



# Submission to the Senate Inquiry into School Refusal and related matters

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December 2022

## Introduction

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my role includes advocating for systemic changes to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of children and young people in South Australia.

It is also my role to ensure the State fulfils its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the UNCRC). The UNCRC sets out the rights of all children, including the right to an education that develops their personality and talents to the full (Articles 28 and 29) and the right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives (Article 12).

Through my regular interaction with thousands of children and young people from diverse backgrounds since 2017, I have gained a privileged insight into children and young people's views and experiences of school.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role of schools as places that provide more than academic instruction; schools foster opportunities, relationships and skills that are critical to children's development, health, safety, wellbeing, confidence and aspirations.

For some children, school is a sanctuary, a place of inspiration and a safety net when things are challenging. Others 'refuse' to go as they experience school as restrictive and exclusionary, and a place where they do not feel safe.

My remit is systemic advocacy and the hundreds of individual matters related to children's experiences in the education system point to systemic issues that result in disengagement and refusal. These stories affect children and families from a young age and across school sectors and diverse socioeconomic, family and geographic backgrounds. Behind these individual experiences are a range of systemic issues that must be addressed if we are to meet our obligations under the UNCRC, the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and other relevant legislation and Conventions.

This submission includes case studies of children and families whose lives have been impacted by formal and informal processes of exclusion, bullying and discrimination, access barriers and poor treatment in educational settings and services failing to deliver on their fundamental right to education. Often these experiences result in children not wanting to return back to school. The impact of systemic failures in education systems on children's lives are often long-lasting, not only influencing their experience of schooling but their engagement with a range of services and their aspirations, as well as how they view themselves and their place in the world.

## Background and summary of recommendations

I welcome the Senate Education and Employment References Committee's Inquiry into the 'national trend of school refusal' and related matters. However, the Inquiry's Terms of Reference appear to be limited to a focus on the impacts of school refusal and existing responses to the 'growing refusal challenge'.

School refusal can be thought of as a symptom. This submission, therefore, investigates some of the causes and asks the Committee to investigate and understand the range of

factors that can contribute to children and young people not feeling safe, trusted, understood or heard in the education system itself.

When the focus is on addressing the symptoms alone, the underlying causes of school disengagement, refusal or avoidance at a systemic level too often go unnoticed. It is only by examining the structure and culture of school practices and environments alongside individual and family factors that we can ensure appropriate, timely and holistic responses to school refusal. This includes looking at how students learn, what they learn, the environments in which they learn.

It is recognised that some of the key issues affecting school attendance have their origins outside of the school setting, but it is the way that schools are equipped to respond to these issues that matter and can either further isolate a student or give them the support they need. Rather than expecting and requiring children to adapt to a school system that is not consistently able, equipped or willing to respond to their needs, changes are needed at a systemic level to ensure education systems and other systems across Australia are meeting the needs of all children and young people.

If we are unable to find a way of ensuring that schools provide an inclusive, safe and nurturing environment for all children, we are at risk of creating a group of children who are deemed ‘uneducable’ by our mainstream education system.

Active consideration must be given to addressing policies and practices that undermine children and young people’s feelings of safety, trust and wellbeing at school. This includes the extent to which schools respect children’s right to privacy or promote student voice and agency, as well as the ways in which schools ‘manage behaviour’ or respond to bullying and discrimination.

Many mainstream schools appear to be ill-prepared and ill-equipped to meet the needs of children and young people experiencing homelessness, financial insecurity and poverty, children with caring responsibilities, children with disability, children with mental health, chronic illness and other health conditions.

The alternative and flexible schooling sector caters to young people who have been excluded from, failed by or otherwise disengaged from mainstream schools. The significant growth of this relatively new school sector over recent years suggests that fundamental changes to the mainstream schooling system are needed to ensure that it is meeting its responsibility of providing an education for *all* children and young people.

