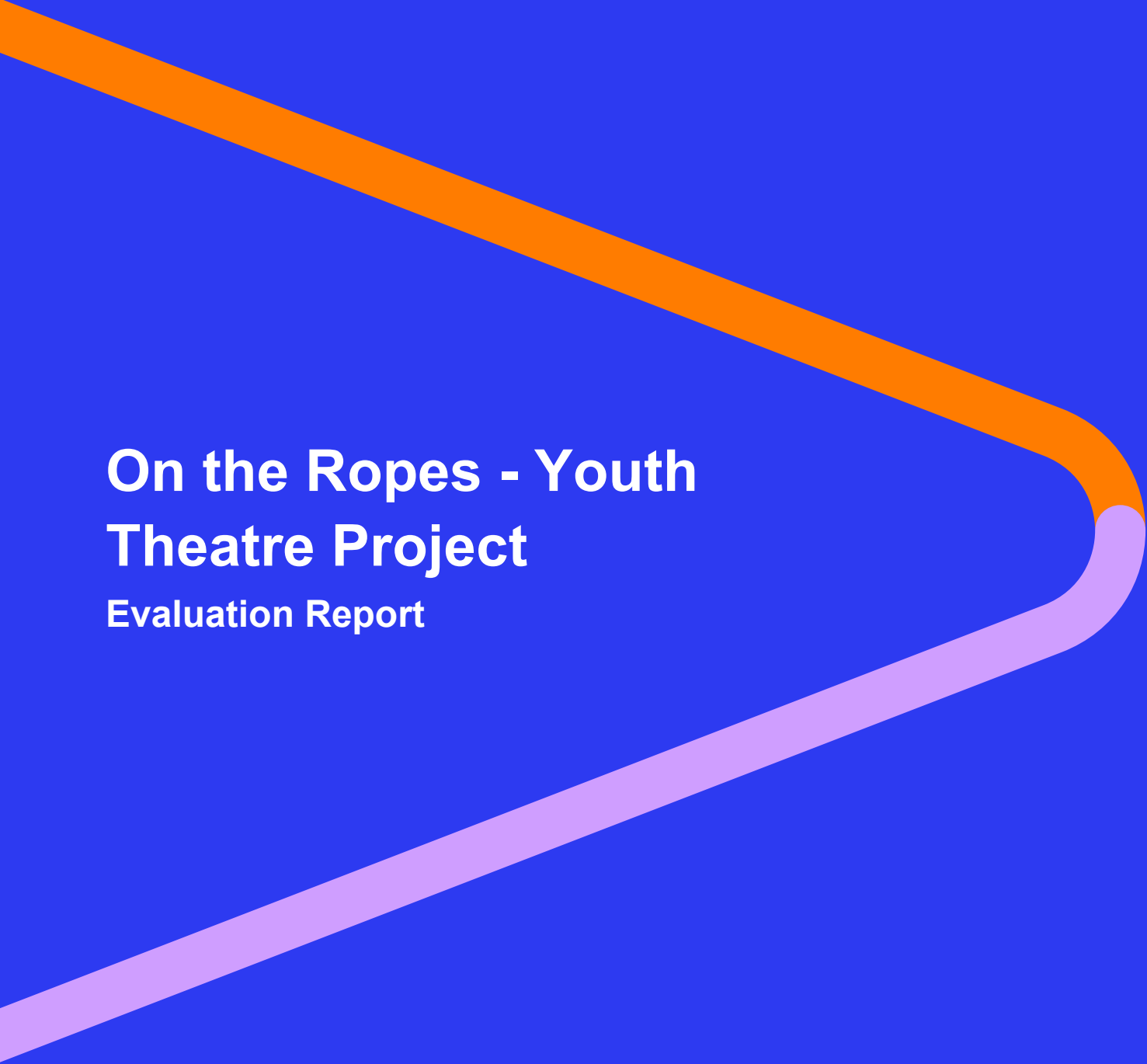




On the Ropes - Youth Theatre Project

Evaluation Report



Acknowledgment of Country

Social Ventures Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the past and present traditional custodians and elders of this country on which we work.

'After the Rains' by Richard Seden for Saltwater People 2024

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We influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning about what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives and advocating for change.

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Our team is passionate about what they do and use their diverse experience to work together to solve Australia's most pressing challenges.

For more information contact us: consulting@socialventures.org.au

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1. Executive Summary

Overview

On the Ropes is a trauma-informed, youth theatre project that aims to increase students' knowledge, understanding and likelihood of seeking help when experiencing or using violence.

A partnership between Peninsula Community Legal Centre and the Red Stitch Actors' Theatre, On the Ropes uses relatable scenarios and language that effectively engage students on topics of coercive control, consent, family violence, and its mental health impacts on young people.

Between November 2025 and July 2026, On the Ropes reached over 5,000 students across 34 performances in 13 Victorian schools.

Summary of key findings

The evaluation found On the Ropes achieved key short-term outcomes for students. Of students who watched On the Ropes:

- 93% understood what coercive control in a relationship means (a 60-percentage point increase)
- 97% reported being able to recognise the early warning signs of a controlling relationship
- 99% understood how witnessing violence at home can affect a young person's mental health
- 97% reported an increased understanding of the legal consequences of violence
- 92% reported feeling more confident about seeing a lawyer if they needed it
- 78% felt the situations portrayed were authentic and relevant to young people today
- 75% reported learning something that would be useful in their own life.

On the Ropes also led to an increase in student likelihood of seeking help, including:

- 18-percentage point increase in likelihood of seeking help from a school counsellor or wellbeing staff (35% pre-performance, rising to 53% post-performance)
- 21-percentage point increase in likelihood of seeking help from a community legal centre (35% pre-performance, rising to 56% post-performance).

However, On the Ropes was unable to shift underlying student stigma surrounding help-seeking:

- 65% of students believed asking for professional help is a 'sign of weakness' (compared to 63% pre-performance)
- 41% of students reported feeling embarrassed if asking for help from a lawyer or counsellor (compared to 26% pre-performance).

On the Ropes also contributed to improved outcomes for school communities. Of school staff who hosted On the Ropes:

- 8 out of 9 staff felt more confident responding appropriately to student disclosures of harm
- 7 out of 9 staff reported an increase in students actively seeking help regarding controlling, dominating, or violent behaviours after the performance
- 7 out of 9 staff reported an increase in student motivation and confidence to challenge harmful behaviours
- 3 out of 5 staff agreed On the Ropes contributed to a safer and more supportive school environment.

Outcomes achieved

This evaluation found that On the Ropes is effectively leading to key short-term outcomes for students and school staff.

Increased ability to identify controlling and violent behaviours

On the Ropes led to a significant increase in students' understanding of coercive control, increasing from 33% pre-performance to 93% post-performance. Further almost all (98%) of students reported an increased understanding of what makes a romantic relationship unsafe.

Increased understanding of legal rights and responsibilities

By humanising the character of a lawyer within the context of a relatable scenario for a young person, On the Ropes contributed to 97% of students reporting an increased understanding of the legal consequences of violence and 96% understanding their legal rights as a victim.

Increased likelihood of help-seeking

On the Ropes led to an increase in the proportion of students likely to seek help from appropriate sources. Notably, the proportion of students likely to seek help from school wellbeing staff increased from 35% to 53% of students and the proportion of students likely to seek help from a community legal centre increased from 35% to 56% of students.

Though knowledge of *how* to seek help increased, more work is required to shift underlying student stigma surrounding help-seeking. Post-performance data showed no reduction in students believing asking for professional help is a "sign of weakness", or in feelings of embarrassment around contacting a lawyer or counsellor for help.

Increased understanding of the cycle of violence and the need for intervention

The performance's focus on the impacts of family violence on a young person's behaviour increased students' understanding of the cycle of violence and how it can affect a young person's mental health. Post-performance, 99% of students understood how witnessing violence at home can affect a young person's mental health.

