South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People 2022

Advocacy Agenda for South Australia's Children and Young People

Commissioner for Children & Young People

The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act').

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

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Introduction

Under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*, each State authority "must, in carrying out its functions or exercising its powers, protect, respect and seek to give effect to the rights set out from time to time in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child". This means that public agencies must be seeking to always do what is in the best interests of the child (Article 3) including keeping children safe. Similarly, under the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* and the *Children's Protection Act 1993*, statutory bodies must comply with provision of child safe environments.

I was appointed as South Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People in April 2017 and reappointed for a further three years in 2022. In this role, I have a mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* to advocate for the rights, interests, and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia.

As Commissioner my role is to ensure that the State, at all levels of government, fulfils its international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of South Australian children and young people. An essential part of my approach is to hear directly from children and young people about their lives, and what changes they would like to see made. I represent their interests to political and civic leaders who have responsibility for the development and implementation of legislation, policy and processes that deliver quality and best practice services to South Australian children and young people.

South Australia's children and young people have been born into a century that is characterised by rapid and unprecedented civic, social, technological, environmental, and political change. This change has created uncertainty and complexity in their lives and is shaping the individual and collective values, identities, and sense of self and belonging of all children and young people throughout the world.

For some time now they have been vocalising their concerns about growing inequality, disrespect, and exclusion based on age, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, and the impact climate change is having, particularly on future generations. While some children are focused on global solutions to global issues, almost all children are focused on the importance of making connections at a local level.

Children and young people have told me that in addition to quality education and healthcare, they want relationships with adults who trust, listen to and respect them as valued members of our communities. When children and young people do find the courage to voice their concerns, they told me that they often feel they're not taken seriously, or that the issues they raise are not adequately addressed.

> **At the core of valuing and respecting South Australia's children and young people is acknowledging and legitimatising the view that they are critical stakeholders who have a right to have input into decisions that impact their lives. The more our institutions, businesses, schools, sporting clubs, religious and other organisations can reflect this, the better quality of life they will have.**

They want us to see them as citizens whose wants, and needs are unique and distinct from those of adults.

The focus of my systemic advocacy over the next three years is based upon what South Australian children and young people have told me are their priorities and builds on the work completed in my first term.

This document provides an overview of the actions I will take over the next three years in relation to the health, safety, wellbeing, education and citizenship of South Australia's children and young people.

I urge all people with an interest in children's rights, wellbeing, and development, to consider dovetailing the contents of this advocacy plan with their own advocacy agendas. By combining our efforts to improving the lives of South Australia's children and young people, we will be working together to ensure SA children thrive. We will also be ensuring those who are the most vulnerable across our communities are not being left behind, now or in the future.

Health

Young South Australians are physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy

Physical health

Australian children and young people are among the least active in the world. A recent study found that only 24% of children aged 5–12 years and 8% of teenagers aged 13–17 years in South Australia are getting the 60 minutes of daily physical activity they need to lead a healthy lifestyle.[1]

Beyond the clear benefits regular exercise offers in developing physical fitness, maintaining health, and preventing long-term illnesses and chronic disease, studies highlight the connection between physical activity and mental health and wellbeing.

Australian kids spend 70% of their school day sitting down.[2] Overwhelmingly children have said they want more physical activity built into their school day. While primary-aged children are much more likely to have short fitness or movement breaks incorporated into their school day, high-school children mostly remain sedentary throughout school hours.

Children and young people are very aware of the benefits regular physical activity offers them, and the direct relationship that exists between being active and staying healthy – both physically and mentally. However, the competing demands of homework, a social life, extra curricular activities, and after-school casual jobs, mean that children, especially teenagers, aren't striking the recommended balance between sedentary and physical activity.

The school days of most primary school-aged children include opportunities to play games and run around with their peers during recess and lunch. They are often able to be more active in their lessons too. Younger children are encouraged to participate in outside play by their parents and teachers, and are generally given more time to 'run around' after school without having to settle in to homework that requires them to be seated and focused.

As children get older, however, participation in sports and physical activity drops off significantly. Recess and lunch times are usually spent 'hanging out' instead of 'playing' or 'running around'. Their class time is usually more sedentary and focused on screens.

Those teenagers who do lead active lives say their physical activity is often incorporated into their daily routines. Instead of participating in organised sport they might walk or cycle to school, help with household chores (like walking the dog) or be on their feet at a part-time retail or hospitality job.

Commitment to regular physical activity can be another external pressure on teenagers who are already working hard to manage what is invariably a more stressful yet important time in their lives.

With less opportunity to move around, teenagers said they felt physical activity also wasn't being promoted at school, and that there wasn't enough variety in the range of physical activities they were being offered.

For this age group too, many said they felt awkward about picking up a new sport or activity because their peers had often already been playing or involved for longer and were therefore more skilled, amplifying their inadequacy and limited skills.

Others, especially girls, felt self-conscious about exercising in front of other people, particularly their peers, and said that contending with uniforms that didn't cater to their size and shape was a significant barrier to them participating in sport.

Many kids say they simply want more time in which to be active. With after school hours filled with homework, or with casual or part-time jobs, older students felt they lacked the time they needed to be more physically active. High-school students in particular said they needed more physical education built into their curriculum during school hours, and that this needed to go beyond the two or three lessons they were currently being offered each week.

High school students also said they often felt pressure to forego their physical activities to focus on their studies and in some cases live up to their parents' expectations. Some students felt their parents were too strict and too limiting of their active time and were even discouraging them from participating in sport and other physical activities so they would focus more on studies. Others said the costs associated with participation were a total barrier to their participation regardless of any interest they may have to do so.

Physical health is directly linked to the places and spaces where young people gather to express themselves. They are also the places and spaces in which they can see themselves being positively reflected within their local communities.

Providing infrastructure specifically aimed at young people helps support development of personal identity. It also contributes to building regional sustainability through connection, confidence building and support of youthful creativity. Investing in youth specific infrastructure sends children and young people the clear message that they are valued and important members of their local communities. Young people want spaces that are age appropriate and that they can hang out in and 'play' within.

Our advocacy around physical health will focus on:

- **Building more physical activity into the school day with more structured play opportunities during break times to support children and young people to increase their overall levels of fitness.**
- **Supporting opportunities for 'older kids' to participate in 'play' through the co-designed teenage play spaces for local communities.**

Chronic illness

Health professionals across Australia agree that chronic illness in children and young people is a widespread and serious issue. The consensus view is that chronic illness impacts between 16 and 20% of children and young people at some point in their childhood.[3] Living with chronic illness impacts all aspects of a child or young person's development with these experiences often cascading into their adult lives.

There is general agreement that the national numbers of children and young people living with a chronic illness are underreported. This is mainly due to the structural challenges and significant costs of doing high quality research and data matching across state and federal jurisdictions.

Although we can infer the current national numbers from the frequencies of chronic illness in children and young people reported across each state (as a percentage of the population) this does a disservice to local experiences, circumstances, and state differences between populations, economies, and geography.

There is currently no analysis of the impact that chronic illness has on South Australian children and young people available, nor is any being undertaken. Given the protracted nature of chronic illness, it is crucial we have better quantitative and qualitative information into the impact it has on children and young people's lives. We need research to better understand the extent of the problem and develop potential strategies to mitigate negative outcomes as a matter of urgency.

Chronic illness among children and young people is a complex issue, mainly as each disease has its own unique trajectory and set of impacts. Some illnesses can be diagnosed before or shortly after birth. Others can manifest at any time. Some are life threatening, relapsing, or need to be managed across a person's whole life.

The common thread to all is the complex nature of the disruption suffering with chronic illness has on all aspects of a child or young person's life. This not only includes the impact it has on the individual, but also on the child or young person's parents, carers, siblings, and other extended family members, teachers, doctors and others with whom there are close and important interactions.

Not knowing the full extent of the impact of chronic illness on children and young people presents a significant challenge to delivery of services that are effective. It also restricts capacity for any long-term planning and management at the local area health network level.

To provide children and young people living with chronic illness the care, treatment and support they need – and to which they are entitled – we first need to know the nature and extent of their illness/es and the impacts on their lives.

Our advocacy around chronic health will focus on:

- **Examining the experiences of children and young people living with chronic illness and advocating for suggestions they have for ways to improve systems and services they regularly interact with.**
- **Improving the pathways and transitions between youth and adult systems and services for South Australian children and young people who are living with chronic illness.**

▶ **For more information, download Issues Brief 01: South Australian children and young people's experiences of living with chronic illness (2022).**

Relationships and sexual health

Data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that 1 in 5 Australian women and 1 in 20 Australian men have experienced sexual violence of some kind from the age of 15 years.[4] These are alarming statistics which cannot and should not be 'normalised'.