This Inquiry is an opportunity to look at the drivers within the educational system behind school refusal, outside of what is happening at home. It is recommended that adopting a rights-based approach to the education system could reduce the drivers behind school refusals.

This submission is informed by what children and young people have told me would create more safe and inclusive school environments, more participatory and meaningful lessons and classrooms, and more trusting and respectful relationships with peers and teachers. It is critical that we listen to children and young people in order to ensure responses understand and address the reality of children and young people’s lives, including challenges they face and their day-to-day experiences of school.

We know that the longer the underlying issues contributing to school refusal remain unaddressed, the more difficult it is for children and young people to return and re-engage in schooling. Rather than delaying responses until after students have disengaged, we need to support proactive, preventative and participatory approaches to creating environments that value, embed and incentivise wellbeing, safety, relationships and engagement.

I hope this Inquiry can inform systemic educational responses to school refusal as part of a bigger ambition to address cycles of disadvantage and vulnerability affecting children and young people. Such a multi-sector response should support schools to understand and address barriers to school engagement and attendance through working in partnership with families and sectors outside of the education system, including in health, housing, justice, child protection and social inclusion. If you would like to discuss anything further, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

**Recommendations include:**

- 1. Explore and address the systemic educational drivers that negatively impact on children and young people's experiences of and connection to school, including:**
  - a) Exclusionary 'behaviour management' practices, including formal and informal suspensions and exclusions.**
  - b) Bullying and discrimination, including racism, ableism, sexism and gender stereotypes, homophobia and transphobia.**
  - c) Financial insecurity, poverty and homelessness.**
- 2. Recognise and seek to reduce barriers to education for particular groups of children, including:**
  - a) Children with chronic illness.**
  - b) Children with caring responsibilities.**
  - c) Children affected by parental incarceration.**
  - d) Children and young people in out-of-home care.**
- 3. Place the rights and interests of children and young people front and centre in school culture and policies, practices and environments, with particular regard to promoting student voice and agency, mental health and wellbeing, privacy and trust.**
- 4. Improve national data collection to provide a more complete picture of student engagement, including measures that:**

- a) Monitor school suspensions and exclusions, with a view to reducing exclusionary practices.
- b) Make visible children who are detached from school and 'missing' from current indicators.

Yours sincerely



**Helen Connolly**

Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia

## 1. Recognise and address the impact of the following on children and young people's experiences of and connection to school:

### a) Exclusionary 'behaviour management' practices, including formal and informal suspensions and exclusions.

Punitive and exclusionary 'behaviour management' practices can have a long-term effect on children's educational attainment and experiences of school, as well as their emotional wellbeing, relationships and aspirations for the future. Such practices range from children being singled out and humiliated in front of their peers, having restricted access to play areas or being encouraged to stay home to more formal suspensions and exclusions.

My 2022 *Blame Game* Report focuses on the causes and impacts of school exclusion from the perspective of children and young people and their families.<sup>i</sup> School exclusions can result in severe feelings of isolation and disengagement from education, with many children and young people who are excluded internalising the message that they are inherently 'bad', 'unwanted' and 'unwelcome'.

In many cases, exclusion reflects a systemic failure to provide the supports, infrastructure and resources required to ensure every child, regardless of their circumstances and what is happening at home, can access their education. Exclusionary practices disproportionately impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, children in out-of-care, children living with disability and children experiencing poverty or homelessness.<sup>ii</sup> Children are being excluded as early as preschool and reception years, often due to a lack of adequate support available to help a child regulate their emotions in a new, unfamiliar environment.

While some young people acknowledged that some of the issues challenging their engagement with their education had their origins outside of the school setting, they felt that the responses being made within schools simply aren't working. Indeed, research shows that exclusionary responses to any behaviour not only fail to reduce problem behaviour but may exacerbate existing challenges and create the conditions for further behavioural issues, resulting in refusals.<sup>iii</sup>

Any practice that has the potential to effect children and young people's wellbeing resulting in school refusal and affecting their right to an education and them not achieving their highest potential must be subject to the most rigorous standards and oversight.