Increased motivation to challenge harmful behaviours

Students' belief that they possess the power to change their own situation if something isn't right grew from 63% to 77%. Further, 7 out of 9 surveyed school staff reported an increase in student motivation and confidence to challenge harmful behaviours.

Increased staff confidence in supporting students experiencing harm

On the Ropes also led to 8 out of 9 surveyed staff reporting feeling more confident responding appropriately and sensitively to student disclosures of harm, and 7 out of 9 feeling more comfortable applying trauma-informed approaches.

Enablers of impact

The impact of On the Ropes is driven by the theatre modality, which uses relatable characters and creates psychological distance to allow students to safely explore sensitive themes of violence and consent. By using authentic scenarios and language that resonate with young people, On the Ropes is able to 'cut-through' and engage students on complex legal topics.

The project has also effectively balanced student safety and wellbeing whilst delivering messaging around sensitive topics of family violence and consent. After the performance, only 6% of students agreed that they felt upset or distressed about something in the play.

Opportunities for the future

- 1. Address underlying stigma on help-seeking:** The evaluation found underlying student stigma around help-seeking did not shift after the performance. This includes beliefs that seeking professional help is a sign of weakness and feelings of embarrassment in asking for help from a counsellor or lawyer. PCLC should consider addressing these perceptions through messaging within the performance or additional interventions with schools.
- 2. Post-performance workshops to embed knowledge and understanding:** Though Teacher resources are provided to continue discussions with students after On the Ropes, some staff were unsure if these were being used. Post-performance group workshops, with both students and staff provide an opportunity to further embed knowledge and may assist with addressing underlying stigma around help-seeking.
- 3. Stronger connections to school lawyer program:** On the Ropes led an increase in the likelihood of students seeking help from a lawyer, however several participating schools did not have a school lawyer. PCLC can develop stronger referral pathways for these schools and strengthen On the Ropes' connection between prevention and early intervention.
- 4. Access and engagement with schools:** To increase the awareness and reach of On the Ropes, PCLC should consider opportunities to enable more school staff to hear about the performance, including additional public performances open to school leaders and staff.
- 5. Maintain no-cost delivery:** It is important to maintain delivery of On the Ropes at low or no cost. All staff emphasised that school budgets are constrained and no-cost delivery would enable On the Ropes to reach more students.

Conclusion

The evaluation found that On the Ropes has contributed to positive short-term outcomes for students, schools and school staff.

Students who watched On the Ropes reported an increased understanding of coercive control, increased understanding of the impacts of family violence on youth mental health, increased understanding of the legal consequences of violence, and increased likelihood of seeking help from a school counsellor or community legal centre. School staff hosting the performance reported feeling more confident in responding appropriately to student disclosures of harm, and more confident applying trauma-informed approaches when responding to disclosures.

This highlights how On the Ropes is enabling students and schools to develop skills and environments that actively prevent violence and promote safer, more respectful communities.

2. Introduction and context

Peninsula Community Legal Centre (PCLC) is a not-for-profit organisation providing free legal services to Melbourne's south-eastern communities. The centre's mission is to work with the community to deliver tailored legal services that support vulnerable and disadvantaged community members to address their legal needs. PCLC offers a range of supports including free legal advice and representation, community legal education (CLE), community engagement and law reform activities.

Through its specialist legal services, PCLC has seen high levels of domestic and family violence and crime involving young people across Melbourne's south-eastern communities.

In response, PCLC established the Youth Theatre Project in 2022 to provide preventative community legal education to engage young people emotionally and cognitively on the use and experience of violence. With grant funding from the Victorian Legal Services Board, PCLC designed the 'On the Ropes' theatre performance.

On the Ropes focusses on broader issues of family violence (including coercive control), consent and healthy relationships, applicable to all students. Through partnership with Red Stitch Actors' Theatre, On the Ropes uses trauma-informed storytelling and a relatable script to improve students' knowledge and understanding of these topics to improve their mental health, wellbeing and likelihood of seeking help.

3. About the evaluation

PCLC engaged Social Ventures Australia (SVA) Consulting to conduct an independent evaluation of On the Ropes. The evaluation considered the delivery and impact of the program between November 2025 to July 2026 (inclusive).

The evaluation was guided by the following key areas of enquiry:

1. To what extent is On the Ropes reaching intended beneficiaries?
2. How effectively is On the Ropes being delivered in schools?
3. What outcomes are being achieved for intended beneficiaries?
4. What are the key enablers of impact?
5. What are the opportunities for the future?

3.1 Evaluation methodology

This evaluation adopts a theory-based approach, testing the extent to which intended, priority outcomes are being achieved. A theory of change (also known as a program logic) was developed for On the Ropes to describe the problem the project aims to address, the project's activities and intended outcomes for key beneficiaries. This theory of change was developed in collaboration with PCLC's Chief Executive Officer and Youth Theatre Project Manager.

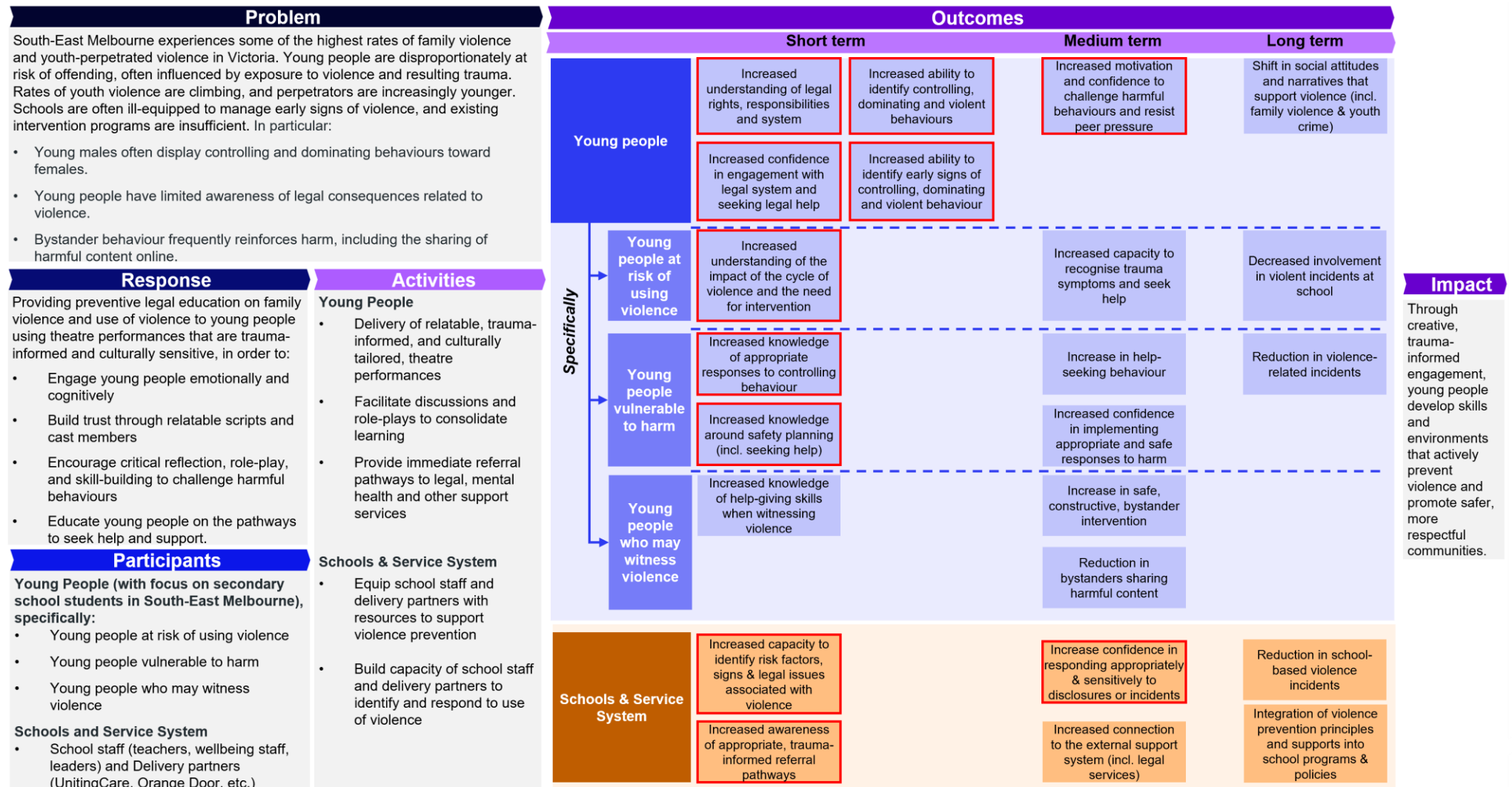
As On the Ropes is within its first nine months of delivery in schools, it was important to focus this evaluation on priority outcomes that could be measured at this stage. Priority outcomes were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Outcomes that are most important to achieving the intended impact of On the Ropes
2. Outcomes that On the Ropes has a unique ability to address (i.e. could be strongly attributed to the project at the time of this evaluation)
3. Outcomes that could be measured within the evaluation timeframe (i.e. nine months of delivery)