Whilst we know that relationships and sexual health education on its own will not fully inform and protect children, research clearly shows that education can influence and promote body positive behaviours through the delay of sexual activity, a reduction in the number of partners and sexual risk taking and help to inform young people about how to identify problematic sexual behaviours if they arise in their own lives. Providing children and young people with knowledge, confidence and skills empowers them to have a healthy approach to their relationships and sexual health, both emotionally and physically.

The online world presents both opportunities and risks to young people when it comes to relationships and sexual health. It is vital that children and young people be equipped to view online content critically.

Evidence suggests the incidence of children accessing pornography through their own devices is on the increase. Often this can be unintentional and occurs when children and young people are researching sexual health, relationships, or medical information. While parents often over-estimate the levels of exposure for young children, and inversely underestimate the levels of exposure for older children, the research shows exposure to pornography is highly likely to occur.

The research shows that just under half (44%) of Australian children aged 9–16 years encounter sexual images every month.[5] Of these, 16% see images of adults having sex while 17% see close-up images of someone's genitals. It is clear from these figures that equipping children and young people with the education they need to discern between safe and unsafe sexual behaviours and practices is crucial.

Relationships and sex education, including child safe programs, have been part of the school curriculum in South Australia for many years. In addition to these programs, quality professional development is made available to teachers to support them in the delivery of relationship and sex education programs and support is also available for students through school well-being leaders.

Despite this, we know the provision of relationships and sexual health education in South Australian schools is inadequate and inconsistent. It is not available at all year levels, and it does not consistently meet the recommended number of subject lessons per year. It is clear that what education is received is not reflecting or upholding the rights of all children and young people.

There are some groups of children and young people who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. These groups include children with disability, those who are accessing out of home care and those who are emotionally vulnerable due to past experiences.

These groups of children often miss out on extended periods of schooling and on other pivotal educational opportunities, which means their needs should be prioritised.

Young people also report that current relationship and sexual health education is non-inclusive of gender and sexual diversity. Many young people are also concerned that programs are not explicitly addressing issues relating to consent, harmful sexual behaviours between peers, or issues of sexual violence. Neither are they addressing controlling and possessive behaviours, or the realities of online relationships.

Young people and advocates have said this lack of knowledge and understanding of what healthy sexual relationships look and feel like, including what consent means, may explain why intimate violence, harmful behaviour between peers, and other domestic sexual violence continues to be on the increase in Australia.

Our advocacy around relationships and sexual health education will focus on the following:

- **Designing an online resource for young people that will enable them to access inclusive, comprehensive relationship and sex education material that will include service information, referral pathways, and issues-based content such as peer-to-peer abuse and violence, under-age pregnancy, and being young parents.**
- **Access to community-based relationships and sexual health education for those South Australian children and young people who live in residential care, attend flexible learning options centres, access disability school leaver support programs, attend regional community health centres, or who are in the state's youth justice system.**

▶ **For more information, download the Sex Education in South Australia report (2021).**

Menstrual health

Evidence suggests that positive experiences of menstruation come from having access to high quality information, appropriate infrastructure, and resources to support menstrual hygiene. These actions can also reduce menstrual taboos and the stigma associated with periods and menstruation more generally.

Given the wide-ranging impacts of menstruation on key aspects of a young person's life, the onus should be on all sectors of the community – including education, business and health – to recognise menstrual wellbeing and dignity as a systemic issue that is fundamental to children and young people's rights, central to economic productivity and key to achieving gender equity across the state.

Recognising menstrual health and wellbeing as a systemic problem involves committing to development of a sustainable and coordinated response that goes beyond provision of free menstrual hygiene products, changerooms and disposal facilities to building confidence and comfort in young people's ability to manage their periods. It will also equip them with the skills they need to overcome other gender-based inequity in their lives.

Our current responses to menstrual wellbeing are inadequate. They don't involve strategies to raise awareness or improve menstrual education and management or acknowledge the systemic gender equity and equal opportunity issues surrounding menstruation.

To change this we must commit to providing a comprehensive systemic policy response. Lack of comprehensive menstrual education means significant numbers of children and young people are not equipped to manage their period in a way that enables them to fully participate in their family, school, sport, work, cultural and recreational activities or commitments and that is fundamentally unfair.

South Australian young people have raised several complex issues relating to menstruation ranging from the lack of adequate information enabling them to make informed choices about how to manage their periods through to not knowing how to use certain products, being too embarrassed to ask for help or not knowing who they could ask when they need support.

Others said they felt they had sufficient knowledge but found it difficult to dispose of period products safely in the school or work environment. Shortfalls ranged from there being a lack of disposal bins in toilet booths to a lack of soap to wash hands prior to inserting tampons or positioning pads. Children and young people who are menstruating also said they had to contend with strict school rules or policies dictating the terms of toilet use as well as cope with negative attitudes from teachers and peers, employers and colleagues who frequently displayed their indifference or annoyance in relation to menstruation and that this was not limited to males but also came from females in their school and work environments.

By recognising menstruation as central, rather than peripheral, to opportunity and participation across all aspects of life and citizenship, there is scope to elevate menstruation as a key education, employment, and health policy issue.

Our advocacy around menstrual health will focus on:

- **Development of a state-wide *Menstrual Wellbeing Policy* to look at the issue of menstrual wellbeing through the lens of gender equity, gender equality, and health literacy.**
- **Raising awareness of menstrual health to promote the uptake of access to free period products in schools and community centres, youth facilities, libraries, and chemists across the state.**
- **Development of a suite of best practice resources that recognise the barriers menstruation creates to students' school attendance. This includes suggestions on ways to support schools to use 'review and change where required procedures' in relation to bathroom access, sanitary bin supply, pain management, and school uniform policy for young people who menstruate.**
- **Advocate for Period Friendly Sporting Clubs and improvement of bathroom access and provision of bins for best practice disposal of period hygiene products at all sporting grounds and club houses.**

▶ **For more information, download the Menstruation Matters report (2021).**

Mental heath

The economic and social costs of mental health concerns in childhood are significant. Children with mental health challenges struggle to engage with and do well at school.

They are also known to be experiencing a poorer quality of life due to poor physical health, which is often the result of living with parents and siblings who themselves may be managing greater stress and mental health challenges than other families.

An estimated 50% of adult mental illness begins before 14 years of age.[6] Poor mental health also disproportionally affects children and young people who are considered vulnerable, including those who have been abused or bullied, are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are accessing out of home care, or who identify as gender diverse.

There are many instances where children and young people with a mental illness 'fall through the gap' with some who we know are not being treated at all. It is also unclear as to what clinical mental health services are available to children and young people, particularly those whose services are often packaged under "family health" rather than being specifically child or youth focused.

Young people have told me that what they see as the main challenges to supporting good mental health are school, general stress, lack of overall support, and a lack of security. They talk about feeling overwhelmed and not being supported by the adults in their lives, who include their parents and teachers.

This view is reinforced by research which emphasises how stress, school, and study can all impact on a young person's capacity to maintain their mental health, particularly throughout their teenage years.[7]

Children and young people want adults to try and understand that it is the cumulative impact of the issues they face that is causing the problems. They talk about solutions that would include schools providing more opportunities for students to take short breaks when they feel overwhelmed

and stressed, and that more open communication around mental health across the whole community, with better access to counselling and professional support services, would really assist.

They emphasised that any discussion around children and young people's mental health needs must be about what actions individuals, community groups, and government will take to help young people already suffering with mental ill-health.

They don't want to keep talking about mental health issues being prevalent amongst teenagers because they already know this. They want the whole community to be equipped with the skills and confidence that is needed to respond to teenagers showing signs of poor mental health, well before these young people reach a crisis point.

Overwhelmingly children and young people talk about the ongoing need to support their friends who are having mental health issues. Children and young people with mental health issues will talk to their friends well before they turn to adults for help. This means young people are the first port of call and therefore need tools that will enable them to provide the help their friends need. These tools would provide the confidence they're seeking to provide that guidance without making things worse and be backed up with more formal support systems they can tap into when needed.

Many young people are also trying to support their peers at times when their own mental health may be fragile, causing these informal support networks to become easily overstretched.

Young people tell me that after their friends, in most situations they are more likely to turn to their parents for help than to school staff or other professionals. When young people are suffering from poor mental health, they want to talk to someone they trust.