As such, it is critical that:

- Decisions to exclude children from education should only ever be used as a 'last possible resort'.
- Restorative and non-exclusionary practices are promoted and students at risk of exclusion are identified and proactively connected with appropriate supports.
- Exclusion from school is not exclusion from education, and schools maintain contact with and make resources available for students.
- Natural justice and procedural fairness be improved by ensuring that decision-making considers alternative arrangements, the best interests of the child, accounting for child safety, carer responsibilities.



- The number of suspensions and exclusions is publicly reported and disaggregated by school and school sectors, age, gender, disability status, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, cultural background and socioeconomic background (see Recommendation 4a).

*“the way school wants kids to learn doesn't work for the kids. It's lonely and means my bedroom is my safe place. School is too noisy and too confusing. just because I have autism shouldn't mean school should be a too hard place. teachers just tell me i'm difficult or lazy. It's too hard to be around the other kids. I don't know what theyre thinking about me. then school tells my mum she's a bad mum and the boss comes to my house. that makes me want to stay at home more”*

– 17 year old, female

*“Help ‘bad’ students instead of just giving up on them and sending them straight out. I have witnessed ‘bad’ students struggling and see them about to get into trouble, but then I assist the student and they actually end up listening to me, and I am able to get the student interested ... Maybe it should be recommended that the struggling students get a peer to help them that is not struggling.”*

– Unknown Blame Game report

#### **b. Bullying and discrimination, including racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia.**

All forms of bullying can result in students refusing to go to school and educators play a critical role in preventing and responding to bullying in ways that minimise the psychological, physical and emotional impacts on children and young people, even if this happens external of schools. Many children and young people report that what teachers and schools don't do can be just as powerful as what they do, particularly when teachers fail to intervene and protect students from bullying.

Being bullied at school can be a traumatic experience. Unsurprisingly, it is not only a key predictor of school attendance problems but there is also a well-established link between bullying and mental health, with unique ‘bidirectional’ relationships between depression, anxiety and victimisation.<sup>iv</sup>

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises bullying as a form of violence that ‘not only harms a child's physical and psychological integrity and wellbeing in the immediate term, but often has severe impact on his or her development, education and social integration in the medium and long term’.<sup>v</sup>

As school is where most children make friends this can effect their socialisation and peer-on-peer relationships. If children and young people cannot spend time with their friends and enjoying themselves, then this too violates their right to participate in leisure and play (Article 30 of the UNCRC).

Children describe quality friendships as an important protective factor against bullying, and they want teachers and other adult role models to support respectful and positive relationships more proactively, which they see as more effective than punitive responses. They also want schools to:

- Protect children from intimidation, embarrassment, humiliation and harm, including through referral to counselling and other support services where appropriate.
- Understand differences in forms of bullying (physical, verbal, emotional) and what it is focused on (appearance, race, gender and sexuality, family, disability).
- Call out bullying for what it is (racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, body-shaming, etc) and respond in age-appropriate and gender-sensitive ways without resorting to exclusionary responses.
- Understand powerful impact of the values of the school system on children and young people's physical and mental health (eg. being mindful of the potential impacts of how they talk about appearance, gender stereotypes and food).
- Model respectful behaviour in relationships with students and with other teachers, parents and families and the wider community.
- Check in on student wellbeing rather than the onus being on children to report bullying incidents.
- Equip students with skills and opportunities to make friendships, support their peers and navigate difficult situations.

### **Ableism and the rights of children with disability**

Any conversation about school refusal must include a conversation about making schools safer and welcome places for children and young people with disability. From a very young age, children with disability are disproportionately impacted by exclusions from school and bullying. These are two of many systemic concerns that my office has heard from children and young people, families and stakeholders in the disability and education sector.