Future evaluations and impact assessments may assess additional outcomes, including evidence of medium- and longer-term outcomes achieved by On the Ropes, as the performance is delivered across more schools and is able to capture longitudinal data.

The theory of change, including priority outcomes, guiding this evaluation is provided in **Figure 1** below.

Figure 1: Theory of change for On the Ropes Youth Theatre Project



3.2 Data collection and analysis

The evaluation used the following quantitative and qualitative data sources:

- **Performance data:** Captured by PCLC, this data includes performance dates, school names, year level and estimated student audiences as provided by schools.
- **Project documentation:** Resources provided to schools, including:
 - *Education pack:* Providing schools with core information when deciding to host On the Ropes. This includes an overview of the performance, learning goals, topics explored, alignment with curriculum, content advisory, links to the Safety and Wellbeing framework and Booking checklist
 - *Safety and wellbeing framework:* Outlining guiding principles of On the Ropes and the trauma-informed design and delivery of the performance (e.g. content boundaries and age-appropriate content development). The framework was guided by existing best practice frameworks and guidelines including Respectful Relationships Education Framework, Safe + Equal Prevention Guidelines and Our Watch.
 - *Content summary and thematic guidance:* Overview of the story and description of the scenarios within the performance aligned to key topics of focus (e.g. family violence, coercive control, consent and healthy relationships, legal rights and responsibilities). This also provides any explicit language used within the play and why this is important from a developmental psychology perspective.
 - *Implementation guide:* Providing clear, practical instructions for schools hosting On the Ropes, including pre-, during and post- performance responsibilities of PCLC and the school. This also provides guidance on logistics, opt-out process and emergency procedures.
 - *School engagement letter:* Requesting explicit approval from the school and outlining responsibilities of PCLC and the school in hosting the delivery of the performance.
 - *Teacher resources:* Post-performance activities to facilitate meaningful discussions after the performance, designed to support the Respectful Relationships curriculum. These include scenario analyses (based on the scenarios within the performance) and key teaching points.
- **Preview Student Survey:** Conducted by PCLC after the five preview performances to capture self-reported data from students on whether the performance was engaging and relatable to their experiences. A total of 455 responses were received.
- **Student Surveys:** Two surveys were conducted by PCLC across six performances to capture self-reported data from students on indicators of priority outcomes, as per the theory of change.
 - *Evaluation survey:* Conducted by PCLC immediately after five school performances, this survey tested priority outcomes as per the theory of change. A total of 566 responses were received.
 - *Pre/Post survey:* Conducted by PCLC immediately before and after one school performance, this survey tested priority outcomes in further depth, particularly help-seeking and mental health. A total of 104 responses were received.

- **Staff Survey:** Conducted by PCLC with school staff after hosting the performance to capture data on staff perspectives on indicators of student outcomes and self-reported data on indicators of priority outcomes for schools and school staff. A total of 9 survey responses were received.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted by SVA Consulting with school wellbeing staff, with consent obtained by PCLC, to understand the effectiveness of delivery, indicators of outcomes for students and school staff, and opportunities for improvement. Interviews were also conducted with the PCLC Youth Theatre Project Manager and the Director of Red Stitch Actors' Theatre.

3.3 Limitations

The findings of this evaluation should be considered in the context of the following limitations.

- **Timing of evaluation period:** The evaluation period included performances of On the Ropes between November 2025 and July 2026. This covers the first half year of implementation and does not include planned performances post July 2026.
- **Measurement of long-term outcomes:** The timing of this evaluation, during the early period of implementation, impacts the ability to capture evidence on long term outcomes achieved. Future evaluations of On the Ropes may be able to capture longer term changes for students and schools.
- **Evolution of student survey methodology:** In line with the developmental approach to the delivery of On the Ropes, PCLC adapted the student survey approach over time.
 - The preview student survey tested whether the performance was engaging and authentic to young people. It was conducted post-performance only.
 - The evaluation student survey tested priority outcomes as per the theory of change. It was conducted post-performance only.
 - The pre/post student survey tested priority outcomes in further depth, particularly around help-seeking and mental health.

Both the evaluation and pre/post student surveys captured evidence on priority outcomes, however due to the difference in methodology, data could not be aggregated across both. As such, data from each survey is presented separately in this report.

- **Evaluation did not directly engage students:** Ethics approval was not sought for this evaluation and did not involve any engagement with students. The evaluation relies on secondary data collected by PCLC, including self-reported data from student surveys.

4. Objectives and design of On the Ropes

4.1 Overarching objectives

On the Ropes aims to provide preventative legal education to young people on family violence and the use of violence through relatable, trauma-informed, theatre. Specifically, On the Ropes seeks to:

- Support young people's mental health and wellbeing by improving knowledge and attitudes around family violence (including coercive control), the impacts of violence on victims, consent and unhealthy relationships
- Improve young people's understanding of their legal rights and responsibilities as a victim, perpetrator or bystander of violence
- Improve knowledge and likelihood of appropriate responses and help-seeking
- Support school communities to identify early signs of violence, apply trauma-informed approaches and respond appropriately to student disclosures around violence.

4.2 Overview of design

On the Ropes was designed through a collaborative, iterative and outcomes-led process. PCLC partnered with Red Stitch Actors' Theatre to design and deliver the performance to address the outcomes from theory of change.

Red Stitch Actors' Theatre Director, Krystalla Pearce and playwright, Dan Giovannoni supported the translation of complex social and legal concepts, such as coercive control, into accessible messaging for secondary students within a one-hour performance. Professional Red Stitch actors were engaged to refine the script and ensure a quality performance that was believable for students.

The script was developed to cover several intersecting topics framed through the stories of two 16 year-old young people and their interactions with a lawyer. The content includes:

- **Family Violence and the cycle of violence:** Exploring the emotional and psychological abuse within a household, including coercive control and verbal abuse, demonstrating that violence may not always be physical. The story also emphasises how young people can still be victims even when they are not being physically abused
- **Coercive control:** Portraying the early warning signs of an unhealthy relationship, including jealousy and isolation, and how these can escalate into control.
- **Consent and sexual harm:** Portraying the importance and nuance of consent across different contexts, emphasising that consent must be active, freely given, and ongoing.
- **Help-seeking, legal rights and responsibilities:** Through the character of a lawyer, demonstrating what happens when a young person seeks legal advice and the rights and responsibilities of young people using or experiencing violence.