They emphasise the need for there to be more counsellors and trained health professionals available and accessible to young people when they need them. They want to see current wait times for appointments which usually exceed any reasonable timeframe addressed.

Our challenge in creating a strong mental health service system is to think of them as the primary stakeholders and put in place mechanisms that build capacity to develop new models of care which will prevent them from reaching crisis points before they seek support.

These new models of care need to be based on the agendas and recommendations young people themselves have prioritised. This means acknowledging that they are the experts in their own lives, and that they can speak about their own lived experiences better than anyone else.

It also means facilitating opportunities for co-designing services with children and young people so that they meet their actual needs, and not be based on assumptions made by well-meaning adults.

Our advocacy around youth mental health will focus on:

- **Working with young people to create mental health peer-to-peer self-help resources on issues related to what they need to know to help a mate, including what to do and where to turn when they're ready to seek adult help.**
- **Access to funding for the provision of Mental Health First Aid with a focus on suicide prevention and psycho-social education for young people, which can be run at schools, sports clubs, and neighbourhood community groups and centres.**

Youth suicide prevention

Although young people are affected by and concerned by suicide, many of the policies and service responses currently in place are not reaching or resonating with young people.

From conversations with them it is clear their knowledge and understanding of suicide prevention is limited. They highlight what they see as inadequate responses to those seeking help from parents and peers, schools, the media, and service providers as well as for those who want to give help to friends and peers who may be facing issues that lead them to contemplate or attempt suicide.

Most young people say they don't know what to do, or where to go for help and support if they or a friend is suicidal. Nor do they know where to go for help when there has been an attempted suicide or death by suicide amongst their peers.

Young people have said that when the trusted adults around them, in families and schools, are not open to talking about suicide and self-harm, it is much harder for them to deal with and know where to go for support. The stigma and taboo surrounding youth suicide is adding to the problem.

They emphasise too, that often the focus of conversations around mental health and suicide, are solely focused on talking the problems out, when this is the hardest thing to do. They understand that talking is important, but they also want to learn techniques that can help them manage difficult conversations and learn ways to respond appropriately when a friend or peer talks about suicide.

Not having these skills leaves young people without any practical knowledge and skills to support themselves or others. While they said it is common for them to ask, or be asked whether they're okay (eg 'R U OK? Day) they note often those doing the asking 'aren't really prepared to hear anything negative' in their response.

Social media is often spoken about in relation to mental health, and there were concerns raised around the standard response adults use in relation to social media and its impact on young people. Adults wanting young people to simply stop using social media is a view they feel is most unhelpful and very condescending and that adults diminish their emotions by blaming social media for the distress they feel about their lives.

We know that services shaped by the people who use them are always more effective, efficient, and responsive than those that aren't. A strong South Australian mental health care system must have at its core the inclusion, involvement, and engagement of all its stakeholders, including children and young people.

In the area of youth suicide prevention, it is the development and implementation of early intervention systems that will best support young people – both those who are seeking help before a crisis, as well as those who are providing support to friends and peers before or after a suicide attempt, or a death by suicide.

Our advocacy around prevention of youth suicide will focus on:

- **Working with young people to co-design strategies, approaches and resources that will inform South Australia's Suicide Prevention Council.**

Body confidence

Body image continues to be one of the top personal concerns young Australians have, with many children and young people reporting high levels of unhappiness with their bodies and their overall appearance.

This dissatisfaction goes beyond the usual challenges of adolescence and its intense physical and emotional changes, to a more serious range of mental health issues arising from body dissatisfaction that involve disordered eating and eating disorders.

The relationship that young people have with their bodies is referred to as body confidence. A lack of body confidence has an impact on a young person's capacity to participate in school, sport, and other recreational and social activities which are known to support and promote their overall wellbeing.

For many years now, body image has been identified as being particularly challenging for adolescent girls, but there is a rising number of adolescent boys who also suffer from poor body confidence.

With the rise in celebrity culture, social media influencers, and the propensity for young people to compare themselves to others, their levels of body confidence are constantly being negatively impacted by the manipulation of images and the assignment of morality to food and eating.

Issues related to body confidence appear to be on the rise, despite decades of effort at all levels of the community to change this.

Children in primary school often discuss being bullied about their weight and appearance. Others discuss food and diets that involve calorie counting the food they're consuming from a primary school age, well before children's bodies have fully developed.

Low body confidence has far-reaching impacts on physical and emotional development. Not only does it impact on self-esteem and levels of self-confidence it also causes young people to isolate and withdraw from their friends and family, and with potential for self-harm in more severe cases.

Whilst most teenagers will compare themselves to others throughout their adolescence as a matter of course, some are responding with an already low body confidence that amplifies their differences from what they perceive to be 'acceptable' and expected by their friends and peers.

In some young people, this can go beyond their body being a slight worry for them, to making major behaviour changes that they think will improve their chances of being accepted and acceptable to others. Over just a few short years, these early signs of disordered eating can lead to severe, difficult to treat eating disorders that can start in adolescence and linger long into adulthood.

Young women describe their frustration with the impact that rules based on gender stereotypes have on their body confidence. They have described this worry about their appearance as distracting and oppressive, leading to feelings of low self-worth and some-times to severe self-loathing.

Young women are telling us, that even with the body positive movement, companies continue to find new ways to make them conscious of their appearance. It's no surprise there is an increasing prevalence of young people struggling with body dysmorphia, eating disorders, and other body image related issues.

Young people also describe how gender stereotypes relating to appearance are often used as a basis for bullying. For example, when gender stereotypes are used to describe how girls should look, they can't be big or strong. Similarly, when gender stereotypes are used to describe boys, they often focus on the need for boys to be physically strong and tall.

In terms of interpersonal relationships, young females shared how they perceive their value and identity to be based on their appearance with the number of likes, follows, and shares they receive on their social media posts a true measure of their worth and attractiveness to others; particularly whether male peers 'approve of their attractiveness' by 'liking' their selfies.

This shows a clear connection between young females body confidence and wellbeing and how they perceive they are seen in society both online and offline, particularly by young males.

The valuing of appearance, sharing of others' appearance, talking about 'bad' foods, celebrating weight loss, and conversations about body size and shape are all contributing to an increase in the number of children and young people who are experiencing disordered eating and related mental health challenges. This must be addressed by health policy and processes that take this into account in early childhood, establishing strategies that can help prevent issues of low body confidence taking hold in adolescence.

Our advocacy around body confidence will focus on:

- **Consulting with children and young people to explore the issue of body confidence from their perspective and identifying what it means to have a healthy relationship with their bodies and eating.**

▶ **For more information, download the Stereotypes and Sexism report (2022).**

Belonging and friendship

Loneliness is linked to poor physical and mental health, as well as to poor personal wellbeing. The negative health impact of loneliness is now considered to be on a par with public health issues such as obesity and smoking. There's also growing evidence that links loneliness to poor sleep, low school attendance, a lack of overall engagement, and academic under achievement.

The pandemic years with the social isolation COVID-19 required of us has led to an increased focus on the issue of loneliness across our society. As a factor in the mental health of children and young people, focusing on the impact of loneliness and isolation highlights the importance social support and social groups provide in combatting stress and adversity at all ages.

As children's lives are usually surrounded by adults and other children, the idea that they could be suffering from loneliness is often given little or no consideration. Loneliness is more readily seen as being an issue for older people. Not surprisingly most research has focused on its impact on older people, leaving a gap in the knowledge around experiences of loneliness suffered by children and young people.

As more children and young people report difficulties with their peer relationships and feelings of disconnection from others, social dissatisfaction is becoming a significant factor at play in some young people's lives.

Children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds have said that 'being poor' can have an impact on their capacity to make friends and participate in school or other social activities, mainly because they fear that they will be excluded or judged by their peers and their parents.

Others talked about having to 'lie to friends' and 'make excuses' about not being allowed to go to the movies or do other 'fun things' because it was too embarrassing to reveal that their families could not afford to pay for them to go.

Other children and young people who feel isolated, said this was because of the added carer responsibilities they have means they are often left isolated and lonely. These young carers said their carer responsibilities had a significant impact on their capacity to make and keep friends over the long term.

Loneliness and isolation are very common experiences for those children and young people who live with disability. Some of these children and young people said that if they did try to attend school or engage in extra curricular activities they would often experience bullying or have to navigate difficult relationships with their peers.

Regardless of background, children suggest that programs and opportunities that enable them to build friendships and have social outings with peers are very important.