Other systemic concerns that can result in school refusal include:

- A concerning use of restrictive practices against children with disability, including restraint, isolation and seclusion which makes children scared of returning to school;
- Inadequate training and resources for teachers to identify and make reasonable adjustments for disability-related needs so that they respond to students in a trauma informed way; and
- A lack of consultation between education providers and students and families regarding potential support and adjustments.

All children with disability have the right to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers without disability. These rights are enshrined in the UNCRC and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) and protected in the Disability Discrimination Act (Cth) and the Disability Standards for Education.

Despite this, Australia has one of the lowest educational attainment rates of people with disability and one of the lowest employment rates of people with disability when compared to other OECD countries.

Many children with complex disability needs also have complex mental health needs or experiences of trauma, often rooted in their experience of exclusion and bullying in education system. To prevent school refusals for this group of children it is time to commit to real actions and partnerships to ensure compliance with Disability Standards for



Education and ensure teachers and schools are supported and equipped to work with external agencies and engage with families to identify and understand disability-related needs, provide reasonable adjustments, recognise the interplay between trauma and disability and the importance of positive behavioural support.

*“Rosie” is 13 years old and has a severe intellectual disability attends an Inclusive Education centre and needs 1:1 support for all daily living tasks. Rosie has a Comprehensive Behaviour Support plan in place. The plan recommends co-regulation for Rosie to de-escalate. Rosie has had three suspensions from school this year and the family are unclear why the suspensions have occurred and what preceded the need for Rosie to be sent home. The school has said that there is difficulty with SSO support and consistency of staffing, which means Rosie must go home. Following a recent incident occurred Rosie received a 2-day suspension after property damage occurred when she was left alone in a room to calm down after an escalation, not in compliance with the recommendation made in her Plan. Mum has received a bill for part of the costs and is concerned that this will continue if adequate behaviour support strategies are not put in place for Rosie. It is causing mum stress to send Rosie to school every day, unsure if she will receive the support she requires and fearing that more escalations and damage will occur.*

Providing for a proactive and independent oversight mechanisms to ensure compliance with the Standards, alongside strengthening Human Rights legislation across Australia, would also provide a strong base to meaningfully impact the safety and wellbeing of children with disability at school as well as their educational engagement and outcomes.

*“I have been suspended when it’s been my teacher not understanding what I need due to my disability.”*

– 13 year old, male

*“Just because I have autism, shouldn’t mean school should be a too hard place. Teachers just tell me I’m difficult or lazy.”*

– 17 year old, female

## **Racism and cultural safety**

*“Corey” is a 14-year-old Aboriginal boy who lives with his grandmother, mother and four brothers in a regional town. His mum is currently getting drug rehabilitation support and lives with a significant mental illness. Family life has been characterised by family violence, chronic illness and frequent moves and Corey also has caring responsibilities for family members.*

*When Corey was in grade 5 he received his first formal suspension. His mum was called to pick him up from school, where his teacher, the school principal, and an Aboriginal staff member told her that Corey had been hanging out with the ‘wrong crowd’ of children who had been throwing rocks during lunch break. When Mum questioned whether suspension was necessary, the school was firm in its decision.*

Corey was angry about his punishment. He was the only one of the group of children who was suspended, despite the fact that he hadn't been throwing rocks himself. He felt singled out. Corey enjoyed being out of school on suspension. He had no homework to complete and wasn't worried about missing lessons. He didn't enjoy the chores his mum made him do, and when it came time to return to school he begged to be transferred to another school. Mum attended the school meetings required for re-entry and filled out the paperwork. Since then Corey's attendance has been sporadic and he has missed many days of school each year through suspensions, being kept home due to living with immunocompromised family, cultural business and his own mental health.

He says most days he sits at home with his older brothers "smoking weed". Corey has not been in school since the start of the year. Corey says as far as he knows his school have not followed this up or attempted to re-engage him. He has recently been referred for mental health support by an aboriginal community-controlled organization that works with his mum for help with his low mood. He is unsure if he will attend the service.