Characters were developed to be relatable to young people and address perceptions around victims and perpetrators of violence. This included portraying a male character exploring his sexuality and having a same-sex, non-consensual experience, to emphasise that boys may also be victims of sexual violence. Acknowledging the sensitivity of the topics covered, supporting the safety and wellbeing of students, school staff and actors was core to the design of the script production.

“Portraying non-consensual sexual experiences from the perspective of a young person... young people are having these experiences but a lot of other means of educating young people on consent shy away from this.” – Director, Red Stich Actors’ Theatre

All aspects of the production were considered to build a relatable world for students to engage in whilst balancing the practicality of performing in different school locations. This included using a black curtain as a backdrop to cover whiteboards and walls and using blocks that could be moved to delineate space.

PCLC captured ongoing feedback from preview performances in schools, a public premiere, and ongoing student and staff surveys to continue refining the script over time.

5. To what extent is On the Ropes reaching intended beneficiaries?

On the Ropes aims to reach students in secondary schools between year levels 9 to 12. Between November 2025 to July 2026, On the Ropes reached over 5,000 students over 34 individual performances, across 13 schools. Schools typically host multiple performances to accommodate multiple year levels.

Though demographic data on attending students was unavailable, an estimated ~1,200 students were attending schools in the local government area of Casey, with ~900 in Mornington Peninsula and ~800 in Kingston.

School	Local Government Area	ICSEA ¹	Est. audience ²
Cranbourne Secondary College	Casey	931	355
Westernport Secondary College	Mornington Peninsula	957	240
Mordialloc College	Kingston	1062	512
Glen Eira College	Glen Eira	1117	429
Rosebud Secondary College	Mornington Peninsula	989	430
McClelland College	Frankston	981	584
Carrum Downs Secondary College	Frankston	969	320
Prahran Secondary College	Stonnington	1080	230
Albert Park College	Port Phillip	1127	280
Wyndham Central College	Wyndham	921	475
Mornington Secondary College	Mornington Peninsula	1004	230
Cranbourne East Secondary College	Casey	983	800
Kilbreda College	Kingston	1082	300
Total			~5,185

¹ Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), MySchool data from Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority.

² Estimated audience numbers provided by school staff.

Due to the medium of theatre, On the Ropes can be accessed by a larger number of students in a shorter (one hour) period than traditional classroom learning. On average, each performance of On the Ropes was attended by ~150 students, per 1-hour performance.

Over the evaluation period, On the Ropes has largely relied on word-of-mouth referrals to engage schools. PCLC delivered a public premiere of On the Ropes on 26th November at Monash University and preview performances at Cranbourne Secondary College and Western Port Secondary College. School staff, including wellbeing coordinators and representatives, were invited to preview the performance.

In interviews, school staff shared that seeing the performance firsthand enabled them to gain a better understanding of quality, topics covered, messaging and alignment to existing curriculum. One staff shared that watching the premiere performance helped her realise that when the same topics were covered in existing programs.

“Often kids sit there in a daze [during classroom discussions on consent] and [we] don’t really know if it is cutting through.” – School staff

6. How effectively is On the Ropes being delivered in schools?

On the Ropes is delivered across public and private secondary schools across Melbourne. Relationships with secondary schools are key to the delivery of On the Ropes to students.

Onboarding of schools to host the performance also requires time and effort from PCLC to build trust and rapport with school leaders and wellbeing teams. This includes proactively contacting school leaders and wellbeing teams, explanation of the objectives and topics covered, provision of testimonials and evidence on indicators of student outcomes. Schools are provided with a set of resources to understand the educational value of the performance, alignment to existing health and wellbeing curriculums, and what is required to host the performance.

Explicit approval is sought from school leaders prior to hosting the performance and practical implementation guidelines are shared to ensure schools are aware of responsibilities and logistics before, during and after the performance.

PCLC’s resources, including the practical implementation guidance, are aimed at making this onboarding process as simple and supportive as possible. All staff interviewed credited the PCLC staff and On the Ropes actors as being highly flexible, professional and communicative.

“He [PCLC Youth Theatre Project Manager] was very responsive and adaptive, which is really great working with schools... they knew what they were doing.” – School staff

Staff noted that securing approval for the performance requires navigating various levels of approvals, including wellbeing teams, year level leaders and school principals. However, staff interviewed acknowledged that this was difficult for PCLC to address, and was an inherent nature of their school approval process.

Schools are provided with content summary packs, templates and checklists to distribute to staff and parents (via Compass). Schools adopted an ‘opt-out’ model to maximise student reach. Information for parents and parental consent was managed by schools (via Compass).

As the performance deals with confronting topics, On the Ropes has a safety and wellbeing framework to minimise trauma to students and staff. Wellbeing teams are closely involved, and if a student is triggered and needs to leave, staff are positioned to immediately step in and support.

Though On the Ropes presents realistic scenarios of family violence, consent and coercive control, the pre/post student survey found only 6% of students reported feeling upset or distressed about something raised in the play. This demonstrates that On the Ropes has been able to balance student safety and wellbeing alongside delivering an authentic representation of these issues.

Preview student survey question (n=455)	Yes	Unsure	No
After watching this performance, I feel upset or distressed about something raised in the play.	6%	25%	69%

On the Ropes was delivered free of cost to all schools during this period. This served as an opportunity and entry point to demonstrate the impact of the performance. All staff interviewed confirmed this was a key driver of their decision to host On the Ropes. One staff member from a public school stated “we were particularly interested because it was free... our budgets are tight and it is much harder to justify more spend”.

The production of On the Ropes is largely self-sufficient, with PCLC bringing all necessary sound equipment and props. Schools must provide a suitable space with electricity and seating for the performance, and a private space for wellbeing staff to see students if needed. To support a shared viewing experience, teachers and wellbeing staff are requested to be present during the performance, to provide immediate support if a student is triggered and needs to leave.

Only one school staff member shared concerns around logistical requirements, as their school did not have a suitably large indoor space. This performance was hosted in an open amphitheatre, where some students in the back reported difficulties in hearing the actors.

On the Ropes is delivered over 1-hour, including 52 minutes for the theatre play. This was designed to fit within a typical school period to minimise disruptions. School staff interviewed reported that finding a suitable time within the busy secondary school year as the biggest challenge in hosting the performance.

PCLC provides teacher resources and activity packs to facilitate staff to continue the conversation after the performance, noting that the topics covered in the performance align with existing health and wellbeing curriculum delivered in secondary schools.

7. What outcomes are being achieved for intended beneficiaries?

7.1 Outcomes for students

On the Ropes is achieving its intended short-term outcomes for young people. In particular, the performance increased students' understanding of coercive control, the mental health impacts of family violence, and their likelihood to seek support from school wellbeing staff and community legal services.

Outcome 1: Increased understanding of legal rights, responsibilities and the legal system

Through linking relatable scenarios with legal rights and supports, On the Ropes has increased students' understanding of legal rights and responsibilities when using violence and as a victim of violence.

In the student evaluation survey, 97% of students agreed to having a better understanding of the legal consequences of when a young person uses violence. Further, 96% of students reported a better understanding of a young person's legal rights when they are a victim of violence.

Evaluation student survey question (n=566)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have a better understanding of the legal consequences when a young person uses violence	24%	73%	2%	1%
I have a better understanding of a young person's legal rights when they are a victim of violence	23%	73%	3%	1%

Several students reported a better understanding of the legal consequences of image-based abuse and the risks involved with sharing sensitive images.

"I learned you shouldn't share personal photos to other people without knowing what they could do with that photo." - Student

"I learned you can get charged for nudes." - Student

Outcome 2: Increased confidence in engagement with legal system and seeking legal help

The performance also improves students' confidence in the legal system and knowledge of places where they can seek legal help.

