

Senate Education and Employment References Committee Inquiry into school refusal

Submission

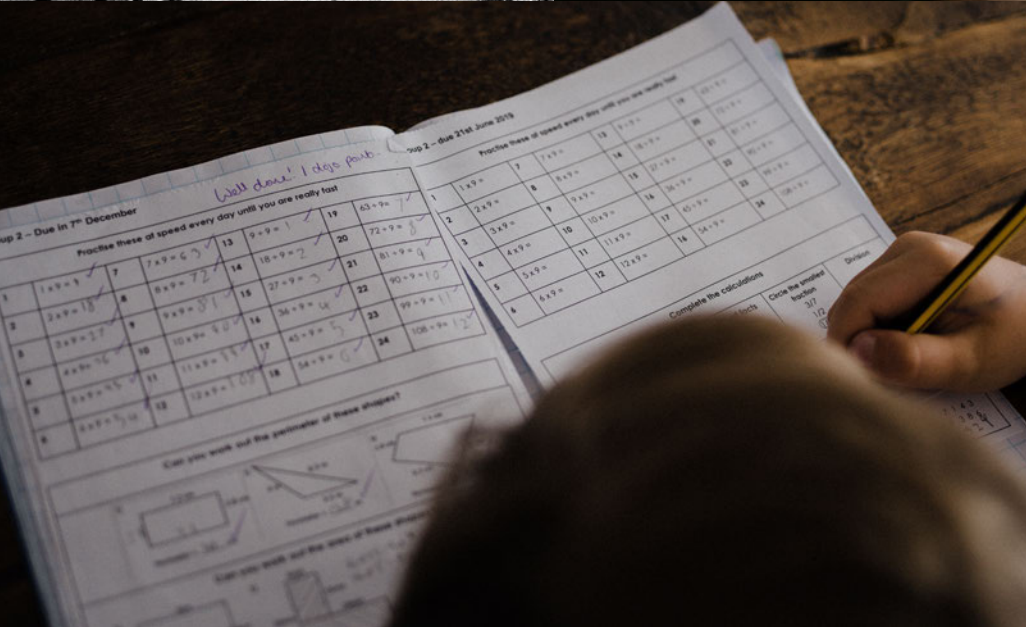
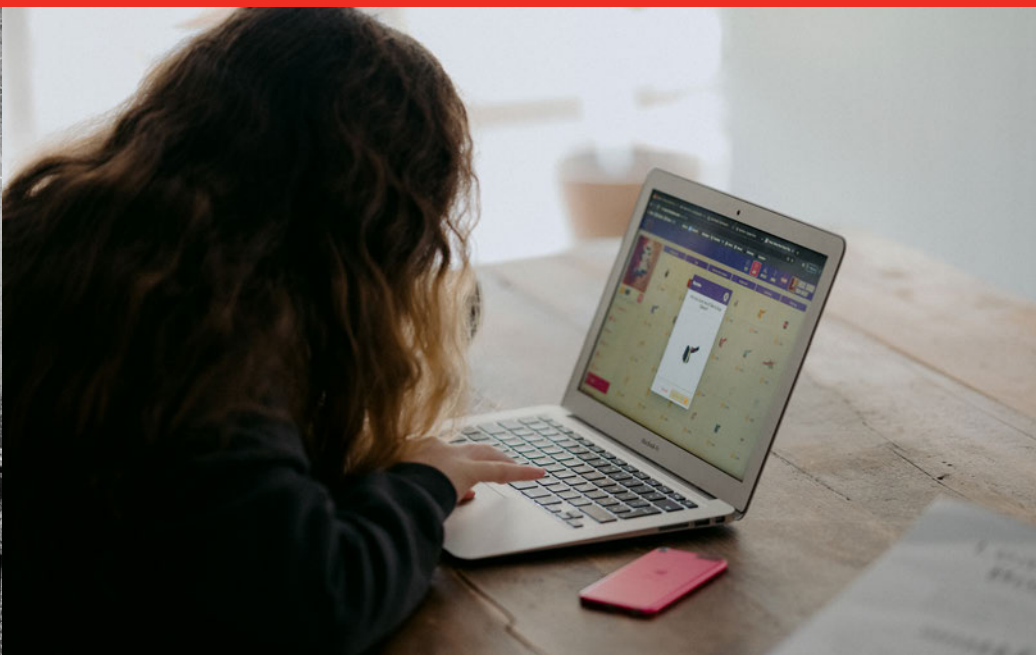
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Acknowledgement

The submission was prepared on *lutruwita* (Tasmania) Aboriginal land. We acknowledge, with deep respect the traditional owners of this land, the palawa people.