Racism is an everyday reality for many children and young people, including at school and can result in refusal. Children and young people describe racist bullying and discrimination from other peers, but also from some teachers who 'protect racist students', ignore and minimise comments made by others or make racist comments themselves.

Experiencing racism is a risk factor for mental ill-health and can result in students refusing to engage in school and even community activities. It can lead to strong feelings of anger and frustration and undermine children and young people's trust in adults, institutions and organisations. Unsurprisingly, racism impacts a child's confidence and sense of self-worth as well as on their personal and cultural identity and overall sense of belonging and potential.

Conversations about school refusal among Aboriginal children and young people must consider their experiences of individual and systemic racism in the education system and other systems and institutions. Issues of systemic discrimination must be explored along with the social determinants of wellbeing in order to inform culturally safe and localised responses.

Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds describe racism as a barrier to feeling welcomed in the schools and communities in which they live, study, work and play.

While some children describe the positive impact of teachers who are committed to cultural safety, others describe the impacts of being treated differently based on their skin colour, cultural traditions, religion or language. Although some schools celebrate diversity, from children and young people's perspective, there does not appear to be much action in terms of addressing 'the real issues' of preventing and combating racism in schools, including in curriculum content and policies.

*"Educate the teachers about racism & making sure that they are aware of what they say & the impact it can have on the person they are saying it. Teachers are not always right and*

*they can be more racist than the students”*  
– 16 year old, female

## Sexism and gender stereotypes

The significant impacts of sexism and gender stereotyping on children and young people's aspirations, relationships, wellbeing, confidence and engagement has been an enduring theme across all aspects of my work. Although gender stereotypes and sexism are prevalent well before children start school, it is clear that school is a place where these messages are amplified and perpetuated.

We must look closely at the environments that enable and reinforce sexist attitudes, derogatory comments, jibes, and sexual harassment that could result in some children refusing to go to school. This means addressing the behaviour of adults as well as the behaviour of children and young people.

It is critical that we embed gender equality into the educational, social, relational, and cultural aspects of schools by supporting schools to:

- Ensure the consistent delivery of age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and inclusive relationships and sexual health education across all year levels.
- Review anti-bullying policies, teaching materials and behaviour management practices to ensure they specifically address sexism and gender-based bullying and promote gender equity.
- Acknowledge and implement peer to peer responses to bullying, sexism, gendered norms and stereotyping.
- Provide training to all pre-service teachers and non-teaching school staff to understand and respond, challenge and 'call out' gender stereotypes, gender bias and gender-based bullying and harassment in school environments.

My 2022 *Stereotypes and Sexism Report* highlights that sexism is too 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.<sup>vi</sup>

*“boys who don’t act as stereotypes are usually excluded more often. Such as if they are weaker, display their emotions more often – they are usually the ones bullied or made fun of.”*  
– 14 year old, male

*“In primary school boys are taught to be strong like when teachers ask for things to be moved by “strong boys”. Girls are taught to be complacent and always say yes.”*  
– 12 year old, female

*“In co-ed schools when the boys did something bad, the girls were asked to sit between them or walk to the front office.”*  
– 11 year old, female

## Homophobia and transphobia

Responses to school refusal must focus on the cumulative impact of day-to-day experiences of indirect and direct discrimination in school environments where LGBTQIA+ children and young people are harassed, made fun of, shamed, ignored, excluded, ‘othered’ or ‘publicly outed’.

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. Some young people have reported living in fear of being punished and excluded, and that the kind of exclusion they experience goes beyond formal disciplinary processes and includes exclusion from in the curriculum, stereotyping in classrooms, and a tolerance of discrimination and harassment that repeatedly goes unchallenged.

*“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.<sup>vii</sup>

My 2021 *No Exceptions* Report and my guide to building *LGBTQIA+ 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.<sup>viii</sup>

### **c. Financial insecurity, poverty and homelessness.**

Children say being poor has a huge negative impact on their life at school which can result in them not wanting to go to school. It not only effects their learning, but also their friendships, sense of self-worth and how comfortable they feel attending and how they are treated by their peers, their peers’, parents’ and their teachers. Not having ‘enough lunch’ or ‘no clean clothes’ and being bullied are common issues faced by children living in poverty<sup>ix</sup>.

