to the specific needs of schools and students. Although challenges like school engagement and staff turnover persist, CFN's commitment to supporting schools remains unwavering. Looking ahead, CFN aims to further address issues of intersectionality, update RR content, and expand RR conversations to encompass a broader range of communities and settings.

In conclusion, the Critical Friends Network (CFN) has been instrumental in bringing practitioners together to learn about successful ways to support schools as well as to troubleshoot together when there have been challenges. This has continued to provide much needed support to these staff.

In turn, the Critical Friends have continued to stand beside schools to provide support and encouragement for the Respectful Relationships (RR) whole-school approach, contributing significantly to its success in the Southern Metropolitan region. By providing guidance to school staff the critical friends have kept the whole of school approach to RR on schools' agendas. Moreover, as mentioned CFN's role as a conduit for up-to-date resources and tools has been pivotal in addressing the diverse needs of schools and students, fostering a culture of respect, and understanding. Despite encountering challenges, CFN has remained resilient, continually supporting schools in their efforts to embed RR principles into every aspect of their operations.