The palawa people belong to the oldest continuing culture in the world. They cared and protected Country for thousands of years. They knew this land, they lived on the land and they died on these lands. We honour them.

We pay respects to elders past and present and to the many Aboriginal people that did not make elder status and to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community that continue to care for Country.

We recognise a history of truth which acknowledges the impacts of invasion and colonisation upon Aboriginal people resulting in the forcible removal from their lands.

Our Island is deeply unique, with spectacular landscapes with our cities and towns surrounded by bushland, wilderness, mountain ranges and beaches.

We stand for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language and history. And a continued effort to fight for Aboriginal justice and rights paving the way for a strong future.

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Introduction

The Peter Underwood Centre

The Peter Underwood Centre aims to support children and young people to flourish through the transformative power of learning. We have a specific focus on disadvantaged communities, and on place-based approaches in Tasmania.

The Centre was established in 2015 as a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government with the Office of the Governor of Tasmania. This partnership provides a unique opportunity to be agile and innovative, and to collaborate on research and initiatives that contribute to positive and sustained change in educational outcomes for children and young people.

During his time as Tasmania's 27th Governor, the Honourable Peter Underwood AC, began conversations with the University of Tasmania around the importance of educational attainment to Tasmania. Following his passing in 2014, the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment was established in his name, serving to honour his belief in the transformative power of education.

Our focus is on research, partnerships and initiatives that contribute to positive and sustained change in educational outcomes for children and young people. We integrate and connect research and practical support, which leverage each other to provide outcomes that are richer and more impactful.

We work in three main ways:

1. Research and evaluation - to inform policy and practice in order to improve learning outcomes for children and young people.
2. Community programs - to support and enhance engagement and success in learning.
3. Partnership programs - connecting students in Year 11 and 12 with the University of Tasmania to open doors to post-school opportunities.

Our key messages are:

- Education is everyone's business.
- Learning can happen anywhere.
- We can all learn a lot by listening to children and young people.
- Equity is at the heart of achieving educational success.

The Trauma Informed Practice Lab

In 2022, the University of Tasmania (UTAS) committed to supporting the development of the Trauma-Informed Practice Lab (TIP Lab) within the School of Education in the College of Arts, Law and Education. This concept was in response to the increasing worldwide recognition about how childhood trauma and adversity impacts individuals, not just in childhood but also lifelong. Burgeoning understanding about the relevance and potential transformational role of trauma-informed practice has led to increased research, acceptance and support of this approach in responding impact and prevention of trauma and adversity.

In May 2022, a Professor of Trauma-Informed Pedagogy (Professor Karen Martin) commenced and is leading the TIP Lab with a Research Fellow and other research support provided by internal and competitively awarded grants. Few universities internationally are working to becoming trauma-informed. The role of a university in community education and leadership is large, and by transforming policies and practices within UTAS to be trauma-informed will assist with the goal of state-wide trauma-informed community. The potential positive impact of embedding trauma-informed practice into UTAS include increased student wellbeing, engagement, retention and satisfaction. In addition, students will be armed with the experience and knowledge of how to be trauma-informed which they can use to assist with transforming communities beyond their work sector.

Need and relevance of trauma-informed practice spans across services and organisations, thus the TIP Lab is supported by collaborations with stakeholders from state, national and international organisations of multiple sectors and disciplines. The structure and proposed activities of the TIP Lab are generated and completed in consultation with the Riawunna Aboriginal Education Centre of UTAS and other interstate Aboriginal elders and trauma experts. As Tasmania is the first jurisdiction to be provided support by state and national governance, university and local overarching associations, this initiative is world first in embedding trauma-informed practice into the education sector.

The ideal community is one in which all interactions including education, the provision and receiving of services, work and community interactions are trauma-informed and trauma-preventive. The vision of the TIP Lab is that all individuals live in a strength-based, trauma-informed communities.

