# Submission to the Review of the National School Reform Agreement

June 2022

Commissioner for Children & Young People

## Introduction

I am writing in response to the request for submissions to inform the Review of the National School Reform Agreement (the NSRA).

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to advocate at a systemic level for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia, particularly those whose voices are not usually heard.

A good education is critical to the future of every child and young person. As such, access to education is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Under the UNCRC, all children in Australia have the right to an education (Article 28) that develops each child's personality and talents to the full (Article 29).

Since 2017, I have engaged with thousands of children and young people from diverse backgrounds. Through my regular interaction with children in preschools, primary schools and secondary schools across all sectors and regions, I have gained deep insights into student experiences at school.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role of schools as places that go beyond academic instruction. Schools foster opportunities, relationships and skills that are critical to children and young people's health, safety, wellbeing, confidence and aspirations.

Children and young people are passionate about their education and what it will offer them beyond school. They are also aware that they need educators and government to look out for them as they navigate key transitions during the school years.

Students want their schools to know how to balance wellbeing and academic achievement. Across sectors, schools and ages, children and young people want schools to be places where:

- they are known
- they are valued
- they have a voice; and
- they see the value in what they are learning

Children and young people have told me directly what they think needs to occur to create more engaging and meaningful lessons, more participatory and inclusive classrooms and more trusting and respectful relationships among students and between students and teachers.

## Summary of recommendations

A complex range of social, economic, health and family factors can lead to absences and disengagement or detachment from school. Many of these barriers and experiences are not recognised in national policy initiatives. The next National School Reform Agreement is an opportunity to address this.

Specifically, it is recommended that the next National School Reform Agreement include:

1. **Measures and policy initiatives that actively support and track student voice and agency in schools.**

2. **Measures and policy initiatives specific to improving educational outcomes for the following groups of students:**
   a. **Children and young people with chronic illnesses.**
   b. **Children and young people with caring responsibilities.**
   c. **LGBTQIA+ children and young people.**
   d. **Children and young people affected by parental incarceration.**
   e. **Children and young people in out-of-home care.**

3. **National policy initiatives that reduce the short and long-term impacts of child poverty on student engagement, wellbeing and participation. This includes policies that:**
   a. **Recognise the true cumulative cost of school and address inequities to ensure every student can fully participate in school life.**
   b. **Improve digital inclusion, both in terms of student access to digital devices and data and development of digital literacy and digital citizenship.**
   c. **Formally recognise menstruation and 'period poverty' as a barrier to school attendance and engagement and develop best practice resources for schools in relation to period product and bin supply, bathroom access and uniform policy.**

4. **National policy initiatives in relation to the following:**
   a. **Prioritise improving the consistency and quality of civics and citizenship education.**
   b. **Support schools to prevent and respond to bullying in ways that reflect children and young people's voices and experiences.**
   c. **Recognise and address the impacts of gender stereotypes and sexism on students.**

5. **Student wellbeing as an outcome alongside associated targets, consistent with recommendations from the Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry as well as students' views and expectations.**

6. **Additional measures in the Measurement Framework for Schooling to provide a more relevant, reliable and complete picture of student engagement and attainment outcomes, including measures that:**
   a. **Monitor school suspensions and exclusions (including internal inclusions), with a view to reducing exclusionary practices.**
   b. **Make visible children who are currently detached from school and 'missing' from current measures of attendance, retention and achievement.**

These recommendations are informed by what thousands of students across South Australia have directly told me impacts their attendance, engagement, participation and wellbeing at school.

If you would like to discuss anything further, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Yours sincerely,

**Helen Connolly**
Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia

1. **Include measures and policy initiatives that actively support and track student voice and agency in schools.**

The Mparntwe Declaration acknowledges that students 'require a voice in and influence over their learning', particularly during the middle years.[i]

However, many children and young people across year levels have told me about the lack of voice, choice and influence they have in relation to different aspects of their learning and school environment. They report that this can impact their sense of belonging and engagement with their school. They want to have more of a say regarding:

- **How students learn**, including teaching methods, hands-on learning opportunities);
- **What students learn**, including financial literacy and other 'life skills', relationships and sexual health education, civics and citizenship education);
- **The school environment**, including the look and feel of study or play spaces, policies regarding uniform, bathroom access);
- **The kind of support students** need, including classroom learning supports, counselling and mental health supports.