After the performance, 74% of students agreed feeling the law was something that could protect them if needed, compared to 62% of students prior to the performance (see **Figure 2**).

"Don't be scared to speak to a lawyer. They will help you." - Student

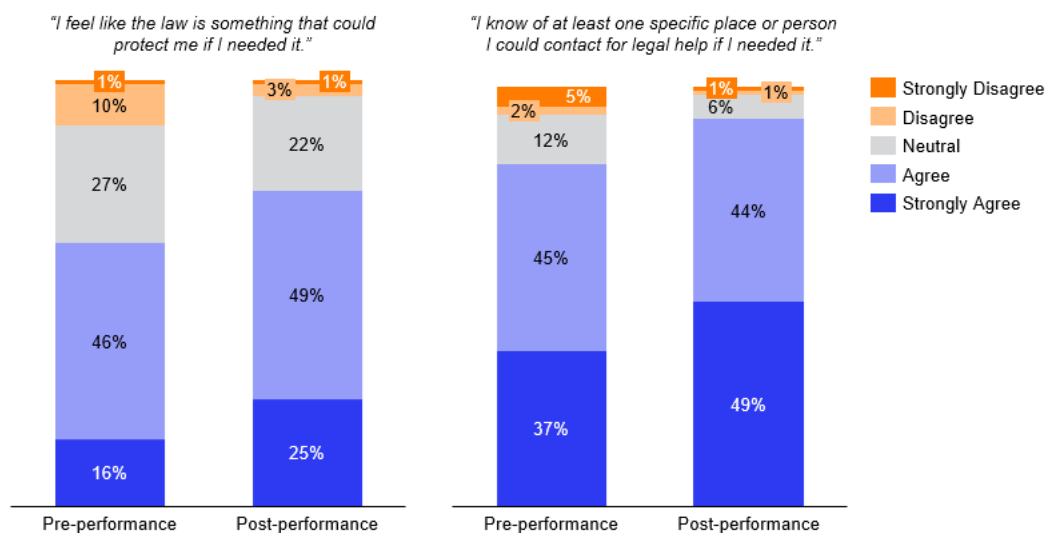
Similarly, the evaluation survey found an increase in students' confidence seeking legal help, with 92% reporting they feel more confident about seeing a lawyer if they needed it.

On the Ropes also increased students' knowledge of where to seek legal help, particularly the availability of free community legal services. The evaluation survey found 96% of students agreeing they could name a place or person to reach out to for legal help.

Evaluation student survey question (n=566)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel more confident about seeing a lawyer if I needed it.	21%	71%	7%	1%
I can name a place or a person I can go to for legal help	30%	66%	2%	1%

This also aligns with findings from the pre/post survey. There was an increase in the proportion of students who agreed with knowing of at least one place or person they could contact for legal help if needed, growing from 82% of students to 92%.

Figure 2: Pre/Post student responses on confidence in engagement with legal system and seeking legal help



Outcome 3: Increased ability to identify controlling, dominating and violent behaviours

On the Ropes led to a significant increase in students' understanding of coercive control, which was reported by school and PCLC staff as a complex legal concept that is often misunderstood.

This was evidenced in the pre-performance student survey data where only 33% of students agreed they understood what coercive control means in a relationship. The performance portrays controlling and dominating behaviour in the context of a young person's parents and in the young person's own relationship with their partner. After the performance, this proportion significantly increased to 93% of students understanding of coercive control.

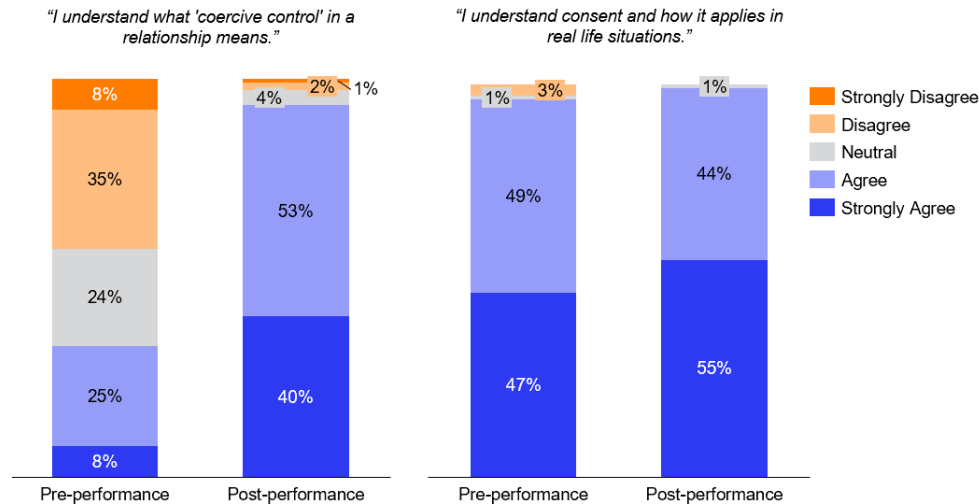
"It was a good way to reflect how bad it is to hurt someone without the intent to." – Student

"Consent is something that has been spoken about in schools many times... But coercive control is something that students may not really understand." – School staff

The performance also explores the topic of consent, portrayed through a character's experience of sexual assault. School staff noted that consent is regularly covered in existing wellbeing curriculum, and 96% of students, pre-performance, agreed they understood consent and how it applies in real life

situations. Post-performance, almost all students (99%) agreed. However, there was an increase in students who strongly agreed with this statement, growing from 47% pre-performance to 55% post-performance (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Pre/Post student responses on coercive control and consent



The evaluation survey found similar evidence, with 97% of students reporting a better understanding of consent in real life situations after the performance.

School staff reported an increase in student discussions relating to controlling, dominating or violent behaviours, with 7 out of 9 staff reporting some increase in discussions.

Staff survey question (n=9)	No noticeable change	Some increase	Significant increase
Have you noticed an increase in student discussions relating to controlling, dominating or violent behaviours?	2	7	0

"[There were] also a couple of incidences after the production with people [students] reflecting on their own relationships and friends' relationships that were not healthy." – School Staff

Outcome 4: Increased ability to identify early signs of controlling, dominating and violent behaviours

Alongside improving students' ability to recognise controlling and violent behaviour, On the Ropes also improved students' ability to identify the early warning signs of this behaviour.

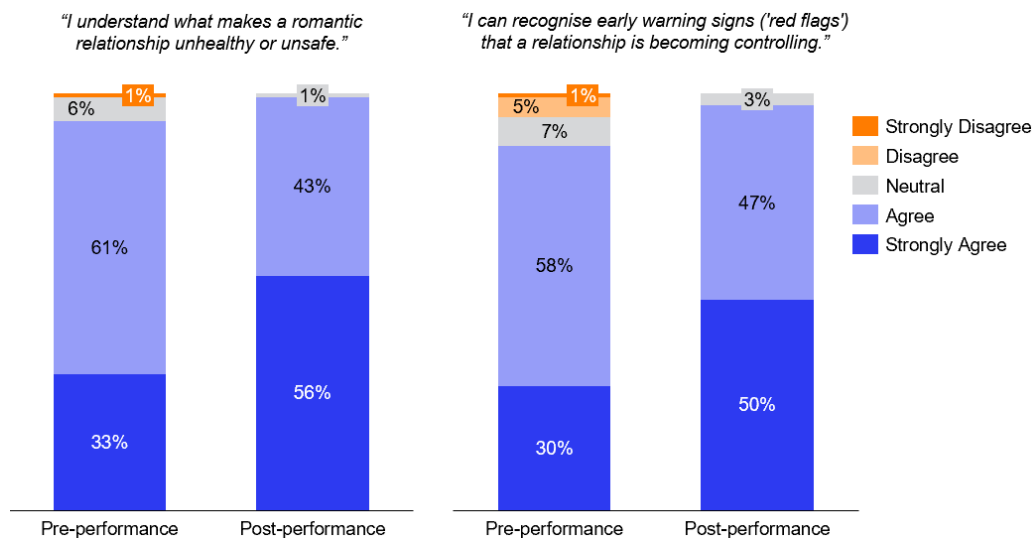
The evaluation survey found 98% of students had a better understanding of how a romantic relationship can become unsafe or unhealthy. This was supported by responses in the pre/post survey. Before the performance, there was a strong baseline understanding of what makes a romantic relationship unhealthy or unsafe, with 94% of students agreeing. This increased to 99% of students after the performance (see **Figure 4**). There was a notable increase in the proportion of students who strongly agreed, from 33% pre-performance to 56% post-performance, indicating On the Ropes is further embedding this understanding.