To achieve this vision, we are applying strategies targeting different domains and sectors of influence including tertiary educators, school teachers, school leaders, education sector staff, allied health education, psychology education and criminology. To enable the TIP Lab's vision of a trauma-informed Australia, developing and testing a blue-print in Tasmania will enable an approach to transformation that is sustainable and upscaleable.

Submission focus

We thank the Senate Education and Employment References Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to inform the Committee’s inquiry into school refusal. We give permission for our submission to be made publicly available.

The table below sets out how this submission addresses the Terms of Reference.

ToR	Submission
The national trend of school refusal or ‘School Can’t’ – as distinct from truancy – that is affecting primary and secondary school aged children, who are unable to attend school regularly or on a consistent basis, with specific reference to:	Section 1 - Understanding school refusal
a. the increasing number since the COVID-19 pandemic, of young people and their families who are experiencing school refusal;	(briefly addressed in Section 2)
b. how school refusal is affecting young people and their families and the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents and carers;	Section 1.2 – Impacts of low/non-attendance on students
c. the impacts and demands of the increasing case load on service providers and schools to support these students and their families;	Section 2 – Implications
d. how relevant state, territory and federal departments are working to monitor and address this growing school refusal challenge; and	Section 2 – Implications
e. any other related matters.	

1: Understanding school refusal

1.1 Types of school absence

Education departments across states and territories emphasise the importance of children and young people attending school and that ‘every day counts’¹.

Their messages tend to focus on authorised and unauthorised absences through emphasis on the compulsory school age; what parents/carers need to do if a child is absent; and acceptable reasons for authorised absences.

1) Authorised absences

At first sight authorised absences may seem unproblematic, since these have a reason that is formally accepted by schools. However, while illness and medical and legal appointments are approved reasons for absence, they can add up to significant disruption to school attendance.

*“By minimising absences to give your child the most opportunities to learn. This could include making medical and other appointments outside school hours”.*²

➔ **School refusal** due to student anxiety may lead parents/carers to provide a valid reason for absence (such as illness). However, frequent authorised absences may signal a cry for help from parents/carers.

2) Unauthorised absences

This means a student is absent from school without a reason provided to the school—or the school did not accept the reason. Once such absences become frequent or persistent they are referred to as ‘truancy’. Schools and education systems tend to locate the responsibility for these absences with the student or family. In practice the reasons for these absences are likely to be complex, including students’ experiences of school (e.g. bullying; learning difficulties; relationships with teachers) and at home (e.g. caring responsibilities; poverty)³.

➔ **School refusal** may at first appear like unauthorised absence or truancy. Students may feel the school does not care about them if their absence is treated with punitive discipline or not addressed at all.

*“I could tell that the teachers didn’t really care. If I was away, they’d just be like, ‘Oh well, she’ll have to catch up, and if she doesn’t, oh well, she fails, I still get paid’.” (student)*⁴

¹ New South Wales: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/parents-and-carers/going-to-school/preparing/starting-primary-school/health-and-wellbeing/attendance>
Queensland: <https://education.qld.gov.au/initiatives-and-strategies/initiatives/every-day-counts>
Tasmania: <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/parents-carers/parent-fact-sheets/attendance/>

² <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/parents-carers/parent-fact-sheets/attendance/>

³ Hancock, K., Shepherd, C., Lawrence, D. & Zubrick, S. (2013). *Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts*. <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/research-topics/student-attendance-and-educational-outcomes-2015.pdf>

⁴ McGregor, G., Mills, M., Te Riele, K., Baroutsis, A. and Hayes, D., (2017). *Reimagining schooling for education. Socially just alternatives*. Palgrave Studies in Alternative Education. London: Palgrave Macmillan (p.51)

In addition, it is important to recognise that students may miss out on school due to three other types of absence:

3) Part-time enrolment

Jurisdictions allow part-time enrolment in school if there is a sound reason why this is in the best interest of the child. Reasons may include a child not being developmentally ready to commence full time primary school; an ongoing medical condition or medical treatment; or combining school and part time employment for older students⁵. A plan to return to full-time enrolment is usually required. However, there are indications that part-time enrolment is used unofficially (and at times indefinitely) for students whose behaviour schools find difficult to manage, which is more prevalent in students who are neuro-diverse (e.g. autism spectrum, ADHD) or affected by trauma (including the majority of students in out of home care).⁶

*Aboriginal children in out-of-home care “had been diverted from mainstream education into special developmental education settings or reduced hours of schooling in response to their trauma-related behaviours and the inability of schools to work with them”.*⁷

→ **School refusal** may lead schools and parents/carers to agree on part time enrolment to reduce the stress on the student. Unfortunately, this can end up hiding the problem. E.g. a student who only has to attend 2 * ½ day per week and indeed attends those has an official attendance of 100%, although in fact they are missing out on 80% of the school week.