Children repeatedly report that parents and teachers underestimate the importance of their online and IRL (In Real Life) friendships, and the crucial role they play in promoting their individual wellbeing, mental health, and overall happiness.

Strategies to address loneliness in children and young people need to be grounded in their own life experiences. This is particularly so for those relating to having no one to talk to, of feeling left out, and having poor relationships with peers that led to them having fewer or no friends.

Our advocacy around belonging and friendship will focus on:

- **Developing a greater understanding of children and young people's experiences of loneliness, and collecting their ideas on what parents and teachers can do to support the development and maintenance of childhood and adolescent friendships in school, sport, and community.**

Safety

Young South Australians are safe and nurtured

Road safety

Active travel to school is an easy way for kids to be physically active as part of their daily routine. However road safety concerns are a barrier to walking and cycling to school in many South Australian regional and metropolitan neighbourhoods, including within Adelaide's CBD.

Physical activity in children and young people is vital, with childhood being the most sensitive period of human development in which to promote long-lasting health-enhancing behaviours in this area. The benefits of regular exercise include better health and fitness outcomes, better mental health and wellbeing, improved physical literacy and the prevention of short and long-term acute and chronic illnesses and disease.

We know that less physical activity can negatively impact children's health and weight. Research shows that currently 33% of Australian children and young people are considered to be either overweight or obese; a rate which has been steadily increasing year on year.[8]

As kids get older, participation in sports and physical activity generally drops off. Recess and lunch breaks are usually short and spent hanging out or doing extra curricular activities with peers instead of spent 'playing' or running around.

Travel to school is an easy way for children and young people to engage in activity in a way that does not require additional time out of their day. We know that those young people who do walk or cycle to school are more likely to undertake additional physical activities outside of school than those who don't.

The ability of young people to have an active journey to school is impacted by both their proximity to their school and how easy or difficulty it is to walk or ride there. But perhaps the most significant impact on whether or not young people have active journeys to school is by how safe these routes to school are.

Fear of road accidents means parents are reluctant to let their children travel to school by themselves. A look at their local area will often lead them to conclude that it is not safe for children to play, cycle, or even walk anywhere in their neighbourhood and will discourage or restrict them from doing so.

In Australia, transport injuries are among the most common cause of death amongst all people, and the second most common cause of injury resulting in hospital admission for children aged 0–14 years.[9]

In 2020, across South Australia, there were 218 road crashes which resulted in a pedestrian casualty. Of these, 38 were injuries to children under the age of 18 years.[10]

Advice from the World Health Organisation (WHO) is that we need to take action to make our streets usable for children and young people. This includes a recommendation to reduce the speed limit to 30kph on streets where people live, play, go to school, and shop.[11]

We know that a large proportion of road traffic accidents occur around the time of school drop-offs and pick-ups, when large volumes of traffic and pedestrians are centred on small areas. We also know that fewer pedestrian and bike accidents are fatal when the vehicle is travelling at a low speed. It is for this reason that a 25kph limit has been in put place around most public schools in South Australia where children are present. However these same limits have not been applied to Adelaide's CBD.

Road accident rates in Adelaide's CBD are higher than in any other suburb – there were 412 crashes in 2020 alone.[12] In most areas of the city the speed limit is 50kph. The 25kph speed limit that operates within 200 metres of a school located in suburbs outside the CBD, does not apply to those located inside the CBD. This is despite the city being home to 14 Government, Catholic, and Independent schools with over 7,000 school students attending these schools on a daily basis.

Our advocacy around road safety and promoting more active travel to school by children and young people will focus on:

- **Working with local government and community partners to create safe ways to school by ensuring there are safe footpaths, cycle paths and crossings within the immediate area of all schools, shops, and parks, with good street lighting, effective signage, and speed restrictions in line with those recommended by the World Health Organisation.**

Cultural safety

Young people are deeply committed to equality and proud of Australia's reputation as a multi-cultural and inclusive society. Young people, particularly those of migrant and culturally diverse backgrounds, say that respect and inclusion of multiple races and ethnicities is very important to them. They want migrants and refugees to be acknowledged for their unique culture and experiences.

For young Indigenous Australians, racism is of primary concern. They are asking for more education and understanding from Australia's non-Indigenous population, and for far more action to be taken on race-based bullying.

Racism is an everyday reality for many children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Unsurprisingly their experience has a negative impact on their ability to settle in to new surroundings, and feel as though they are welcomed in the communities in which they live, study, work and play. Racism impacts on their confidence and sense of self-worth as well as on their personal and cultural identity, their mental health, and their overall sense of belonging and potential.

For some South Australian young people, racism has been an experience they've endured throughout their whole lives. For others it is a new experience that includes combatting racist stereotypes, behaviours and discussions based on skin colour, cultural traditions, and a person's religious, or ethnic background.

Young people from culturally and language diverse backgrounds describe racism as being a significant barrier to their participation in their community and to finding a job or taking advantage of opportunities for advancement.

They describe experiences of racism in school, at their workplace, on public transport, and while playing sport. Many examples come from the systems with which they are required to interact to access services designed to support them.

Young people said that racism also takes many forms; it can include verbal and/or physical abuse, exclusion, being overlooked by coaches, peers and sometimes parents and siblings, or being isolated from friends and family, all of which has a negative cumulative impact on their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Young people have said that many of the places they wish to go to are not very welcoming, and don't know how to embrace cultural diversity. They describe racist bullying from students, but also from teachers who not only make racist comments themselves but will ignore racist comments being made by other students.

Experiencing racism is a risk factor for mental health, disengagement from school and labour markets, and a lack or low level of participation in community activities. Accumulatively it can lead to strong feelings of anger and frustration.

Over time this leads to a lack of trust in institutions and organisations, and in the capacity of adults to help.

Our advocacy around cultural safety will focus on:

- **Consulting with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds about their experiences of racism**

and developing recommendations for actions that can be taken by schools and sports clubs to prevent racism in all its forms.

Bullying at school

Bullying has been recognised by The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as a form of 'mental violence'. This type of 'mental violence' can affect children's health, wellbeing, safety and security.

Furthermore, if children and young people cannot spend time with their friends with an expectation that this will be time spent enjoying themselves, then this too violates their right to participate in rewarding leisure and play.

Bullying on the basis of a child or young person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status, can negatively impact on their sense of safety and wellbeing. Online bullying can infringe on a young person's right to privacy and violate their right to protection from attacks on their reputation. Bullying can also affect young people in the workplace.

Whilst there must be consequences for bullying behaviour, a focus on punishment alone is unlikely to be an effective approach. In some instances, taking a punitive approach will create more negative outcomes than it prevents. Effective responses need to be situational, child specific, and have a restorative focus.

Children and young people acknowledge that the roles of bully, victim, and bystander are interchangeable. This means responses to bullying need to involve all children and young people in their development. Furthermore, community responses to bullying must include strategies which are aimed at increasing adult awareness of the impact their behaviour has on children who bully.

Children and young people have said that in response to bullying that takes place at school, they require specialised assistance to learn practical skills that incorporate a range of peer led intervention programs. This would enable them to challenge bullying behaviours that are being displayed by their friends.

When developing strategies to address bullying in the school environment the social contexts and cultural differences that exist between children and young people need to be considered. Doing so ensures an appropriate and measured response relevant to a specific group or groups of children and young people involved will be taken.

Bullying occurs across and within multiple online and offline environments. Effective bullying strategies must also focus, therefore, on supporting the development of skills and strategies that are effective in a range of settings.

Our advocacy around anti-bullying strategies will focus on:

- **Designing self-help resources for children and young people that better reflect the multiple forms of bullying being experienced in the school environment.**
- **Developing approaches and strategies aimed at reducing school-based bullying particularly toward those who are the most vulnerable with the aim of improving children and young people's overall quality of life.**

▶ **For more information, download the Bullying Project report (2018).**

Bullying at work

Young people have frequently raised issues relating to their workplace conditions and the challenges they face at work. These include issues of respect that range from having a lack of access to toilets to harassment by their employer and/or verbal abuse from customers.

There are also issues of bullying surrounding employer expectations and how these are being communicated. These include their availability and the need to have and use a personal digital device so that they can be aware of and make changes to shifts as well as keep up to date with their work schedules. Many teenagers also reported that these negative experiences in the workplace were exacerbated by the conditions enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While bullying at school has attracted extensive attention and research, few studies have provided information about teenagers' experiences of bullying in their workplaces. This is despite young

people having consistently reported bullying behaviours occurring while they're at work.