"I learnt not to let things slide." - Student

There was also an increase in students' ability to recognise early warning signs (or red flags) that a relationship is becoming controlling, from 88% pre-performance to 97% post-performance. Similarly, the performance contributed to a stronger recognition of early warning signs, with the proportion of students who strongly agreed increasing from 30% to 50%.

"I learned a lot from the romantic relationship that was presented to us throughout the play and how, even though it seemed healthy, it wasn't in the end." - Student

Figure 4: Pre/Post student responses on identifying early signs



Outcome 5: Increased motivation and confidence to challenge harmful behaviours and resist peer pressure

There is evidence that On the Ropes is increasing students' motivation and confidence to challenge harmful behaviours, from the pre/post student survey and the school staff survey.

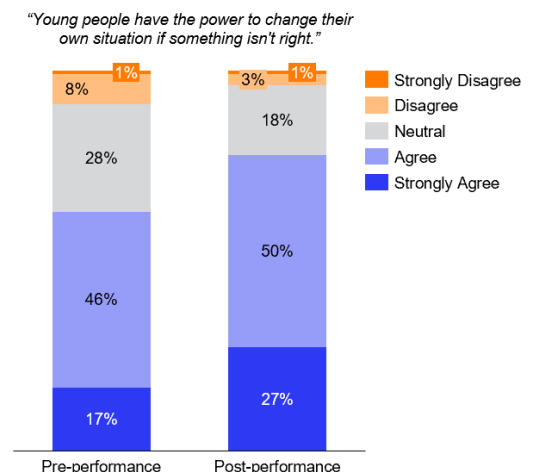
The pre/post survey found 63% of students, pre-performance, agreed young people have the power to change their situation if something isn't right. This increased to 77% of students, post-performance (see **Figure 5**).

"I learned how to reach out to someone that needs it." - Student

"I have learned how to stick up for yourself." - Student

"I have learnt to speak out if you need to." - Student

Figure 5: Pre/Post student responses on motivation to challenge harmful behaviours



School staff also reported an increase in motivation and confidence amongst students to challenge harmful behaviours with 7 out of 9 staff reporting some increase after the performance.

Staff survey question (n=9)	No noticeable change	Some increase	Significant increase
Have you noticed increased motivation and confidence amongst students to challenge harmful behaviours?	2	7	0

In interviews, school staff emphasised the importance of different modalities to engage students on topics of violence and harm. They shared that the performance was a novel way to ‘cut-through’ to students whilst reinforcing messages that are being shared through other mediums.

“Even our rowdy students were quiet and paying attention.” – School staff

Acknowledging that this evaluation was not intended to measure long-term (which would require longer-term data), 2 out of 5 surveyed staff reported some reduction in controlling, dominating or violent behaviours amongst students.

Staff survey question (n=5) <i>Note: 4 staff did not complete this question</i>	No noticeable change	Some reduction	Significant reduction
Have you noticed a reduction in controlling, dominating or violent behaviour amongst students?	3	2	0

There is also early evidence that On the Ropes is contributing to safer school communities, with 3 out of 5 surveyed staff agreeing that the performance contributed to a safer and more supportive school environment.

Staff survey question (n=5) <i>Note: 4 staff did not complete this question</i>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The performance contributed to a safer and more supportive school environment	3	0	1	0	1

Outcome 6: Increased understanding of the cycle of violence and the need for intervention

The story within On the Ropes displays how a young person's experience of family violence at home influences their own wellbeing and use of violence in relationships. Student survey results provide that the performance increases understanding of this cycle of violence and the impact it can have on a young person's mental health and behaviour.

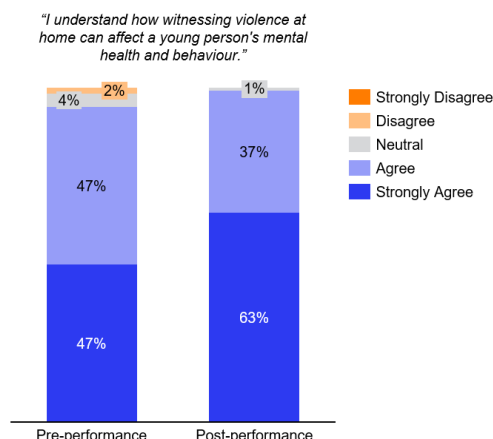
The evaluation survey found that 98% of students agreed they had a better understanding of how violence between parents can impact their children.

The pre/post survey also found an increase in the proportion of students agreeing they understood how witnessing violence at home can affect a young person's mental health, increasing from 94% pre-performance to 99% post-performance.

Importantly, there was a notable increase in the proportion of students who strongly agreed, increasing from 47% pre-performance to 63% post-performance (see **Figure 6**).

"My family fights a lot, so I learnt that it can affect me too, and how I should be careful." – Student

Figure 6: Pre/post student responses on understanding the cycle of violence



School staff reported an increase in active disclosures of family violence after the performance. One Wellbeing Coordinator was approached by a student who had "typically been more reserved" but had realised they were experiencing family violence at home and was referred to Orange Door for assistance.

"After the performance, two students shared that things were happening at home, controlling behaviours and family violence. Feel that perhaps the performance brought front of mind experiences they related to." – School Staff

Outcome 7: Increased knowledge of appropriate responses to controlling behaviour

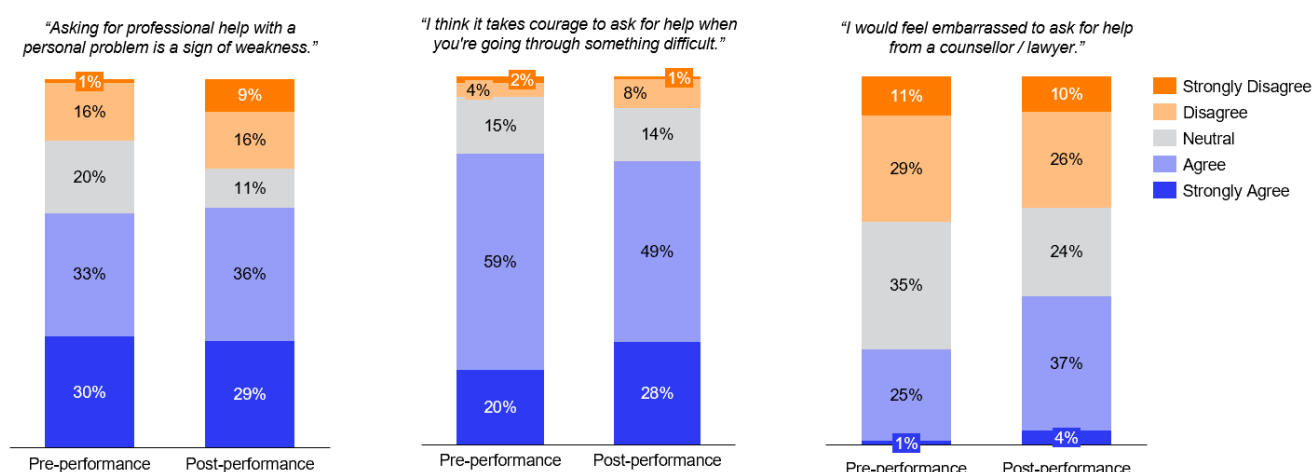
There is evidence that On the Ropes improves students' understanding of the importance of seeking help. In the evaluation survey, 98% of students agreed that it is important to seek help when repeatedly experiencing violence.