4) Disciplinary absences

These include the use of time-out spaces, suspensions, exclusions, and expulsion. They are imposed by a school and governed by state education system policies. They are not usually considered as part of attendance policies.

*“She wouldn’t come and help me so she used to kick me out of the class everyday ‘cause I was not working because I couldn’t understand it and I was just mucking around, so she used to kick me out and give me detentions all the time”.*⁸

→ **School refusal** is often connected with a refusal *by the student*, usually due to anxiety. However, other students are refused (rejected) *by the school* and subsequently refuse to attend as a result of repeated experiences of rejection through time out, suspensions, and exclusions.

⁵ E.g. *Ministerial Instruction No 3 for Part-time Attendance at School*.

<https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Document%20Centre/Part-Time-Attendance-at-School-Ministerial-Instruction-No-3.pdf>

⁶ Graham, L., McCarthy, T., Killingly, C., Tancredi, H. & Poed, S. (2020). *Inquiry into Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian government schools: Final Report*. Brisbane: The Centre for Inclusive Education, QUT.

⁷ Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People (2016). *Always was, always will be Koori children’: Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria*. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/upholding-childrens-rights/systemic-inquiries/always-was-always-will-be-koori-children/> (p.87)

⁸ Ibid McGregor et al (2017) (p.55)

5) Missing from school

Some students are entirely 'missing' from school for months or years. They may not appear on the enrolment list of any school due to 'falling through the cracks' after leaving a school due to moving house or exclusion.

"school movement provides an opportunity for the 'relay baton' to be dropped if schools are unable to confirm that students have enrolled and are attending in their new location".⁹

➔ **School refusal** may lead to students joining this invisible group, such as if they withdraw from one school and never re-enrol in another school.

1.2 Impacts of low/non-attendance on students

Being absent from school is associated with increased social isolation, increased likelihood of leaving school early, and reduced academic achievement. Any absence (even if authorised, and even if only small) has a negative impact; and the effects are cumulative.

Absence from class (for whatever reason) means students miss out on instructional time. The greater the loss of instructional time, the harder it is for students to catch up¹⁰.

School refusal is a dreadful experience for children and families. It is also a burden for society, especially increased health costs and reduced productivity (by parents having to withdraw from the workforce and by the children missing out on the learning and qualifications needed for future employment)¹¹. This means there is both a moral and a financial imperative for governments to invest in genuine solutions.

Absence from school is of particular concern for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds since they rely heavily on school to improve their life chances. In addition, there is evidence of a significant drop in attendance rates during COVID-19 among socioeconomically disadvantaged students.¹²

⁹ Watterston, J. & O'Connell, M. (2019). *Those who disappear. The Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about.* <https://education.unimelb.edu.au/mgse-industry-reports/report-1-those-who-disappear>

¹⁰ AITSL (2019). *Spotlight: Attendance matters.* <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/spotlight-attendance-matters>

Hancock, K., Shepherd, C., Lawrence, D. & Zubrick, S. (2013). *Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts.* <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/research-topics/student-attendance-and-educational-outcomes-2015.pdf>

Zubrick, S. R. (2014). School attendance: equities and inequities in growth trajectories of academic performance. In: ACER (ed.) *Quality and Equality: What does research tell us?* Melbourne: ACER. https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1221&context=research_conference

¹¹ McLachlan, R., Gilfillan, G. and Gordon, J. (2013). *Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia.* Australian Government. Canberra: Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper.

¹² Tomaszewski, W., Zajac, T., Rudling, E., Te Riele, K., McDaid, L. & Western, M. (2022). Uneven impacts of COVID-19 on the attendance rates of secondary school students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in Australia. *Australian Journal of Social Issues* (online) doi:10.1002/ajs4.219

A specific cohort of concern are children in Out of Home Care. These students have significantly more absences from school than their peers not in the child protection system:

- *Double* the amount of absence per term: average of 7 days versus 3.4 days
- *More than four times* the amount of chronic truancy (defined as 10+ days unauthorised absence): 46.3% versus 10.7%¹³
- *Almost four times* the proportion of students suspended: 23% versus 6%¹⁴

School refusal as a specific form of non-attendance is also a significant concern for children in Out of Home Care. The following vignette has been provided by an Out of Home Care provider.

