

STINGY SCHOOLS PUT IMAGE BEFORE KIDS

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SECONDARY students are being encouraged to quit or move into vocational education courses by schools anxious to maintain high year 12 scores, a report has found.

Children and Young Person Commissioner Helen Connolly has criticised the practice, saying it was putting further stress on high schoolers already under “overwhelming pressure” to achieve good results.

“Schools should not be adding to this by putting their public image above the wellbeing of students, especially their mental health,” she said.

Ms Connolly said private schools were using the strategy to maintain high ATAR scores for marketing purposes while public schools wanted as many students as possible to obtain their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE).

In a new report, Ms Connolly said a statewide survey of 300 year 12 students heard schoolmates had dropped out of private or public schools at the end of year 11.

Ms Connolly said students had told her they were “aware of ongoing pressure being applied to peers who schools believed may not successfully complete their SACE certificate”.

“They suspected that, despite there being a few ‘dropouts’, schools had also asked some young people to leave before they started their final year,” she said.

“This was being done either by excluding them or by encouraging them to pursue VET pathways,” said her report. “Young people felt that tactics like these were being applied partly because of the pressure schools are placed under to maintain their SACE completion rates, and uphold their public reputation and standing.”

Ms Connolly said public school principals had told her underperforming year 11 students often were encouraged to undertake vocational educational training in year 12 to ensure they passed SACE or consider leaving.

Private school administrators have told The Advertiser it was common to encourage the parents of lower-achieving year 11 students to move them into the public system rather than continuing paying fees.

Several public secondary principals have confirmed their schools regularly received calls from private schools asking if they could accommodate year 11 students during mid-year intakes. They said the strategy was used by private schools to preserve high SACE pass rates and ATAR scores for marketing purposes.

Ms Connolly said there was concern among year 12 students over the “immense amount of pressure” to achieve high ATAR scores and complete SACE.

“Children as young as eight are saying they worry about year 12 and their future beyond school if they don’t do well on their ATAR,” she said.

Ms Connolly said her survey, which included conversations with more than 100 students, found year 12 students believed too much emphasis was put on high ATAR scores.

“Young people identified the need to challenge the false and unhelpful narrative around achieving a high ATAR as the only worthwhile pathway post-school,” she said. “These narratives are dominant in children’s lives from a young age and exacerbate the pressure they feel to have everything figured out by the time they start year 12, let alone by the time they complete it.”

Ms Connolly said students also had told her they did not believe they had received enough support or direction during year 12, especially about their future career choices or study.

Education Minister Blair Boyer said Ms Connolly’s report provided important insights from young people “that we can use to make our education system better”.

“Our public schools are for every South Australian,” he said. “It is my expectation as the Education Minister that every student is supported to follow their passion and pathway of choice.”

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