Of staff surveyed, 8 out of 9 surveyed staff reported an increase in students' knowledge of appropriate responses to controlling behaviour.

Staff survey question (n=9)	No noticeable change	Some increase	Significant increase
Have you noticed an increase in students' knowledge of appropriate responses to controlling behaviour?	1	7	1

However, pre/post responses indicate further work is required to de-stigmatise seeking help. There was an *increase* in the proportion of students who believed "asking for professional help with a personal problem is a sign of weakness" (63% pre-performance, and 65% post-performance). Further, there was a *decrease* in the proportion of students who believed "it takes courage to ask for help" (79% pre-performance, 77% post-performance). There was also an increase in students reporting they would "feel embarrassed to ask for help" from a counsellor or lawyer (26% pre-performance, 41% post-performance). See **Figure 7**.

Figure 7: Pre/Post Student responses



These responses indicate that On the Ropes was not able to shift the underlying stigma associated with help-seeking.

Outcome 8: Increased knowledge around safety planning (incl. seeking help)

On the Ropes contributed to a significant increase in the likelihood of students seeking help when witnessing, experiencing or using violence.

The pre/post student survey found that 71% of students felt confident in getting help if they or someone they knew was in an unsafe situation, increasing to 79% post-performance (see **Figure 8**).

The pre/post survey tested how likely students were to seek help from the following sources, with increases across all (see **Figure 9**):

- School counsellor or wellbeing staff:** Increase from 35% of students pre-performance, to 53% post-performance
- Trusted adult (family member, coach or mentor):** Increase from 77% of students pre-performance, to 86% post-performance
- Crisis line or online service (e.g. Kids Helpline):** Increase from 40% of students pre-performance, to 56% post-performance
- Doctor or health professional:** Increase from 45% of students pre-performance, to 62% post-performance
- Community legal centre:** Increase from 35% of students pre-performance, to 56% post-performance

Figure 8: Pre/Post Student responses on confidence in seeking help

"I feel confident that I could get help if I or someone I knew was in an unsafe situation."

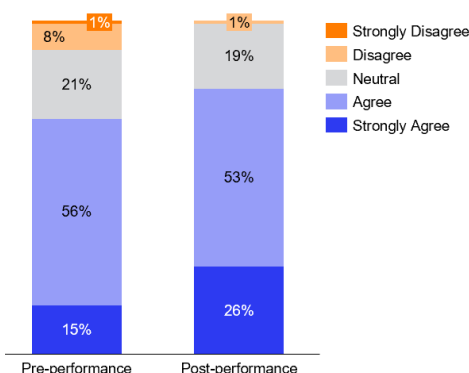
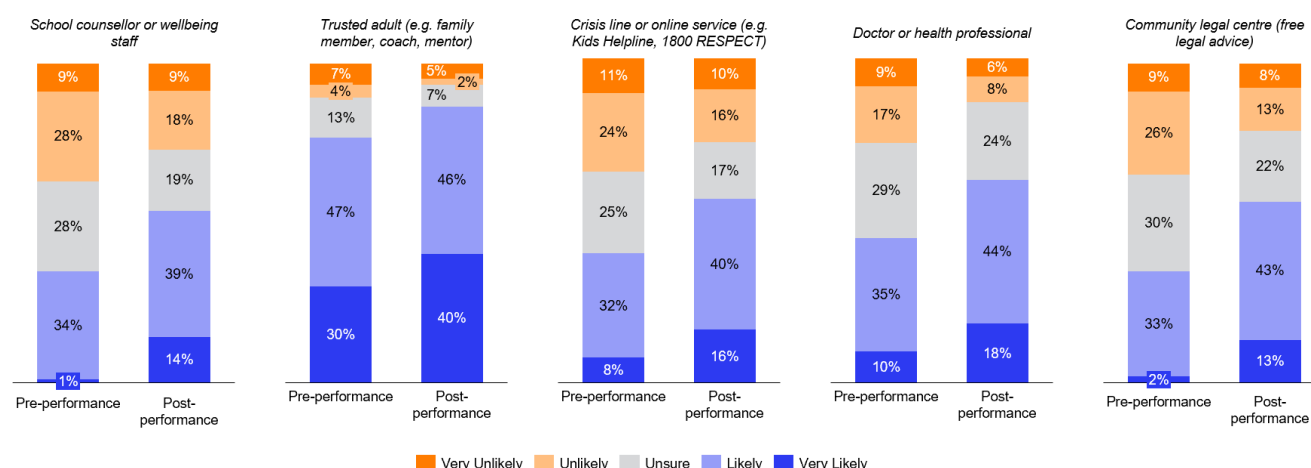


Figure 9: Pre/Post Student responses on likelihood to seek support



The largest increase was in likelihood of seeking support from a community legal centre, which demonstrates that On the Ropes is effectively increasing the awareness and understanding of free community legal supports.

“I went through the same violence in the family as in the play and I noticed what I should have done.”
- Student

These reported increase in likelihood of students seeking help also aligns with perspectives of school staff. Of staff surveyed, 6 out of 9 reported some increase in student knowledge of safety planning, such as how to seek help when needed. Additionally, 7 out of 9 reported some increase in students asking for help in relation to controlling, dominating or violent behaviours after the performance. Three staff reported some increase in referrals to legal support services after the performance.

Staff survey question (n=9)	No noticeable change	Some increase	Significant increase	No response
Have you noticed an increase in student knowledge of safety planning, such as how to seek help when needed?	2	6	0	1
Have you noticed an increase in students asking for help in relation to controlling, dominating or violent behaviour?	2	7	0	0
Have you noticed an increase in the number of students you or your colleagues have referred to legal support services?	6	3	0	0

Anecdotally, staff shared examples of students reaching out to wellbeing staff or house leaders for support.

“A handful of students who did reach out for support specifically following the play, who may have realised there was some family violence going on that they didn't realise was family violence. And a few younger girls that were in relationships that they realised were unhealthy.” – School staff

“Some students have also reached out to make an appt with our school lawyer, which is fantastic.” – School staff

Staff cautioned that limited active disclosures after performance may also reflect that many students did not require legal assistance. They emphasised that the performance was instead planting the seeds through increased knowledge and understanding, to appropriately seek help if needed in the future.

7.2 Outcomes for schools and school staff

Staff reported improved capacity to identify risk factors for students experiencing violence, and improved confidence in appropriately responding to disclosures.

Outcome 9: Increased capacity to identify risk factors, signs & legal issues associated with violence

The performance improved the knowledge of school staff to identify early signs and potential legal issues for students who may be experiencing violence.

Of staff surveyed, 8 out of 9 reported a better understanding of the risk factors for young people experiencing or using violence. Further, 7 out of 9 agreed the play helped them feel more comfortable identifying signs of coercive control and consent issues.

Staff survey question (n=9)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have a better understanding of the risk factors for young people who may experience or use violence.	1	7	0	0	1
The play helped wellbeing and teaching staff feel more comfortable identifying the signs of coercive control and consent issues	2	5	1	0	1

Wellbeing coordinators and school nurses shared a strong existing understanding of coercive control and consent, overseeing the delivering of these messages to students. Anecdotally, some wellbeing staff believed the performance was helpful for other school staff who may be further removed from this curriculum.