Vignette: A reflection on residential care, and education engagement

The setting. Rural Australia.

The town. Population of around 50,000 with around 9,000 being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The town has around 19 schools across the sectors.

The young people in this reflection are in OOHC Residential system. They are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people, ranging in age from 13 to 17. All have been disconnected from education for over 12 months.

They have been rejected by schools and society:

- They have had poor experiences with school settings, usually beginning in primary school. Low literacy rates, frequent school transitions and OOHC placement changes have contributed to their lack of trust in systems and sense of alienation.
- Over the years increased non-attendance, suspension, exclusions, managed enrolment coupled with complex development trauma and cultural disconnection has led to a deep sense of alienation and a growing connection with the juvenile justice system.
- Many schools find difficult to manage pain based trauma informed supports and struggle to differentiate behavioural supports that allow young people to remain connected to education.
- In the home setting consistency of support (trusted adults – youth workers, case workers etc are very hard to maintain as there is a significant turnover of staff in these settings) coupled with the complexity of school's response all contribute to these young people disenfranchised and potentially facing futures of ongoing alienation.

These young people's journey has been one of disconnection and removal. The only true constant being change, rejection and a growing sense of powerlessness.

Unsurprisingly, they now resist going to school. When school is an alienating place to be, school refusal can be a rational option to avoid further trauma.

Source: Personal communication from an Out of Home Care provider.

¹³ Armfield, J. M., Gnanamanickam, E., Nguyen, H. T., Doidge, J. C., Brown, D. S., Preen, D. B., & Segal, L. (2020). School absenteeism associated with child protection system involvement, maltreatment type, and time in out-of-home care. *Child maltreatment*, 25(4), 433-445.

¹⁴ Ibid Graham et al (2020).

In the context of COVID-19, pressures on foster carers and staff in residential care settings also led to disengagement and – at times – school refusal by students in Out of Home Care.¹⁵

“In relation to Indigenous students in residential care, one key informant gave the example that “two out of seven teenage indigenous girls will be going to school” (Education system; direct communication) to engage with learning, and the other five will do very little learning.”¹⁶

Key messages

School refusal is complex.

It may begin with a reluctance to attend school because school is unpleasant (e.g. due to bullying or struggling to keep up with lesson material) and snowball from there: the more school is missed, the harder it becomes to re-engage.

It also may begin with rejection by the school, in the form of part-time enrolment or punitive discipline – often connected with the inability of school staff to cater for student behaviour considered challenging, for example due to neurodiversity or trauma.

Missing school has significant negative impacts, especially for students who are already disadvantaged, such as children in Out of Home Care.

To prevent escalation of non-attendance into school refusal and avoid the significant negative impacts of missing school:

- All the ways in which students miss out on instructional time need to be recognized.
- Early and constructive responses to absences (of any type) are fundamental (see section 2).

¹⁵ Brown, N, Te Riele, K, Shelley, B & Woodroffe, J (2020). *Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians. Independent Rapid Response Report.*

<https://www.education.gov.au/covid-19/resources/professor-natalie-brown-peter-underwood-centre>

¹⁶ Ibid Brown et al (2020) p.20

2: Implications

2.1 Need for understanding and supportive schools and systems

It is imperative that the issue of school refusal is not seen as 'student and family' owned and that the education sector considers the influences of the wider environment.

The socioecological model¹⁷ can be used to consider factors which may be related to school refusal and identify specific targets for interventions. Whilst factors which influence refusal, such as student anxiety, contribute to school refusal, school policies and practices need to accommodate and support the needs of children.

Moreover, a comprehensive ecosystem of support is needed. Schools cannot do this on their own – support is also needed from education and health systems.

School refusal is a symptom of distress, and therefore responses need to address the causes of that distress. These causes include student mental health, family circumstances, and school experiences.

Understanding student mental health

Anxiety is known to be a contributing factor to school refusal. Prior to COVID, a systematic scoping review noted that school refusal is directly and closely related to state and trait anxiety, social anxiety, school anxiety, and separation anxiety¹⁸.

