

We must stop blaming kids for education exclusion says Commissioner

Commissioner Helen Connolly believes, that instead of imposing sanctions that exclude students from an education, we should be adopting inclusive responses to ensure that no child misses out on their right to an education. Inclusive options should ultimately lead to the elimination of school exclusion as an option for behaviour management.

In her latest report "*The Blame Game*" - the Commissioner examines the perspectives that South Australian children and young people (and their families) have on the causes and impacts of school exclusions. She found that they differ significantly from teacher and school perceptions and that students often perceive exclusion, including suspensions, expulsions and being excluded from a classroom, as a form of punishment for situations that are often exacerbated by factors that are beyond their own control.

The findings of the report are drawn from the experiences of more than 400 South Australian children and young people and their families who participated in the Commissioner's exclusion project via one-on-one interviews, focus group consultations and two surveys. The vast majority of respondents were aged between 9 and 17 years and came from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations.

Of the students participating, 75% reported that they had had direct experience of school exclusions while 52% reported that they knew someone who had experienced education exclusion. The themes, experiences and issues covered, included a series of case studies that represented the most consistent stories heard from all children and young people interviewed.

The report outlines the reasons that can lead to a student being excluded from school such as poor relationships with teachers, problems at home, a learning difficulty, living with disability, a lack of support, being sick and not understanding instructions. Groups of children most likely to be excluded are those experiencing disconnection with family and in child protection, illness and disability, poverty, as well as those experiencing homelessness and cultural disconnection.

The main conclusion Commissioner Connolly drew is that we need to stop blaming children for what is fundamentally a failure of the system to adjust to their individual needs. She emphasises the need for the system to be designed in a way that supports children's attendance at school and thereby upholds their basic right to access an education in the context of their lives, needs and circumstances.

Behind every South Australian child who is excluded from school is a story of loss and pain, both for the child and their family. Parents and carers spoke with the Commissioner about their desperation with the types of behaviour management practices being used in South Australian schools and how adversely they are affecting the wellbeing of their children, their siblings and the wider family. Many parents/guardians often felt ignored, especially when they tried to reach out to the school.

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Many guardians also talked about the wider impacts of exclusion. These included having to give up their job and sources of income due to their child being excluded, causing not only emotional, but financial stress on their family.

Strategies to eliminate, or at least reduce the incidences of educational exclusion must be part of a bigger ambition to address cycles of disadvantage in the lives of children and young people, particularly given South Australia has the highest rate of poverty in Australia with 1 in 6 children aged 0-14yrs living below the poverty line.

Doing something to help everyone get an education was one of the top five issues South Australian children and young people identified as a priority for the Commissioner's work.

Quotes attributable to Commissioner for Children & Young People, Helen Connolly
The impact of being excluded from school can be lifelong, particularly if exclusions begin from a young age. Children can internalise their exclusion experience as a message that they had not only done something bad, but they themselves were 'bad', 'disliked' or 'unwanted'. This starts a long journey of disconnection from their education that can lead to lives that are deeply rooted in disadvantage and vulnerability due to not having had the opportunity to meet their educational milestones. So many students I spoke with told me they felt misunderstood, not heard and unsupported. Parents told me that exclusions rarely took into account the impact on the family, other siblings, a parent's capacity to earn income while caring for an excluded child, or the system's failure to take into account their child's disability, medical condition, developmental, or other needs. The data that records exclusions is impersonal. It hides the social and emotional impact of what is ostensibly a State sanctioned rejection of individual children and young people from an education to which they are fundamentally entitled and to which we have an obligation to provide.

To download your copy of *The Blame Game* go to: www.ccyp.com.au/ccyp-reports

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about the work of the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People go to www.ccyp.com.au

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