One in eight people in Australia, including one in six children, live below the poverty line.<sup>x</sup> In South Australia, 1 in 4 children and young people are estimated to be living in the state’s most disadvantaged circumstances.<sup>xi</sup> Child poverty is real, and in a country of relative abundance, it should not and must not be tolerated.

Poverty, financial insecurity and homelessness must be acknowledged as contributing factors in children’s experiences of not feeling welcomed at school and in formal school exclusions. Children growing up in poverty and homelessness 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 and homelessness 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.

Australian governments must collaborate on multi-agency responses that address the impacts of child poverty on student engagement, wellbeing and participation and support to families to ensure that every child has food, a safe and warm home, and can participate fully in school and community. Doing so will give effect to the Mpartnwe Declaration's national goal that education should promote equity as well as excellence. Such multi-agency responses should address:

- The true cumulative cost of going to school, including the cost of uniforms, digital devices, transport, stationery, textbooks and other materials, as well as the costs of participation in school camps, excursions, sport and other extracurricular activities.<sup>xii</sup>
- Food insecurity as a chronic issue and a symptom of poverty affecting more than 1.3 million children in Australia in the past 12 months.<sup>xiii</sup> Evidence across Australia and internationally shows that the provision of free school meals leads to marked improvements in student attendance, engagement and behaviour.<sup>xiv</sup>
- The reality of the impacts of digital poverty for children's rights and improve access to digital devices and data, along with the provision of opportunities for all children across preschools and schools to learn digital literacy and skills that are essential to engagement in education and employment.<sup>xv</sup>
- Period poverty and menstruation-related absence from school, which young people attribute to barriers to confidently managing their period at school, including: 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.<sup>xvi</sup>

## **2. Recognise and seek to reduce barriers and implement supports to education for particular groups of children.**

There are particular barriers and experiences of discrimination that disproportionately impact school attendance and educational outcomes for specific groups of students, including children with caring responsibilities, children living in poverty, those who identify as LGBTQIA+, those living with chronic illness or disability, and those living in out-of-home care.

Support for these students is too often vested in the goodwill of individual teachers or school leaders at a classroom or school level. There is a need for system-wide changes to school policies, practices and environments that consider the rights and needs of these students, acknowledge and address the unique barriers they face and ensure they have ongoing and consistent support.

### **a. Children with chronic illness.**

There is a lack of understanding of chronic illnesses in the education system. This is driving the exclusion and isolation of children suffering chronic illnesses, and at times, putting their safety at risk. Without a standardised policy or model of care in South Australia for children with chronic illnesses, these children are at risk of falling through significant system and service gaps.



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.

The government should be collecting data on the prevalence of chronic illness in children and young people across Australia. Without knowing the true extent of the problem, policymakers and support services are faced with considerable barriers to plan and implement effective support for children and young people living with chronic illness. My Issues Brief provides more information regarding the way schools currently treat children with chronic illness and the impacts on children's inclusion, participation, belonging and wellbeing.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **b. Children with caring responsibilities**

This Inquiry is also an opportunity 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.

Many children and young people have caring responsibilities that can place significant physical and mental strain on their wellbeing, attendance and engagement at school, and many young carers do not disclose their caring role. Currently, schools are not equipped to identify young carers and support for young carers at school is inconsistent, often dependent on the goodwill of individual teachers rather than system-wide approaches.

I encourage the Committee 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.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **c. Children affected by parental incarceration.**

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. It also has significant implications for a young person's ability to participate in the standard school day, whether due to fatigue, anxiety, emotional distress or concern for what they will do once the school day is over.

Despite some negative experiences at school, most young people felt it was important for teachers and schools to know about their situation to better support their wellbeing and keep them connected to learning, however they also wanted schools and educators to respect their privacy.