There is clear evidence of increasing prevalence of anxiety in children and young people since the onset of the COVID pandemic. In addition, there is strong research indicating that COVID stressors in themselves have increased psychiatric care requirements¹⁹.

Depression rates are also significantly higher in children who refuse to attend school. The increasing incidence of depression associated with COVID in children and young people warrants consideration. Indeed, it is important to note the impact of COVID on previously healthy children. Socio-emotional vulnerability is a predictor of increased cortisol response patterns in response to COVID.²⁰ Teaching and supporting socio-emotional health and education can be considered a target for intervention.

¹⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "The social-ecological model: A framework for prevention." (2015).

¹⁸ Tekin & Aydin. (2022). School refusal and anxiety among children and adolescents: A systematic scoping review.

¹⁹ Reece L, Sams DP. The impact of COVID-19 on adolescent psychiatric inpatient admissions. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 2022;27(1):112-121. doi:10.1177/13591045211030666

²⁰ Raymond, C., et al. "Pre-pandemic socio-emotional vulnerability, internalizing and externalizing symptoms predict changes in hair cortisol concentrations in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic in children." *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 144 (2022): 105888.

Understanding family circumstances and perspectives

Family functioning, parental depression, and parental anxiety are also associated with school refusal.²¹ Changes in involvement of families on the school grounds during and since the onset of the COVID pandemic is likely to have impacted their engagement and sense of belonging to the school. Parents/carers and other family and community members were stopped from attending school grounds during the height of the pandemic to increase community safety.

The messaging provided to support this is likely to have influenced how families perceive their role and importance in the school community. Further, some schools have not yet allowed community back onto the school grounds or have reduced attendance permission to only specific events or locations. Concepts of being 'locked out' and then not welcomed back onto school grounds for families is likely to have reduced school engagement of community members, or potentially created or cemented a 'them and us' culture.

Experiences during the pandemic have highlighted that wellbeing is a not merely a 'nice to have' part of schooling, but a core part of the role of schools²². Education systems can support schools to undertake their essential wellbeing work through:

- increasing access to allied professional staff (youth workers, occupational therapist, psychologist) with appropriate trauma-informed practice skills;
- providing teachers and teacher assistants with professional learning to support their students' wellbeing as well as their own.

Beyond schools and school systems, the COVID-19 pandemic has also underlined the importance of system-wide support for mental health and wellbeing across the community. However, prior to the pandemic mental health services were already stressed. Enhanced use of telehealth and virtual/digital delivery of such services (which started during the pandemic) is worthwhile. In addition, when governments implement policies to alleviate economic distress this has flow-on benefits for emotional wellbeing, mental health, and physical health.²³

Genuinely listening to both parents/carers and students themselves is fundamental to understanding their circumstances in order to collaboratively develop solutions. This requires taking their experiences and views seriously and including their input not only on what the 'problem' is, but also on strengths – such as what & how the student enjoys learning, and how that could be part of returning to school.²⁴

Creating supportive and welcoming school environments

In addition to changes to the school policies related to COVID, other aspects of the school environment may impact student's desire to attend school.

²¹ Ibid Reece

²² Ibid Brown et al (2020)

²³ Bessell, S. (2021). The impacts of COVID-19 on children in Australia: Deepening poverty and inequality. *Children's Geographies*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1902943>

²⁴ Ibid McGregor et al (2017)

School punishment has been noted as a strong predictors of school refusal²⁵. Other practices commonly used in the school sector, such as the use of humiliation, shouting and preferencing specific children also increase feelings of stress for students²⁶.

Such experiences of stressors may not only reduce the child's willingness to attend school, but also the parent's/carer's desire to encourage their child to attend school, particularly if the child is already experiencing mental health issues.

Alternative or 'flexi' schools have shown success with students who previously had low attendance.