There is an opportunity for the NSRA and the Measurement Framework to include policy initiatives and measures that actively support and track student voice and agency in schools. My guide on *Supporting Student Voice, Agency and Wellbeing in Schools* sets out further practical ideas from students that may be a useful guide to this end.[ii]

Such a national commitment will not only align with aspirations set out in the Mparntwe Declaration but also with what students say would make a positive difference to their experiences of school. Student voice is a key part of building positive relationships between students and teachers, and ensuring schools meet the diverse interests, needs and aspirations of all students. Feeling heard and valued are also key to student wellbeing, which is closely linked to student outcomes and should be recognised as such (See Recommendation 5).

*"Students have opinions and they matter. Don't forget that they want to be listened to. Do not forget about us and when you make decisions they do actually affect us."*
*– 13 year old*

*"Students should complete compulsory surveys about specific teachers. Teachers should explore more ways to teach. Make students more involved in activities rather than just writing."*
*– 16 year old*

2. **Include measures and policy initiatives specific to improving educational outcomes for the following groups of students:**
   a. **Children and young people with chronic illnesses.**
   b. **Children and young people with caring responsibilities.**
   c. **LGBTQIA+ children and young people.**
   d. **Children and young people affected by parental incarceration.**
   e. **Children and young people in out-of-home care.**

There are particular barriers that disproportionately impact educational outcomes for specific groups of students, including those living with chronic illnesses, with caring responsibilities, those who identify as LGBTQIA+, those living in out-of-home care and those affected by parental incarceration.

The next NSRA is well placed to acknowledge the unique barriers facing these groups of students across the three key NSRA domains. National policy initiatives should consider the rights and needs of these groups of students, address the barriers impacting their outcomes, and collect consistent data in order to measure their progress, support and outcomes over time.

### a. Children and young people with chronic illnesses.

Living with chronic illness disrupts and impacts all aspects of a child's development and outcomes, including their attendance and engagement at school. Childhood chronic illness is a complex issue, with each illness having its own unique trajectory and impacts.

In 2022, I created a survey for children and young people with chronic illnesses to share their insights and experiences of managing chronic illness at school. Over 90 children and young people responded to the survey, and half reported that they missed out on school 'a lot of the time'. When at school, students with chronic illness described a range of barriers to their engagement and participation, including a lack of knowledge and understanding from teachers and peers, difficulties accessing medication, as well as managing severe pain, exhaustion or medication side effects.

A recent study undertaken in New South Wales found that children hospitalised with a chronic condition were more likely to miss NAPLAN testing, and where they did complete testing, 'underperform academically across literacy and numeracy domains at each school grade'.[iii] The study concluded that 'novel, integrated health and educational intervention' are needed in order to support this group of children and their families and improve academic outcomes.

Although there is a range of support in place for children living with disability, there is no standardised policy or model of care for children with chronic illnesses, leaving these children to fall through significant system and service gaps.

There is an opportunity for the NSRA to address these gaps, both through new measures that capture the prevalence of childhood chronic illness nationally as well as targeted policy initiatives that mitigate the impacts of illness on student outcomes. Such policy initiatives may include practical resources for schools and teachers alongside tailored student learning and support programs.

### b. Children and young people with caring responsibilities.

Children and young people with caring responsibilities provide care for family members who may be living with either one or a combination of physical disability, chronic illness, mental illness, terminal illness or drug and alcohol dependence.

Although many young carers describe their caring role as a positive experience, caring can place significant physical and mental strain on a child's wellbeing, attendance and engagement at school, particularly where a young carer is inadequately supported.

I have engaged directly with many young carers and the carer support agencies they interact with. However, there are many more students across our communities who are caring for family members but do not disclose what they do – to their friends, teachers or neighbours – meaning they do not receive the support they need.

Governments and schools have a duty and obligation to understand the issues facing this group of children and support them to access the services and have the same opportunities as their peers. Currently, schools are not equipped to identify young carers and support for young carers at school is inconsistent, often vested in the goodwill of individual teachers rather than whole-of-school or systemic approaches.

There is an opportunity for the next NSRA to recognise this group of students and commit to policy initiatives that ensure they are healthy, safe, engaged and actively able to participate in school. I encourage the Commission to consider the recommendations in my 2020 *Take Care Report*, which highlights specific and practical actions schools and educators can take to support young carers at school and improve attendance, behaviour, wellbeing and learning outcomes.[iv]

### c. LGBTQIA+ children and young people.

Although there are noted examples of schools that actively promote and practice inclusivity, many LGBTQIA+ young people have described feeling unsafe in school environments and raised concerns about the barriers they face to feeling known, valued, included and heard at school.