It is estimated that about 5 per cent of children throughout Australia will experience incarceration of a parent during their lifetime. 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.<sup>xix</sup> Although each child and young person's experiences are



unique and diverse, they often share experiences of social isolation, stigma, and bullying, as well as their feelings of anger, shame, and guilt ‘by association’.

At a national level, governments should commit to work with relevant agencies to identify children and young people affected by parental incarceration and make them a priority group to 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.

*“Jamie” is 13 years old and in Year 9 at school. He is the eldest of 4 children and they all live with their grandmother. Their father was living with the family, but he is currently in prison for a few years for drug trafficking. Their mother died a few years ago. Grandma is struggling to look after the kids as she has her own health issues and trauma history after living with a violent partner who died last year.*

*Jamie struggles with big emotions and is not getting any help to make sense of them. He has been in trouble at school and has been tormented by other kids for having a dad in prison. Sometimes he lashes out and is sent to the wellbeing leader.*

*There was recently an incident at school with a peer, after being reprimanded in front of the class, Jamie ‘lost it’ and yelled at his teacher. She in turn yelled at him and called him a criminal like his father. Jamie hasn’t been back to school since. Grandma can’t get him to go. He says he is home schooling because his grandma has health issues.*

#### **d. Children in out-of-home care.**

Children and young people in out-of-home care can have negative experiences at school and face significant barriers to school attendance, which can impact 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.<sup>xx</sup>

The State has additional responsibilities to ensure children removed from their families have the care, protection and physical environments to ensure their rights, interests and wellbeing are promoted and protected.

We need a national commitment to practical measures and policy initiatives that ensure children in out-of-home care receive trauma informed education and ensure they can’t be excluded without departmental approval, and they have a transition worker to support them move from kindy to primary school and then to secondary school. This will

### **3. To prevent school refusals it is important to place the rights and interests of children and young people front and centre of school culture and policies,**

### practices and environments, with particular regard to promoting student voice and agency, mental health and wellbeing, privacy and trust.

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 where they see the value in what they are learning and doing. Children and young people 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.<sup>xxi</sup>

Schools have a significant influence on children and young people's physical and mental health. Some students feel that their wellbeing only become a concern for schools when they aren't performing academically. Given that many young people face complex challenges inside and outside of school, it is critical that school counsellors and other available support services are equipped to deal with issues beyond academic underperformance and high levels of stress.

*"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."*

In most schools, students do not feel heard or valued or believed at school, that their worries dismissed, and that they do not know where to get help or how to help others. They want schools to better understand the range of issues and experiences that affect mental health, including bullying and discrimination, difficulties with friendships and belonging, exclusion, competition and being compared to others.

They want to have more of a say regarding:

- How **they learn**, including teaching methods and project-based, hands-on learning opportunities.
- **What they learn**, including financial literacy and other 'life skills', relationships and sexual health education and civics and citizenship education.
- **Where they learn**, including the look and feel of study and play spaces, policies regarding uniforms and bathroom access.

Young people's ideas for how schools can better support student wellbeing and prevent school refusal include:

- Show understanding of how life 'outside' of school can influence behaviour, mood, and attention, reduce stigma around help-seeking and be willing to proactively provide support (including referrals to further support) rather than waiting for kids to ask for help.
- Foster collaboration rather than competition, including by promoting opportunities for students to support each other and learn from each other.
- Talk openly with them and get to know them and the issues they face both as a generation and as individuals.
- Provide mechanisms for students to give direct feedback on learning and more one-on-one or small-group discussions and support and less 'lecture-style learning'.

- Promote children and young people's feelings of belonging in classroom and school environments, including through displaying symbols of acceptance or children and young people's artwork, making useful and relevant information available to them, or fundraising for causes that matter to them.
- Support children and young people to successfully navigate key transitions.