*"Evidence for success in terms of process is provided by attendance, because many of these students 'would have been long-term non-attenders' (Shannon, staff, Key College). Dave (staff, St Luke's ESU) agreed, 'the first thing is getting them in and having them attend and engaging them so that they want to come along'".*²⁷

These programs can showcase useful strategies that staff in mainstream schools can draw on to create supportive and welcoming school environments. For example, they:

- Combine attention to wellbeing and to learning. Staff in these schools recognise that when students are emotionally well that supports their learning and at the same time that successful learning supports emotional wellbeing.
- Build strong, positive relationships between staff and students and amongst students. This is an essential foundation for students wanting to attend and to be able to engage with learning. For example bullying is prevented and addressed through these relationships.
- Provide significant support for learning. School refusal may stem from students feeling they cannot keep up with class and school refusal almost always leads to students missing out on key learning which makes return to class more difficult. Flexible learning programs use processes that enable young people to achieve successful learning, by tailoring support to what each student needs and by not giving up on the student.
- Flip the default approach in many schools that expects students to 'fit in' with the way schooling is done, to changing the way schooling is done to 'fit' students.
- Flip the deficit approach – not seeing the student as the problem, but recognising that every student has strengths and interest; and recognising that learning happens in real-life situations (in and outside of school). Schools can harness this to help the student (re-)engage with schooling.
- Focus on the needs of the child rather than their behaviour.
- Involve families and communities in positive ways, seeing them as assets (not problems).²⁸

²⁵ McKay-Brown, Lisa, et al. Reengagement with education: a multidisciplinary home-school-clinic approach developed in Australia for school-refusing youth." *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 26.1 (2019): 92-106.

²⁶ Martin KE, et al Child's Voice; Perspectives of school stressors and supports (Unpublished manuscript)

²⁷ Te Riele, K. (2014). *Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible learning programs in Australia. Final report.* http://vuir.vu.edu.au/31758/1/TheVicInstitute_PuttingTheJigsawTogether.pdf (p.50)

²⁸ Mills, M., Te Riele, K., McGregor, G. & Baroutsis, A. (Eds) (2018). *Teaching in alternative and flexible education settings.* Special Issue into Books series. London: Routledge doi:10.1057/978-1-137-59551-5

Te Riele, K. (2014). *Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible learning programs in Australia. Final report.* Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning. Available: http://vuir.vu.edu.au/31758/1/TheVicInstitute_PuttingTheJigsawTogether.pdf

Reducing disciplinary absences and exclusion

Schools are expected to support positive student behaviour and legislation in each state/territory regulates when and how suspension and exclusions are permitted. Schools may formally exclude or expel a student based on their behaviour at school, as a last resort²⁹. In Western Australia, application for exclusion is encouraged via a 2019 reducing violence policy introduced by the state's Education Minister³⁰. National policy however still mandates that schools have a responsibility for providing appropriate learning and arranging a re-entry process.

In government schools, formal exclusion is associated with explicit responsibilities for providing appropriate learning and arranging a re-entry process or transfer to another school. Informal exclusion, however, does not involve such responsibilities. Young people can be informally excluded from school in a range of ways³¹.

Lucas [...] says he was suspended: "heaps of times when I was in Year 7, 8 and Year 9". He reports that eventually he simply stopped going to school, during Year 10, when it "got too much". [...]

In his interview Oliver says that he was asked to leave during Year 9, and received a Year 9 pass (i.e. it was recorded that he officially passed the year), even though he had not completed the year. He says that the school told him they did not want him to have an expulsion on his record. Once he left that school, he ended up just staying at home for the rest of the year.³²

Reducing absences from class due to time out, suspensions, and exclusion would significantly support student engagement and sense of belonging, in turn reducing the likelihood of school refusal.

To enable this, school staff need access to professional learning on trauma-informed practice.³³

²⁹ E.g. *Secretary's Instruction No 3 for unacceptable behaviour of students and volunteers at, and visitors to, State schools and school activities.*

<https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Document%20Centre/Unacceptable-Behaviour-at-a-State-School-Secretarys-Instruction-No-3.pdf>

³⁰ Ellery S, (2018) Department of Education Government of Western Australia, Let's take a stand together; Minister's Statement on School Violence

³¹ Mitchell, J. (2016). *Out of sight, out of mind? Exclusion and inclusion of students in Victorian schools.* A research paper by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

<https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Documents/SUB-Exclusion-and-inclusion-of-students-in-Victorian-schools-2016.pdf>

Victorian Ombudsman (2017). Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions. Victorian Ombudsman. <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/our-impact/investigation-reports/investigation-into-victorian-government-school-expulsions/>

³² Te Riele, K. & Rosauer, K. (2015). *Education at the Heart of the Children's Court. Evaluation of the Education Justice Initiative. Final Report.* Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning. <http://ecite.utas.edu.au/113852> (p. 14)

³³ Berger, E., & Martin, K. (2021). Embedding trauma-informed practice within the education sector. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 31(2), 223-227.