While some LGBTQIA+ young people focus on the impact of formal school exclusions, the most common concerns relate to the cumulative impact of day-to-day experiences of indirect and direct discrimination in school environments where they are harassed, made fun of, shamed, ignored, excluded, 'othered' or 'publicly outed'.

*"Treating them differently to others and preferring the 'straight' kids over the ones they know to be a part of the lgbt+."*
— 17 year old

Findings from Australia's largest study of health and wellbeing among LGBTQIA+ young people, the *Writing Themselves In* national survey, show that school is the most likely place for abuse and discrimination to occur. More than three-fifths (60.2%) of LGBTQIA+ secondary students reported feeling uncomfortable or unsafe at school due to their sexuality or gender identity, and more than one-third (38.4%) reported missing days of school due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable.[v] Studies have also found that young people in discriminatory or unsupportive school environments have poorer educational outcomes.[vi]

Given the level of discrimination being described by LGBTQIA+ students, it is important that the next NSRA prioritise policy initiatives that support LGBTQIA+ students. My 2021 *No Exceptions* Report and my guide to building *LBGTQIA+ Inclusive School Environments* provide key insights from children and young people on what cultural and structural changes are needed to ensure schools are safe for all students.[vii]

### d. Children and young people affected by parental incarceration.

Parental incarceration has significant impacts on children and young people's relationships, health, wellbeing, and education, including their attendance, participation and achievement at school.

My 2022 *Join the Dots* report is based on my consultation with this vulnerable and largely invisible group of children.[viii] Children with incarcerated parents reported that their 'grades went down' or they had 'trouble' at school as they dealt with overwhelming emotions and disruption to their lives outside of school.

Some young people described how their school 'didn't care' or didn't respond appropriately, and others wished their school would have 'let me have time' or worked with them to ensure their response 'matched the situation'. Despite negative experiences at school, most young people felt it was important for teachers and schools to know about students affected by parental incarceration in order to be able to support their wellbeing and keep them connected to learning.

While schools are likely to be aware of students whose parents are offenders in high profile cases, schools are not automatically informed by the courts or correctional services when a child's parent is sent to prison. As such, it is difficult for schools to understand children's needs and respond appropriately with information or support services.

There is an opportunity for the next NSRA to commit governments to work with relevant agencies to identify children and young people affected by parental incarceration as a priority group and develop national policy initiatives that ensure educators and schools are equipped and prepared to provide timely, appropriate and practical support to this group of children.

### e. Children and young people in out-of-home care.

In June 2020, there were 35,717 school-aged children in care in Australia.[ix] Children and young people in out-of-home care can face significant barriers to school attendance and negative experiences at school, which can impact attendance, social connections, academic achievement and school completion.

Schools often lack expertise to support children and young people who are often dealing with the impacts of complex trauma and placement instability. Children in care are disproportionately impacted by school suspensions and exclusions, with South Australian data showing that students in care are suspended at a rate four times higher than students who are not in care.[x]

The Mparntwe Declaration includes 'learners in out-of-home care' as a group requiring targeted support. The National Standards for Out-of-Home Care and Australia's National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 recognise access to education as a fundamental right that is key to improving life outcomes for children in care.[xi]

The NSRA can build on these existing policies with a national commitment to practical measures and policy initiatives that support this group of children. This will require collaboration across education and child protection systems.

3. **Include national policy initiatives that reduce the short and long-term impacts of child poverty on student engagement, wellbeing and participation.**

Although the NSRA and the Measurement Framework address issues of inequity, there is scope for Australian governments to do more to address the impacts of child poverty on student engagement, wellbeing and participation. Recent events, including bushfires, floods, as well as high costs of housing, fuel and food, have only exacerbated the issues for families 'doing it tough'.