A lack of monitoring or awareness from employers in relation to bullying of young people in the workplace, means workplace bullying is something young people have no avenues for complaint or any control over.

With no opportunities or processes in place for young people to seek intervention from a member of staff who might act on their behalf, bullying in the workplace can run rampant.

Internationally, there is a growing recognition that young workers are more likely to both experience and observe bullying in the workplace than older workers are and that because of this they experience poorer psychological wellbeing.

Studies that have captured young people's experiences of bullying in the workplace have tended to show that young workers experience worse mental health effects from bullying than older workers do.

One Australian survey of employees supported this view with young people aged 18–29 years being more likely to experience and witness person-related bullying than their older work colleagues.[13]

The 2010 Australian Workplace Barometer of the youngest workers (18–24 year olds) reported the lowest level of workforce engagement across the nation. Workplace bullying is considered by some health professionals as being "more dangerous than physical violence".[14]

Around the world, workplace bullying has now been identified as a major health and safety issue for employees of all ages. To protect young workers, it is important that we develop a better understanding of how teenagers experience work, including ways to address and prevent workplace bullying.

Our advocacy around workplace bullying of young people will focus on:

- **Consulting with young workers about the challenges and experiences they face in the workplace, and on gaining a greater understanding of the impact workplace cultures and practices have on a teenage workforce.**

Bullying in sport

Participation in organised sport and other physical activities are important to increasing the level of engagement children and young people have with regular exercise and all the health benefits this brings.

To prevent young people from dropping out of sport, we need to better understand how they view sport, including what motivates them to get involved form the beginning and stay involved over time. Some of these influences can relate to the importance of being amongst people, places, and resources that are familiar, and to having choices and a voice through which they can express themselves. Participation in team sport can enhance feelings of belonging by being included, known, and valued.

Experiences of being bullied and excluded in sporting environments have a significant impact on children and young people's levels of participation. They describe how being put down or bullied based on their skills, gender, sexuality, body size or appearance, race or cultural background, affects their overall wellbeing and sense of safety, ultimately impacting on ongoing interest in participating in sport.

Children and young people report diverse experiences of bullying and discrimination in sporting environments ranging from subtle put downs and overt ongoing harassment to total exclusion.

Others describe a 'cliquey' culture where some sporting communities 'ruin the social side of sport' by purposely leaving people out, particularly if they are 'new' or 'different'.

Some young people speak about not getting many chances to play the sport they enjoy, because they are being 'subbed' or 'benched', or made to play in a position on the field where they don't play well, and which will be used to 'determine your spot' in a particular team or division for the rest of the season.

Other young people described explicit bullying that included bigotry and 'hate speech' used toward them. Often this verbal bullying was based on race, cultural background, gender, age, physical size, ability, or skill level. It included being yelled at, put down, or 'looked down upon', shamed, 'othered' or 'laughed at' when you did something wrong.

Many children and young people highlighted that bullying in sport disproportionately impacts girls and young women, LGBTQIA+ people, people from culturally diverse backgrounds, and people with disabilities.

Culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people described finding sport very difficult to get involved or stay involved in. They said this was mainly due to the assumptions that were made in relation to their cultural background and because of racial discrimination that had been levelled at them or a friend or colleague.

Children and young with intellectual and physical disability have consistently said that playing sport or undertaking physical activity can be particularly difficult for them to achieve. Similarly, children and young people with chronic illnesses such as asthma and diabetes were not always well supported to maintain their involvement in sport, despite the many benefits it was likely to deliver them.

Children and young people described how sport does not consistently 'facilitate a space for people with disabilities.' Bullying based on a person's ability more generally included 'nasty' comments about how you 'suck' or 'can't play' and about 'teammates who always get angry at mistakes'. There were also comments relating to how older people often exclude 'younger ones' and how taller people often exclude shorter people, or boys exclude girls, etc.

Many children and young people believe that the expectations set, and the fuelling of a perception that sport is for able-bodied and neurotypical people, needs to be replaced with an inclusive and less competitive approach. This includes building special facilities for those who need them.

Children and young people also say they want sport to be more inclusive and culturally diverse across gender, socioeconomic backgrounds and skill levels. They want sporting environments that are kinder, more 'gentle', 'fun' and 'safe, 'without the stereotypes' and where all children feel as though they can belong, are wanted, included, and involved. They also want environments which are supportive and where parents and other club members encouraged children and young people to participate regardless of their skill level.

Young people's view of how sport should be approached includes ensuring it is more available to those children and young people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. They also wanted an approach that would ensure young people who are living with anxiety, body image issues, or 'fitness challenges' can be successfully accommodated.

Young women in particular want to see stronger messaging in sporting clubs and environments that promote body positivity with examples that included a 'size doesn't matter' approach and campaigns such as 'it doesn't matter if you're too tall or short' to play sport.

In addition to challenging sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or racist behaviour and stereotypes, young people said that actively promoting diversity would make a significant difference to their interest in participating in sport over the short and long term.

Our advocacy around bullying in sport will focus on:

- **Working with partner agencies and sporting codes to explore feedback provided by children and young people on ways to address bullying behaviour in sporting clubs and support coach development in this area.**

▶ **For more information, download the More Than A Game report (2022).**

Sexual harassment

One of the enduring cross-cutting themes that repeatedly surfaces across all aspects of systems advocacy work is the impact sexism, gender roles, and gender stereotyping has on the lives of children and young people.

Whilst the impacts are different for boys and girls, it is clear they affect almost every aspect of a child or young person's life from their aspirations and relationships to their sense of health and wellbeing.

South Australian children and young people have also expressed their frustration and concern that discussion about sexism, sexual assault, and domestic violence are not currently a feature of their relationship and sexual health education at school. This leaves them feeling unsafe at school, at work, and socially, as well as within their intimate relationships.

As a generation that demands more respect for diversity, young people want an education that uses a gender sensitive approach. They want to be part of the generation that advances gender equity by working with teachers and educators to address and positively transform gender inequality in their schools.

Work in this area must address the behaviour of children and young people as well as the behaviour of adults. We must look closely at the environments that enable and reinforce sexist attitudes, derogatory comments, jibes, and sexual harassment. A failure to challenge these gender stereotypes and minimise their impact on children and young people's lives is detrimental to everyone, regardless of age, sex, and gender.

To build our contemporary understanding of how sexism and gender stereotypes impact on children and young people's lives, it is essential to include them in these conversations. Without their input, the effectiveness of any actions taken will be limited.

Given that gender roles and stereotypes are taught and learnt, we must also understand how we as individuals as well as how the systems we have put in place perpetuate experiences of sexism. This means looking closely at how systemic sexism and discrimination play out at the classroom level, and more broadly within our educational institutions.

To ensure all children and young people have equal opportunities, we must actively tackle sexism, gender stereotypes, and gender norms in schools. This involves looking at the knowledge, skills, and resource barriers that exist to reinforce sexist stereotypes and their associated behaviours, occurring in classrooms and on school grounds every day.

It means putting a stop to the daily experiences of sexual harassment that many students face – particularly girls – who say they are not being heard or believed, and that reporting incidents does not lead to the kind of change they expect.

Gender stereotyping is a frequent cause of discrimination against women. It is a contributing factor that violates an array of rights, including the right to health, to an adequate standard of living, to education, marriage, and family relations, to work, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, political participation and representation, freedom from gender-based violence.

This ongoing discrimination extends to there not being an effective remedy for violations that have already occurred, or which continue to occur.

While the drivers of violence against women are complex, national and international evidence shows that factors relating to gender inequality, including rigid gender stereotypes, are the most significant and consistent predictors of violence against women.

Our advocacy around sexual harassment will focus on:

- **Reviewing the extent to which school-based relationship and sexual health education and bullying materials specifically address sexism, sexual harassment, and gender-based bullying.**

▶ **For more information, download the Stereotypes and Sexism report (2022).**

Harmful sexual behaviour

Following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA) all State and Territory governments have committed to prevention and better responses to child sexual abuse, including ensuring children and young people impacted are safe and well.

The RCIRCSA found that child-on-child problematic or harmful sexual behaviour is a critical issue and that harmful sexual behaviour by children appeared to be more prevalent than previously thought. However due to a lack of consistent national data collection there is an under investment in appropriate primary, secondary and tertiary intervention being undertaken at the systemic level.

Prevention requires services and appropriate responses for children with harmful sexual behaviours to operate across education, health, child protection, and youth justice systems. Current approaches in South Australia are largely siloed within agencies and disciplines, and mostly focused on the tertiary level.