Multi-disciplinary and whole ecosystem strategies

Interventions which address the multiple factors influencing a student's school refusal are warranted. Community-based, culturally relevant, individualised, strengths-based, and family-centred interventions³⁴ may achieve the best outcome in relation to resource investment.

For example, a multidisciplinary, home-school-clinic intervention models are usually supported school-refusing youth to return to school increasing their attendance and wellbeing outcomes. Attendance increase was maintained for six months³⁵.

The need for collaboration across disciplines and services is highlighted by the experiences of students in Out of Home Care, as illustrated in section 1.2. The vignette below continues on from that, supplied by the same provider.

Vignette: Implications from reflection on residential care and education engagement

The way forward.

There are many parts of the system wrapped around these young people, the OOHC team and service supports, the schools, along with the Police and local Aboriginal Community agencies are working together to build innovative pathways back to education and community. A team approach is being advocated to support the various scaffolds needed to create access to learning, embrace culture, build trust and ultimately empowerment.

The development of personal learning plans must become the guiding document – and importantly all involved must stick to it and when it is not working revisiting it.

In addition, a commitment is needed to changing the way schools reengage with these young people – that is schools make the differentiation required to support engagement rather than expecting young people to fit in with default school practices. For many young people with complex developmental trauma backgrounds school requirements of rule based/classroom based conformity are a bridge too far.

The regulate, relate, reason model of engagement offers a good starting point to schools to think about how young people may be supported to reengage – along with a deep understanding of literacy developmental needs – ie the ability to engage with the curriculum content. So rethinking how the patterns of the day work, time allocations, building in working agreements for young people and adults to negotiate how they will be together and how to collaborative problem solve when things don't work, hence providing agency and voice.

At the centre of this approach is relationship and trust and providing young people with agency and voice.

Umbrella-ing this work are national and state policy frameworks that provide protocol to guide actions – Disability Standards for Education, State Based Education Policy for OOHC, Child Protection frameworks, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander placement principles, NCCD, to mention a few give the protection needed to steer progress.

Policy on its own is not enough, but it provides the authorisation for action and advocacy to create learning environments where children and young people in out of home care feel welcomed, cared for, loved.

Source: personal communication from an Out of Home Care provider.

³⁴ L. Eber, K. et al Completing the continuum of schoolwide positive behavior support: wraparound as a tertiary-level intervention W. Sailor, et al (Eds.), Handbook of positive behavior supports, Springer, New York (2009), pp. 671-709, 10.1007/978-0-387-09632-2_27

³⁵ Ibid L.Eber

2.2 Need for research

To address the issue of increased school refusal post re-opening of Australian schools, rigorous research is required. This research must include the voices of students and their families. Prior to the pandemic, there was a paucity of school refusal research in Australia. The limited research completed largely conceptualised the issue of refusal being attributed to student or parent perspectives and practices. The concept of the wider environment that discouraged or supported school attendance was less evidenced, and the focus remained on changing children and parents/carers behaviours, rather than the multitude of factors which interact and contributing to refusal patterns. Perspectives of students and their families must be understood to identify the most appropriate strategies, in the current Australian context, to encourage attendance and engagement.

Key messages

- Comprehensive, contextually relevant research is required; perspectives of children and young people, parent/carers and school staff must be sought
- Provide resources and information to enable schools to create welcoming and supportive school environments which prioritise and focus on student needs rather than behaviour and deficit
- Nationally mandate in schools the removal of punitive policies and strategies ('consequences') which are 'pain-based' (that is intentionally generate negative feelings such as humiliation, fear, shame, rejection, isolation, feelings of being burdensome, reduced self-esteem, reduced self-efficacy)
- Implement a national approach to aligning state policies with research evidence that suspension and exclusion are harmful for children and young people and that these strategies increase risk of future violent behaviours, criminal behaviour, unemployment and disengagement with education.
- Multi-sector and multi-disciplinary strategies are required to support children and young people to return to school.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the contents of our submission in further detail and to support the Committee's inquiry.