In South Australia, 1 in 4 children and young people under 18 years of age are estimated to be living in the state's most disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances, compared to 18.5% nationally.[xii]

Children growing up in poverty are more likely to attend school less frequently, have difficulties learning at home, and have less involvement in extracurricular activities like sport, music and art. The impacts of poverty continue into adulthood, with children living in poverty also more likely to leave school early and have difficulty transitioning from education to work or formal post-school education.[xiii]

Child poverty is real, and in a country of relative abundance, it should not and must not be tolerated. The following pages outline three practical and specific initiatives suitable for national collaboration that would ensure the NSRA gives effect to the Mparntwe Declaration's national goal that education should promote equity as well as excellence.

a. **Recognise the true cumulative cost of school and address inequities to ensure every student can fully participate in school life.**

Children and young people have consistently raised with me concerns about what they consider to be the high costs of going to school. This includes the costs of uniforms, digital devices, textbooks, transport, stationery, and other materials, as well as the costs associated with participation in school camps, excursions, sports, and other activities.

In 2019, I released my *Leave No One Behind* report, which was the culmination of many conversations about how children experience poverty in their everyday lives.[xiv] My 2021 *Spotlight on The True Cost of Going to School* Report builds on this and emphasises the need for responses at a school and system level that address the financial barriers to public education.[xv]

Beyond impacts on learning, financial barriers can also have a significant impact on student participation and connection with their school and surrounding community, as well as their friendships and sense of self-worth and belonging. Children and families have also identified financial insecurity as a contributing factor in children's experiences of school exclusion.

While the costs of some events and activities are officially considered 'optional' or 'non-essential', from the perspective of students and their families, they are all essential insofar as they allow for full and enriching participation in all aspects of school life. It is recommended that the NSRA commit to specific policy initiatives to promote equity and reduce the impacts of poverty on student outcomes, including:

- Free school breakfast and lunch programs in priority high need schools;
- Free public transport for low-income families; and
- Increasing existing vouchers and subsidies for sport and expanding financial assistance to include activities beyond organised sport, such as dance, Scouts and Girl Guides.

### b. Improve digital inclusion, both in terms of student access to digital devices and data and development of digital literacy and digital citizenship.

Children and young people describe digital access as being just as important as access to transport and electricity, and digital skills as being as 'basic' a requirement as reading and writing.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the issue of digital inequality and exposed the significant impact a lack of digital access has on children and young people, particularly their engagement with education.

My 2021 *My Digital Life* report considers the everyday experiences of issues related to digital poverty from a child rights perspective and makes recommendations that seek to build digitally inclusive schools and communities.[xvi]

For children and young people who have no, limited or low-quality digital access, it is difficult to meet the growing expectations of peers and teachers. Digital poverty can also impact children and young people's participation in internships or work experience opportunities as well as their ability to apply for jobs or access information and services, including those related to future work or study opportunities.

*"No internet at home so can't do homework."*
*- 15 year old*

*"[The worst thing about being a kid is...] lack of internet and not being able to fix it"*
*- 8 year old*

While ICT literacy forms part of the Measurement Framework, it is not included in the current NSRA. It is recommended that the next NSRA embed and measure digital access and digital literacy as sub-outcomes relevant to all three of the NSRA's key domains: student engagement, achievement and skills acquisition. The NSRA can promote digital inclusion, including through policy initiatives that:

- Expand free public Wi-Fi to include all public buildings and transport, including school grounds; and
- Ensure all students have a laptop and data pack, regardless of family income, circumstance or geography; and

- Recognise that children's rights exist equally online as they do offline and create opportunities for learning, participation, creativity and digital citizenship.

c. **Formally recognise menstruation and 'period poverty' as a barrier to school attendance and engagement and develop best practice resources for schools in relation to period product and bin supply, bathroom access and uniform policy.**

Children and young people first raised 'period poverty' or an inability to afford period products as a systemic issue during conversations about children's everyday experiences of poverty. In order to gain further insight into children and young people's perceptions and experiences of menstruation, I released two consecutive surveys during 2020.

My 2021 *Menstruation Matters* report documents what thousands of South Australian children and young people said about the impact of menstruation on their education, wellbeing and participation.[xvii]

Although official education policies do not mention or investigate menstruation as a possible cause for student absences, a significant number of young people reported missing school due to their period. Even those who had reliable access to period products reported facing barriers to managing their period confidently and comfortably at school.

Young people explained their menstruation-related absence from school in terms of strict rules or policies dictating school bathroom access; inadequate toilet and bin facilities; stigma or negative attitudes from teachers or peers; and difficulty obtaining a period product, whether due to cost, forgetting, or fear of asking others or navigating their schools' lengthy processes.