*"Our education system needs to focus on teaching students about the world, not how to get a good grade. There's no grades in life, but there are morals, failures and successes, and education should overarching teach us how to deal with them."*

– 14 year old

*"Make school tasks use more imagination so kids can do what they do best."*

– 11 year old

*"more opportunities to have breaks and be active, more help from teachers and SSOs to help kids feel safe and to learn"*

– 12 year old

*"support students - flexibility in learning - more counselling meeting opportunities - educate themselves about the generation they're teaching – inclusivity"*

– 17 year old, female

Young people said they need to know more about what support is available to them both inside and outside of school, and for there to be clearer referral pathways. There is a lack of coordination between education and mental health systems. Embedding a coordinated multi-sector response that provides for a continuum of supports and involve schools, community partners and different levels of government, as well as primary health care, including professional and peer workforce teams who are specialists in child and adolescent health.

To this end, it is worth asking what can mainstream schools learn from alternative flexible schooling models?

Stakeholders have raised concerns that the growth of the 'flexi-school' system risks absolving mainstream schools of responsibility for all students, providing an 'easy option' for mainstream schools to 'give up' those who are not fitting in. For as long as mainstream schools are not meeting the educational needs of significant numbers of young people, alternative options will be necessary. Mainstream schools should be supported to integrate approaches from the flexible or alternative schooling model, including:

- Strong connections with local community, organisations and services.
- Individualised case management and planning models that allow for more personalised learning tailored to children and young people's needs.
- Smaller class sizes, higher staff to students ratio and more diverse composition of staff, including social workers, youth workers and volunteers in addition to teachers.
- Focus on wellbeing, relationships, cultural safety and high expectations for all students, avoiding deficit views of those who are not 'achieving'.

- Hands on and project-based learning experiences that align with student interests.

Given the high rates of school exclusion as well as the fact mental health struggles often begin in childhood, programs and support need to start early and providing alternatives for students aged 16 or 17 years old is too late.

Children and young people also talk about the ‘lack of privacy’ at school and a tendency for schools to ‘nit-pick over small things’ like uniforms ‘rather than more relevant issues’, fail to ‘act out against discrimination’ or ‘not carrying out initiative organised by students’.

They range of breaches to their privacy, including bag searches, the removal of toilet doors, the use of cameras and bans on mobile phones. Some young people have reported not telling school staff everything they would like to because ‘everybody knows’ they will feed what they say back to their parents. This fear of disclosure is a barrier to reaching out and accessing the support they need. This is particularly difficult in regional areas, where ‘everyone knows everyone’ and there are fewer support services available.

*“lack of privacy, share everyone's grades to class, don't support students academically, don't act out against discrimination, treat you differently compared to someone else due to religion/sexuality etc.”*

– 17 year old, female

*“school psych sometimes alerting people without permission”*

– 16 year old, male

*“Try to treat students fair and the same. When someone needs to go to the toilet let them”*

– 9 year old

#### **4. Improve national data collection to provide a more complete picture of student engagement, including measures that:**

##### **a. Monitor school suspensions and exclusions, with a view to reducing exclusionary practices.**

Given the significant impacts of suspensions and exclusions, it is recommended that nationally consistent measures are introduced 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 data should inform the development of policies that reduce the incidence and impact of exclusionary behaviour management practices and promote restorative, non-exclusionary responses to behaviour (See recommendation 1a).

##### **b. Make visible children who are detached from school and ‘missing’ from current indicators.**

Disengagement often starts early, with many children and their families feeling as though they are seen as a ‘problem’ from their first interactions with the education system. This

can lead to a breakdown in trust and relationships that can be transmitted intergenerationally and result in families avoiding formal learning environments.

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.<sup>xxii</sup>

Current indicators of school attendance, retention and completion hide the number of students who are habitual or chronic non-attenders. 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’.

We must develop measures to better capture the true extent of school detachment and keep track of these ‘missing’ students and actively seek them out and provide all the supports available to wrap around the child to get them into schooling and education.

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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