Responsibility should be wider than the 'usual suspects' of health, justice and child protection and include education, families, and front-line workers who are recognising and responding to problematic sexual behaviours from children and young people and their associated causes.

South Australia requires more primary and secondary approaches. This includes building a better understanding of children's development, devising strategies that support children to behave in ways that protect their own sexual safety as well as that of other children.

Organisations need to build capacity in their staff to work confidently and appropriately with children and families where problematic sexual behaviour arises. This includes ensuring non-punitive measures are being applied to children with these behaviours – with particular sensitivity to ensuring children and young people who are exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours are not shamed or stigmatised as a result.

Our advocacy around harmful sexual behaviours in children and young people will focus on:

- **Implementing a multi-disciplinary and multi-agency service system for harmful peer to peer sexual behaviour that delivers prevention, early intervention, psycho-educational therapy, and individual case management.**

Care and protection

If South Australian children and young people are being removed from their families, then as a community, we have additional responsibilities to fulfil. These include ensuring those children and young people we place in out of home care are provided with the support, protection, and physical environments that ensure their rights, interests and wellbeing are prioritised, promoted and protected.

Much more than simply providing them with a shelter and physical safety, out of home care must include provision for support that ensures children and young people feel they belong. This means ensuring they are put in a place where their health and wellbeing is of paramount importance and where they have the emotional safety and resources needed to feel valued and supported to enjoy life.

Good system design and effective models of care and support need both professional content and user context. It is still a rarity for children and young people to be engaged in the development of policies, services, and programs aimed at them.

When we fail to include children and young people in the design of policies and operational processes impacting on them a critical element of context is missing. Ultimately it means any solutions developed will be less likely to address the issues children and young people themselves see as being the most important.

Children and young people in care have identified specific areas of support that they say can and will make an enormous difference to the quality of their lives. One of these is support for their sibling relationships and connections; the importance of which is often underestimated by adults.

Whilst it is always preferable for children to live in family-based environments, for a range of reasons some children and young people are required to live in congregate (residential care) facilities. These facilities are required to provide an environment in which children and young people placed in their care are given what they need to feel healthy, happy and safe.

Numerous advocates have reported that the residential care experience can lead to children and young people coming into contact with youth justice. It is disturbing that some SA children and young people are being removed from their home environments and placed into State care in environments where their behaviour is being managed by adults who are imposing rules and setting consequences for actions that involve police, arrests, charges, youth court, remand, and the possibility of acquiring a criminal history – all before they turn 18.

This is in stark contrast to what would ordinarily happen within the family environment, where other strategies, including those which are non-punitive, are more likely to be applied and be dealt with in ways that are proportional and restorative.

The Law Society has raised grave concerns for children and young people placed in residential

care units who are being arrested as a form of discipline and ending up with a criminal record for actions that would more than likely be considered as 'naughty' if they were living with their family.

The standard response to children and young people's frustration, despair and confusion should be to use behaviour support practices that provide opportunities for them to reflect upon, repair, and resolve the challenging situations they face without police involvement.

Practices need to move toward more supportive, restorative approaches. At their core, there needs to be a developmental education approach which acknowledges and supports children and young people to express why they acted the way they did. This approach needs to include an examination of what impact their actions had on others, and teach them behaviour change strategies that demonstrate how they might act differently were they faced with a similar situation in the future.

Our advocacy around the care and protection of children and young people who are in care will focus on:

- **Working alongside children and young people in out of home care on the issues they prioritise, including recommendations to amend the *Child Safety Act* to better reflect child voice and child agency.**
- **Implementing measures that refer children away from the judicial system as a first resort and instead work with regions to implement local diversion protocols between police, schools, child protection and community agencies.**

Children of an incarcerated parent

It is estimated that about five percent of children throughout Australia will experience the incarceration of a parent during their lifetime. While the purpose of incarceration is to punish the offender, children and young people who have a parent who is incarcerated are often called the 'innocent victims' of the criminal justice system.

Children with incarcerated parents are a vulnerable and hidden group of young people whose lives and rights are not only affected by their parent's offending, but also by how their community and service systems respond.

These systems, insofar as they are primarily designed for adults, are not systematically identifying, assessing, or considering the interests or impact of parental incarceration on children or young people. Any information that is gathered is adhoc with current services placing the onus on children and young people to present themselves to service providers when problems have already escalated.

Families also report that this is made more difficult by barriers that include the stigma and secrecy surrounding incarceration, exacerbated by the fear of intervention from statutory authorities that will not be supportive of keeping families together.

Like many other adult-focused service systems, the criminal justice system is being challenged to consider the parenting status of the adults it serves. This brings with it recognition of a need to move away from 'child-blind justice' (where the impact of decisions on a child are "neither foreseen, acknowledged or remedied by the system") towards 'child-friendly justice' (whereby decisions at every stage of a system are centred on child rights in and of themselves, rather than as an afterthought or based on the "personal circumstances" of the offender).

At a theoretical level these developments have not consistently translated into practice at the systemic level, with limited examples of practical positive outcomes for children and young people with an incarcerated parent currently available.

Data on the parenting status of adults entering prison, or on the status and whereabouts of their children during their incarceration, is not officially or routinely collected or published in any state or territory in Australia.

There is currently no consideration given to the role the State could play in providing children who are separated from their parents with special consideration, as per Articles 9 and 20 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and this must be addressed.

Our advocacy around children of an incarcerated parent will focus on:

- **Identifying children with incarcerated parents as a priority access group for government support services and development and implementation of protocols for their support that can be applied by frontline staff.**
- **Adoption of a child rights and child safe environment approach that includes provision of child-friendly information about prison processes, establishing family visit times in suitable venues and spaces, promoting prisoner reconnection and reintegration with children, and considering the best interests of the child or children in discussions about prisoner rotation of their parent.**
- **Investing in parenting support initiatives that help incarcerated fathers as well as mothers, understand child development stages and milestones.**
- **Actively considering children's rights in the administration of justice where children are involved, and where they will be directly impacted by any decisions made about their parent's incarceration.**

▶ **For more information, download the Join the Dots report (2022).**

Youth justice

To ensure that children and young people's rights are upheld in our youth justice system, South Australia has an obligation to meet standards set under International Law, with an imperative that the best interests of the child or young person always being positioned front and centre.

Judicial procedures should be both 'accessible and child appropriate' and opportunities for children's views able to be heard throughout the entire process. The child should also be properly informed about the outcome of the hearing they will be required to attend, and the extent to which their views will play a role in determining decision-making.

There is a growing body of developmental and psychological theory and research focused on the backgrounds and developmental capacity of children and young people who become involved with youth justice systems.

A history of trauma and neglect coupled with disabilities, language disorders and communication difficulties, can impact on a child or young person's capacity to understand and engage in the youth justice process. For the rights of these young people to be upheld, the system must respond in a more developmentally appropriate way.

Creating opportunities for young people who are in contact with the youth justice system to have a larger role in court proceedings is likely to result in more positive outcomes.

In addition, research shows that active participation by young people in decision-making processes can help them to understand and accept the final decision being made in relation to their offence. This also makes it easier for the young person to act on any 'orders' they may be required to follow.

Another study revealed that 'limiting the autonomy of children has a consequence of being a self-fulfilling cycle of learned helplessness, often resulting in behaviour becoming worse.'[15]

Conversely, children who learn to participate in decision-making that impacts directly on them can see and experience their reasoning skills being developed and applied. This can lead to them gaining confidence in expressing their points of view that includes explaining why they behaved the way they did that can then be better considered by the courts to determine a more appropriate restorative approach to the outcome their behaviour will have.

Our advocacy around youth justice will focus on:

- **Reviewing current policies and procedures to ensure children and young people's participation is upheld, and that court environments support young people to have a genuine opportunity to comment, respond, and freely express themselves.**

▶ **For more information, download the Making Change in Youth Justice report (2020).**

Wellbeing

Young South Australians are happy, inspired and engaged

Cost of living

In South Australia, over 200,000 adults and children are struggling to survive on income payments that are set well below the poverty line. This translates to 1 in 8 people, including more than 75,000 children, so that nearly 1 in 4 children are growing up in the poorest families.[16]

Children and young people consistently raise the impact that cost of living pressures and financial stress is having on their lives. It is something that is never far from their minds. In fact, they readily talk about the impact these pressures and stresses have on their own lives, their parent's lives, and on the lives of other young people they know.