Some progress has already been made in several Australian jurisdictions in relation to the provision of free period products in schools. In light of the significant impacts of menstruation on student wellbeing and engagement, it is recommended that the NSRA include comprehensive national policy initiatives that promote menstrual wellbeing, awareness and education. Such initiatives should:

- Formally recognise menstruation and period poverty as a barrier to school attendance.
- Develop best practice resources for schools in relation to period product and bin supply, bathroom access, and uniform policy.
- Provide free period products in all Australian schools.
- Review menstruation education to ensure all children across all year levels receive consistent and age-appropriate education so they feel prepared, comfortable and confident to manage their period.

4. **Include national policy initiatives in relation to the following:**
a. **Improve the consistency and quality of civics and citizenship education.**

Children and young people have unique experiences and ideas, and they want to be active members in their communities and prepared for life outside of school. However, significant numbers of young people report making it through their years of schooling

without being taught about the systems and communities they live in, the democratic processes that affect their lives, and their rights and responsibilities.

> "Kids want to be included. The government & world leaders hold our future, yet exclude us from shaping it. If we are to trust others, they should trust us and include us in what may very well shape our lives."
> – 14 year old

Results from the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (the NAP-CC) reflect this. In 2019, only 53% of Year 6 students attained the proficient standard and only 38% of Year 10 students attained the proficient standard for civics and citizenship.[xviii] There were significant disparities in results between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as well as by geographic location, parental education and parental occupation.

Improving these results should be a national priority. Although achievement in civics and citizenship is measured as part of the National Measurement Framework, the sub-outcomes related to academic achievement in the current NSRA are limited to literacy and numeracy, mathematics and science.

It is therefore recommended that the next NSRA commit to initiatives that will improve the consistency and quality of civics and citizenship education and ultimately increase the proportion of students attaining the proficient standard. This will ensure the NSRA is aligned with the aspiration set out in the Mparntwe Declaration 'that all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful learners, and active and informed community members'.

### b. Support schools to prevent and respond to bullying in ways that reflect children and young people's voices and experiences.

While children and young people understand how difficult it can be to prevent bullying, they also have ideas to inform bullying prevention strategies. They describe quality friendships as an important protective factor against bullying, and they want teachers and other adult role models to more proactively support respectful and positive relationships, which they see as more effective than punitive responses.[xix]

Bullying poses a significant risk of physical, emotional and psychological harm to children and young people. Schools can play a crucial role in preventing bullying and minimising the impacts of bullying on student wellbeing and engagement.

The NSRA should therefore commit all levels of government to the delivery of school-based bullying prevention programs that:

- Are developed in ways that actively include students;
- Equip students with skills and opportunities to make friendships, respectfully navigate difficulties in relationships and support their peers;
- Equip teachers and schools to deliver programs that proactively support positive peer relationships and respond to bullying without resorting to exclusionary or punitive responses, including access to counselling services where appropriate.

### c. Recognise and address the impacts of gender stereotypes and sexism on students.

One of the enduring themes across all aspects of my work has been the impact of sexism, gender roles, and gender stereotyping on children and young people's aspirations, relationships and wellbeing. Although gender stereotypes and sexism are prevalent well before children start school, it is clear that school is a place where there these messages are amplified and perpetuated.

My 2022 *Stereotypes and Sexism* Report brings children and young people's perspectives and experiences to the fore, highlighting that sexism is often considered a normal part of school culture and is generally not reported due to a belief that nothing can or will be done about it.[xx]

Given the far-reaching impacts of gender stereotypes on almost every aspect of a child or young person's life, it is critical that the NSRA recognises and addresses the impacts of gender stereotypes and sexism on the confidence, engagement, wellbeing and attainment of all students, regardless of gender identity. This includes national policy initiatives that:

- Ensure the consistent delivery of age-appropriate, culturally relevant and inclusive relationships and sexual health education across all year levels;
- Embed gender equity into teaching materials, anti-bullying policies and behaviour management practices; and
- Training for pre-service teachers and non-teaching school staff to understand and respond to gender stereotypes, gender bias and gender-based bullying and harassment in school environments.

### 5. Include student wellbeing as an outcome with associated targets, measures and policy initiatives, consistent with recommendations from the Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry as well as children and young people's views and expectations.