“We [wellbeing team] are thinking and talking about these topics every day. For other teachers this was a real improvement in understanding early risk factors.” – School staff

Outcome 10: Increased confidence in applying trauma-informed approaches when responding to violent incidents or disclosures of harm

School staff reported an increase in applying trauma-informed approaches when supporting students. Acknowledging that many wellbeing staff already have an understanding of trauma-informed approaches, the performance served as a reminder of how to apply these approaches in practice.

In the school staff survey, 7 out of 9 agreed they felt more confident applying trauma-informed approaches when responding to violent incidents or student disclosures of harm.

Staff survey question (n=9)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel more confident applying trauma-informed approaches (e.g., avoiding victim-blaming) when responding to violent incidents or student disclosures of harm	2	5	0	1	1

In interviews, school staff highlighted that the shared experience of watching the performance helped increase their own empathy and understanding of the lived experiences of students experiencing violence.

Outcome 11: Increased confidence in responding appropriately and sensitively to disclosures or incidents

On the Ropes led to an increase in the knowledge and understanding of school staff to refer and respond to student disclosures.

Of staff surveyed, 8 out of 9 reported feeling more confident responding appropriately and sensitively to student disclosures of harm or violence.

As above, staff pointed to the shared community experience. Sharing the “discomfort” of the scenarios in the play alongside students, provided staff with reference points to facilitate meaningful discussions about family violence and experiences of unhealthy relationships with students.

“In terms of ongoing impact, it has given a point of reference for conversations [between teachers and students].” – School staff

On the Ropes also led to an increase in staff understanding of available legal services for students experiencing or using violence. Of staff surveyed, 7 out of 9 reported a better understanding of the legal supports available to students after the performance.

Staff survey question (n=9)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel more confident responding appropriately and sensitively to student disclosures of harm or violence.	1	7	0	0	1
I have a better understanding of the legal support available to students experiencing or using violence.	2	5	1	1	0

“Would say that this is bringing this to the fore, we are probably making more direct referrals to Orange Door, and referrals to other support services has increased.” – School Staff

8. What are the key enablers of impact?

On the Ropes has contributed to key outcomes for students by improving their knowledge and understanding of violence, consent and healthy relationships. This evaluation found the following key enablers of On the Ropes contributed to the outcomes achieved.

Effective engagement tool

The performance is as a different type of engagement tool as compared to classroom education. The relatable story, character portrayals and script were critical to capturing the attention of students and building their knowledge and skills around identifying and appropriately responding to controlling and violent behaviours.

“I loved the play. I learnt about so many topics such as violence, manipulation etc. and how to get help.” – Student

Approximately 450 students were surveyed at the preview surveys to understand their perspectives of the performance. Of these students, 75% reported that they learned something that would be useful in their own life and 72% found the play interesting and engaging.

Preview student survey question (n=455)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I learned something that I think will be useful in my own life.	19%	56%	15%	6%	4%
I found the play interesting and engaging.	16%	56%	15%	10%	3%

On the Ropes assisted students and school staff to have important conversations on sensitive topics, such as consent and image-based abuse. Wellbeing coordinators shared that the messages within the performance aligned with existing curriculum, but the performance was able ‘cut-through’ in a format that traditional classroom learning may not be able to.

“It also completely broke the stereotype of educational theatre being “cringe.” Our students were engaged, reflective and at times completely still, which speaks volumes about the quality and authenticity of your work.” – School staff

Relatability to young people

Staff highlighted the importance of the relatable characters, stories and language that resonated with students. Language, slang and terminology within the script was intentionally designed to feel authentic to a teenager. Employing young actors enabled the performance to feel more “peer-led”.

As noted above, the inclusion of an image-based abuse scenario particularly resonated with young people. One student reported that the inclusion of a queer story line resonated with their own experience and how they had felt at school.

Responses to the preview student survey shows 72% of students believed the young characters felt realistic and 78% felt the situations in the play were relevant to young people today.

Preview student survey question (n=455)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I thought the young characters felt realistic.	16%	56%	17%	10%	1%
The situations in the play felt relevant to young people today.	21%	57%	16%	4%	2%

“The cast was engaging and highly relatable, and their performances brought depth to a script that aligns closely with the Respectful Relationships curriculum.” – School staff

Psychological distance

Engaging directly on topics such as coercive control and family violence is inherently confronting for young people. The modality of theatre enables students to engage in a storyline that may reflect their own concerns and experiences, while creating ‘psychological distance’ by watching characters on stage. The performance enables students to explore sensitive themes safely, without feeling personally judged.

Shared vulnerability and reference point

As students and staff watch the performance together the project creates a shared experience that breaks down traditional power dynamics. This shared vulnerability in experiencing the discomfort of characters, serves as a reference point for staff to later use the stories from the performance to explore and discuss issues later.

Embedding legal education in a human story

The performance delivers important information around legal rights and supports by building messaging around a human story. The role of the lawyer is integrated within the main character arcs to present a real example of how legal services can support and what lawyers may ask or do. This humanises legal professionals and helps students see lawyers as accessible and relevant to relationship-based issues.

“These moments reflect the real challenges many of our students are facing as they navigate relationships, consent, identity, pressure... [the] performance opened the door for conversations that are both necessary and difficult, and already we are seeing students bring thoughtful questions and reflections to their teachers and our Wellbeing team.” – School staff

9. What are the opportunities for the future?

There is positive evidence that On the Ropes is achieving its intended short-term outcomes for students and school staff. In line with the developmental approach to the design and implementation of On the Ropes, PCLC has continued to adapt and refine the delivery, performance and supporting resources over this evaluation period based on feedback from schools.

Further improvements to On the Ropes seek to build on the impact and further improve the delivery of the project. Importantly, On the Ropes is currently funded through a grant from the VLSB and the following improvements may require additional funding to implement.

1. **Address underlying stigma on help-seeking:** The evaluation found On the Ropes did not change the underlying stigma around help-seeking, including beliefs that asking for professional help is a sign of weakness, or feeling embarrassed to seek help. PCLC should consider additional messaging within the performance that directly addresses this stigma, or additional interventions with schools to combat these perceptions.
2. **Post-performance workshops to embed knowledge:** Though PCLC provides resources for teachers to facilitate these, staff shared they were unsure if these resources were being used in practice. There is an opportunity for On the Ropes to facilitate post-performance group workshops with both students and staff to further embed their knowledge and provide an opportunity to ask questions. One staff member suggested the actors be involved in these workshops as students find their characters relatable and can focus discussions on the experiences of the characters within the performance. Including staff within these discussions continues the shared learning experience whilst also building staff confidence in facilitating these conversations.

“The way the play rolls out students are rooting for those characters and having the conversation with them [actors] would be powerful.” – School staff

“Having more time with students pre and post experience would be great, so you can explore and reflect on that shared experience from the performance. It would deepen the impact of the work.” – Director, Red Stitch Actors’ Theatre

3. **Stronger connections to school lawyer program:** On the Ropes led to an increase in the likelihood of students seeking help from free legal services. However, some participating schools did not have a school lawyer, often due to lack of capacity and staffing to facilitate this. PCLC can develop stronger referral pathways for these schools to access free onsite legal services, strengthening the connection from prevention to early intervention.

“We’ve always been investigating having a school lawyer, but we have limited capacity for staff onsite during school hours... we don’t have the ability to support this.” – School staff

4. **Access and engagement with schools:** Schools are primarily learning about On the Ropes via word-of-mouth referrals and PCLC’s proactive outreach to school staff. The preview and premiere performances assisted with reaching a wider number of school staff. There is an opportunity to make it simpler for more schools to hear about the performance. This may include hosting additional public performances open to school leaders and staff.
5. **Maintain no-cost delivery:** All staff interviewed emphasised the importance of On the Ropes being delivered free to schools. Discretionary school budgets are constrained, and it is important that future delivery is provided free of cost or at low-cost. PCLC is currently exploring other funding opportunities to support this.



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