Beyond the impact this has on their learning, knowing that you are 'growing up poor' can have a significant impact on a child or young person's desire and opportunity for participation and connection within their community. It can also lead to less opportunities for involvement in extra curricular activities such as sport, music, art, or other social and recreational pursuits that might provide avenues for self-development and fulfilment that they had assumed would not be available to them.

Growing up poor can also impact on friendships, a child's sense of self-worth and belonging, and how they 'deserve' to be treated by not only their peers but also by their peers' parents, by teachers, trainers, and coaches and other community members of all kinds, including health professionals and public service personnel such as police and those in the judicial system.

Research shows that children and young people who come from poor households are much more likely to leave school early and find it difficult to engage with formal post school education pathways, ultimately affecting their socioeconomic status into adulthood and leaving them vulnerable to experiencing adult poverty that in some cases can become lifelong.

Children and young people who are living in poor households have identified financial insecurity as one of the key contributing factors in their experience of school exclusion. The affordability of school uniforms and other ancillary costs are often given as reasons for non-attendance; either as a preventive measure to avoid been singled out as being poor, or because a child or young person identified this as a reason for them being suspended from school.

Our advocacy around the impact that the cost of living has on children will focus on:

- **Working with schools and the community to establish policies and practices that can better support students from low-income families to participate in the range of activities they are interested in both within and outside of school.**
- **Actively promote anti-poverty week opportunities and advocacy to halve child poverty by 2030.**

▶ **For more information, download the Leave No One Behind report (2019).**

The cost of school

Education is compulsory in South Australia. But both Federal and State government recognise that compulsion is impractical unless education is made available and accessible to everyone across the community, which is why public education throughout Australia is offered free of tuition costs.

Although school may be free of tuition costs, public education is not free of 'other' costs. In fact, school fees make up only a relatively small portion of the overall cost of education at a government school, with the additional costs increasing as students get older.

Children and young people regularly report that school affordability is a major issue for both low-income families and large families. Given the frequency with which it is being reported, South Australia's Department for Education needs to determine the true cost of public education per family and set ceilings on the out-of-pocket expenses that both low-income and/or larger families are incurring on an annual basis.

While the government's School Card Scheme provides crucial support to a significant number of low-income families, it only covers 'essential items and services' as itemised in the annual materials and services charge. It does not include uniforms, computers, and extra curricular activities. Further, there may be families whose income is just above the eligibility threshold for the School Card Scheme who miss out on this vital support completely.

The cost of various practices and initiatives that routinely take place in schools can leave some children and young people feeling isolated and embarrassed. While dress-up days, festival days, Book Days, and other social activities are not intended to be exclusive, they can leave disadvantaged children feeling inferior and embarrassed because they are unable to participate due to the costs involved.

As a way of minimising acute feelings of shame, some children will choose not to attend school on a given 'special' day. Children as young as eight have reported the cost of excursions, camps, and other extra curricular activities and resources, has caused them and their family considerable emotional and financial distress.

Purchasing pieces of equipment (such as a laptop) and materials (such as paying for printing), sports uniforms, entrance fees, travel and accommodation costs, costumes and excursion snacks, are just a few of the extra costs that come with fully participating in activities offered at school.

Finding money to cover these 'extras' can be particularly stressful for low-income families, particularly those with more than one child, while the inability to cover these costs can be a complete barrier to a student's capacity to engage fully with their peers, their school, and their education.

Uniforms, excursions, technology, sport, and participation in fun events, are all examples of costs often labelled as 'optional extras', when in reality, student participation relies on families being able to afford all of the associated costs of participating in school life.

Not only do these optional extras add up, they are key to a student's capacity to enjoy a full and enriching educational experience; one that does not see them being left out or unable to participate to the same degree as their peers can.

Add to this the reality that many schools are increasingly reliant upon families to fundraise for particular activities, or pay out of their own pockets for enhanced school facilities and initiatives, and the financial and social pressures on families already struggling to make ends meet become immense.

Low-income families with children attending government schools should be receiving more comprehensive financial assistance to enable their child or children to fully participate in school life. This assistance needs to include financial support for costs such as uniforms, sport and equipment, school camps and excursions, as a minimum, and provided in ways that are sensitive to the child and the family concerned.

Our advocacy around the true cost of school will focus on:

- **Showcasing examples of schools that have reduced the cumulative costs of going to school, including reducing school fees and incidental costs for families who are known to be experiencing financial hardship.**

- **Developing a public-school uniform policy that requires schools to make uniforms affordable, and removes the need for school-branded items.**

▶ **For more information, download the Spotlight on the True Cost of Going to School (2021).**

Digital access

Equality of digital access does not translate to equality of opportunity. It is clear there is a strong need for education and methods of empowerment that ensure children and young people have the digital skills and digital literacy both expected and required of them to succeed in the 21st century.

The lack of digital inclusion that is a reality for some South Australian children and young people constitutes a systemic failure that must be addressed. Limited or no digital access presents a significant barrier to their education, career options, safety, and citizenship.

While experiences vary widely across different socioeconomic, cultural, and educational contexts, the evidence is clear – addressing unequal digital access has significant social and economic benefits for individuals as well as helping to minimise differences between regional and metropolitan communities.

Within South Australia, many children and young people experience limited access to digital devices and data, particularly those living on lower incomes. This not only exacerbates inequalities but places those without digital access at a distinct disadvantage.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index regularly publishes information about the state of Australia's online participation. It does this by measuring digital inclusion across three dimensions – accessibility, affordability, and digital skills ability.

The Index shows that whilst there are some improvements in overall digital inclusion being made, there is still a 'digital divide' between those children and young people who are living in families that have lower incomes and those who do not.

Lack of uninterrupted access to Wi-Fi and a digital device, impacts significantly on a child or young person's capacity to remain connected to their education and to other social and recreational aspects of their lives. It not only limits their ability to participate in important education and social activities, it limits their capacity to find and maintain part-time work while they're at school and gain access to health services they might need.

Without access to critical digital infrastructure through schools, libraries, residential care, and other physical spaces, many young people are unable to remain connected to each other or their community. Neither can they receive information that would enable them to participate more fully both socially and economically.

Children and young people without regular or reliable access to digital services are also more likely to experience an acute sense of isolation and exclusion from their peers and community, with all of the long-term impacts this presents.

Access to online learning relies on having access to a device, as well as unlimited uninterrupted access to data and the Internet.

It also relies on a child or young person having the confidence and capability to use the technology available. This in turn relies on children and young people being able to learn, practice and apply the digital skills they are being taught so that they can keep up with the rapid technological changes to hardware and software.

For many South Australian children these foundational digital access requirements are not being uniformly met. Home broadband services are out of reach for many households across SA who face tight budgets and competing financial demands.

Many children have no device available for learning at home. Others have inappropriate devices such as a smartphone, or a single device that must be shared amongst siblings and parents and carers, some of whom who may be working from home.

Some young people have said their home internet connection is largely achieved through their phones, with a number who don't have access to the NBN or any other internet service because of the lack of a device or the costs involved.

If there is more than one child connecting from their device, data is being chewed up quickly.

With a large majority of mobile phones relying on the user having a generous plan, this can create another unexpected financial burden on the household, making engagement and participation in a range of critical educational, social, and health services both problematic and expensive.

Our future policy and strategies around digital access must take a comprehensive and targeted approach that accounts for the social, cultural, educational, and economic differences that exist between those who need to access it.

We must find ways to provide all SA children and young people with opportunities to learn digital literacy skills that will be empowering and to achieve this via easy access to digital devices and data that is provided regardless of socio-economic background or ability.

Our advocacy around digital access will focus on:

- **Providing free laptop and data packs to all SA School Card holders and expanding free public Wi-Fi services to include all public buildings, public transport, and community infrastructure such as libraries and school grounds.**

▶ **For more information, download the My Digital Life report (2021).**

Food insecurity

Food insecurity is a chronic issue in South Australia and a symptom of chronic poverty. According to a survey undertaken by Foodbank in 2021, 1.2 million children throughout Australia went hungry last year.[17] Almost half of the parents (45%) deemed to be severely food insecure reported that their child went for an entire day without eating at least once a week. Foodbank found the most common reasons given for children experiencing food insecurity were because their household received an unexpected bill or expense that had to be prioritised.

Multiple factors impact on individuals and families who miss meals, or who find themselves unable to afford nutritious food. Those in need are extremely diverse. They may experience food insecurity as a one-off, on multiple occasions, or on an ongoing basis, with the impact of the COVID-19 adding to the issue.