There is a significant body of research highlighting the direct relationship between student wellbeing and learning outcomes.[xxi] This reflects what children and young people have consistently told me: that they are more likely to engage in school and schoolwork when they feel safe and supported, and that they want schools to balance wellbeing and academic achievement.

*"Students need a balance of academic focus and personal wellbeing, instead of focusing on only one which can often affect a student's overall performance. Things such as mental health may be more promoted, and this ties in which (with) academic success."*

While schools are already involved in supporting student wellbeing, this role 'has never been clearly articulated by governments'.[xxii] Consistent with recommendations from the Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry, it is essential that the next NSRA include a national commitment to support student wellbeing.

I support the Mental Health Inquiry's recommendation that one possible outcome for the NSRA could be that 'all students gain the skills required to support their own wellbeing and are able to seek support when required'.

I encourage Australian governments to consider all of the Inquiry's recommended reforms. Many of the practical and specific reforms recommended throughout this submission can also form part of a comprehensive set of policy responses that support this outcome, alongside nationally consistent indicators of student wellbeing.

6. **Include additional measures to provide a more relevant, reliable and complete picture of student engagement and attainment outcomes, including measures that:**
   a. **Monitor school suspensions and exclusions, with a view to reducing exclusionary behaviour management practices.**

Suspensions and exclusions are punitive processes that can have long-term effects on children's educational attainment and experiences of school, as well as their emotional wellbeing, relationships and aspirations for the future. Research has also shown that "marginalised and excluded young people at an increased risk of juvenile and, eventually, adult incarceration."[xxiii]

Anything with the potential for such a substantive impact on student wellbeing and attainment must be subject to the most rigorous standards and oversight.

My 2020 *Blame Game* Report focuses on children and young people's experiences of school exclusion.[xxiv] Evidence shows that exclusionary practices disproportionately impact children in care, children with disabilities or illnesses, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children experiencing homelessness or poverty.[xxv]

It is recommended that the next NSRA include nationally consistent measures to capture the prevalence of school suspensions and exclusions. This will provide a more relevant, reliable and complete picture of student engagement and attainment, and should be disaggregated by school, age, sex, gender, disability and health status, Indigenous status, cultural background and socioeconomic background, care status and other relevant background factors.

This measure could provide the basis for national policy initiatives that reduce the incidence and impact of exclusionary behaviour management practices. Such initiatives could include:

- Early identification of students at risk of exclusions and proactive intervention approaches that can adapt to children's needs and keep students connected over the long-term;
- Ensuring opportunities for students, or a family member or advocate, to have direct involvement in any decision-making about exclusion or alternative arrangements;
- Ensuring exclusion from school is not exclusion from education, and that schools maintain contact with and make resources available for students, as though they were physically attending school; and
- Providing practical resources for teachers and school leaders to reduce the number of exclusions and school level incentives to do so.

### b. Make visible children who are currently detached from school and 'missing' in current measures of attendance, retention and achievement.

Several national reports have highlighted the complex problem of school detachment, with conservative estimates suggesting that at least 50, 000 children and young people of school age have detached from any educational program or institution across Australia at any given time.[xxvi]

Current indicators of school attendance, retention and completion tend to:
- exclude children and young people of school age who are not accounted for in the system because they are not enrolled;
- use averages for attendance that hide the number of students who are habitual or chronic non-attenders; and
- inflate the percentage of student retention up to year 12 by not counting students who 'drop out' during the year.

Beyond the Year 12 completion target, there is no national response to disengagement or detachment from schools. Without measures to distinguish between 'disengaged students' and 'detached students' or to adequately keep track of detached young people, these young people 'disappear'.

It is therefore recommended that the next NSRA include measures to better capture the true extent of school detachment across Australia and keep track of these 'missing' students. Capturing the true extent of school detachment across Australia should be the first step in the development of national policy initiatives that prevent detachment early by targeting the complex range of factors that can impact attendance and lead to school disengagement and then detachment.

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iv Connolly, Helen. Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia, 2020. *Take Care: What can be done at school to support children and young people with caring responsibilities at home*. Available at https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Take-Care-What-can-be-done-at-school-to-support-children-and-young-people-with-caring-responsibilities-at-home.pdf.

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ix Thiele, K et al. 2022. Attending school every day counts – but kids in out-of-home care are missing out', The Conversation. Available at https://theconversation.com/attending-school-every-day-counts-but-kids-in-out-of-home-care-are-missing-out-182299.

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