The Foodbank survey indicated that in 2021, 38% of those who said they had experienced food insecurity had never experienced it before, while ten percent of respondents said they went hungry because they had to self-isolate and could not go shopping.[18]

Hunger is a relatively easy issue to address, but food insecurity is much more complex and difficult to resolve. Given that more than 1 in 5 children live in food insecure households, addressing food insecurity is essential if they are to have the opportunity to lead sustainable and fulfilling lives.[19]

Most students in South Australia go to school with a packed lunch prepared by their parents or carers. Some charities and other organisations provide free breakfasts to students who need them. Red Cross estimates about a third of South Australian schools currently provide free breakfasts for students whose families can't afford to supply their children with breakfast each day.

While the Department for Education does not provide direct funding to schools for provision of meals, it does help fund breakfast programs. Currently funds are available for Foodbank and Kickstart for Kids with $100,000 per year being made available by the government to maintain and expand breakfast programs around the state.

Free school lunches have been a feature of school life for many years in countries as diverse as Sweden, the UK and India, which all provide government funding for this purpose. Free school meal programs have been trialled in Australia and New Zealand with some success. For example, Ka Ora, Ka Ako supplies healthy school lunches on a universal basis to schools from low-SES areas (the top 25% of socio-economic disadvantage). Lunches are made available for all students from year 1 to 13, with the option to opt out and bring a packed lunch if they wish to. The universality of the school lunches scheme minimises any stigma associated with it thereby protecting students who live with food insecurity from experiencing any shame for not coming to school with their own lunch.

In 2020, in school term four, the Tasmanian School Canteen Association conducted a trial provision of free hot lunches at three government schools.

While there are costly challenges to a statewide roll-out, the trial showed that providing hot lunches resulted in marked improvements in student attendance and behaviour.[20]

The average cost of providing lunch to each student per day was $4.72. This figure varied from $7 per child to $3 per child, with the more students involved in trial the lower the cost per student.[21]

Parents welcomed the program for helping to reduce the burden of time and money that providing breakfast presents, but also for helping to expand the range of foods being eaten by their children.

Attendance rates and behaviours improved at the school, with fewer parents keeping their kids home because they couldn't afford to send them with a lunch, thereby minimising the associated fear of being judged. As a result, the trial has been expanded to include a further 15 schools in 2022, with another 15 schools likely to be included from 2023.[22]

Our advocacy around food insecurity will focus on:

- **Implementation of a free lunch scheme in South Australia that can address issues of food insecurity for children from low-income families.**

Cost of sport

Most South Australian children play a sport or participate in an extra curricular activity such as dance, drama, or Scouts, every week. These activities provide positive health, social, and academic outcomes.

Children from low-income families participate at much lower levels than their more 'well-off' peers. Yet according to research, they are likely to benefit most from taking part in extra curricular activities.[23] The research also shows that children who live outside major cities or in poorer suburbs, face major barriers to participation in extra curricular activities outside of school. These barriers can include poor public transport access, a lack of clubs in their area, inadequate or poorly maintained facilities, or the costs associated with participation being too high.

Children and young people said that sport is expensive and that the costs of participating increase as you get older. These can include the cost of uniforms, shoes, equipment, registration, and transport, as well as contributions to fund-raising activities for enhancement of club or school sporting facilities.

Some young people said their families could not afford to play sport, while older young people with some level of financial independence, described struggling to balance the costs of sport with other costs of living such as food and rent.

Access to transport that is not reliant upon the availability and resources of parents and carers, is critical in determining whether children and young people can participate in sport on their own terms. A lack of transport options is often compounded by a lack of local facilities, requiring further distances to be travelled and thus making transport essential and more costly. So much so that living close to sports venues was key to whether some young people were able to participate in sport at all. There were some who said they simply 'wouldn't be playing sport' if they weren't living so close to their sports club.

Costs of participation range from membership and registration fees to those associated with purchasing a specific uniform, shoes, musical instrument or other 'essential' piece of equipment.

Although all SA primary-school aged children can receive up to a $100 discount per calendar year on sports or dance membership and registration fees, or on the cost of a learn to swim program, this is still not enough for many families.

In 2022, the Government's Sports Voucher Program was expanded to include students in years 8 and 9. While this initiative eases part of the financial burden for a season or term, there are costs beyond the voucher that are not being covered, particularly for students who want to participate in more than one recreational activity each term – for example a sport and musical activity. There are also discrepancies between the fees and costs associated with participation based on which region a child lives.

Many children and young people have raised what they see as significant inequity around government assistance that is provided for formal sports, but not for other outdoor recreational pursuits such as Scouts or Guides.

Children and young people with a lived experience of poverty spoke about how their family becomes entirely focused on 'the necessities' of life, so that 'fun' or 'additional' activities are treated as luxuries that will generally not be made available to them.

Our advocacy around the cost of sport will focus on:

- **Better targeting, increased value, and overall expansion of the scope of the government's Sports Voucher Scheme to benefit children and young people from low-income families who wish to participate in extra curricular activities that go beyond club sport.**

▶ **For more information, download the More Than A Game report (2022).**

Climate safety

Children are growing up in a time that scientists are describing as a sustained period of global 'climate emergency' and 'climate disaster'. Regardless of where they live, children and young people are regularly exposed to the reality of climate change, either through their lived experience, or through various media channels.

They read news stories and hear reports about climate change every day. They see images and video footage of extreme weather events, air pollution, rising sea levels, and loss of biodiversity that they know is occurring across the globe.

Closer to home children throughout South Australia are regularly exposed to emergency events and disasters at much greater rates than the generations before them. They know that disasters are becoming more likely and have come to expect more heatwaves and cold snaps that will inevitably lead to droughts and longer bush fire seasons, with longer winters and shorter more intense summers featuring more days of extreme weather risk likely to become the norm.

Children and young people say they care very strongly about the environment, and that spending time playing outside in nature with animals is very important to their wellbeing. They recognise the benefits of green spaces and of building liveable cities.

They want access to natural spaces for play and wellbeing. They also want to be involved in community efforts focused on protecting these places and spaces for future generations.

Children and young people in South Australia see the degradation of the environment as a huge threat to their future. Many in regional areas are particularly concerned about drought. They fear for farmers and their livelihoods and worry that the River Murray will run out of water.

They worry too that there won't be enough food to sustain the needs of the state over the longer term and are concerned that floods and bushfires that are repeatedly affecting people and animals in the same local regions will be occurring with greater regularity than at any other previous time.

In fact, South Australian primary aged school children worry about the environment more than anything else. Climate change, pollution, the ocean, waste, plastics, drought, deforestation, and bushfires and floods are on their minds most and make them feel uncertain about their future. Their thoughts and fears also contribute to feelings of hopelessness and pointlessness.

They know that the cleaner and healthier the environment is, the healthier and more productive people will be. They have repeatedly said they are worried about the impact air and plastic pollutants have on the environment and on their own health. They want urgent action taken on climate change and for adults to focus much more on ways to transition quickly to renewable energy and permanently eliminating the world's dependency on fossil fuels.

Key to children's interest in the environment is their sense of justice. They recognise that poorer people, remote communities, and Indigenous people will be those who will continue to be the most affected by climate change. Conversely, they also see that those who are the most disadvantaged might also benefit the most from the development and introduction of renewable energy technology, reducing and eventually eliminating our need for fossil fuel.

If children and young people are to reach their developmental goals, having clean air, water, and food is crucial. Whilst the inclusion of children's rights in the preamble of the Paris Agreement was welcome, the statement didn't go far enough to ensure that a child rights approach

to climate action was more broadly adopted around the world.

Australia's current climate policy does not apply a "child lens" or consider child rights issues. Neither does it consider the impact of climate change on children's rights now and in the future – these crucial elements have been totally overlooked. Yet, it is children and young people who will face the consequences of the climate crisis and water insecurity, despite being those least responsible for creating it.

Children's rights must be integrated into climate action. This is the only way that we can ensure that climate projects will respect, protect, promote, and fulfil children's rights, rather than undermine them and their future.

Although evidence indicates that some of the significant effects of climate change can be mitigated or reversed with policy redirection and reinvestment, and that South Australia has made some good progress in this regard, this message, and information about what positive action is already being taken to progress climate action, rarely reaches children and young people.

Our advocacy around climate safety will focus on:

- **Upholding children's right to be heard and supporting child-focused approaches to emergency management and disaster mitigation and reduction.**
- **Promoting access for young people to climate-related decision making including best practice student engagement.**
- **Communicate positive actions already achieved to address feelings of despair and hopelessness about the future.**

Transport

One issue that sits consistently in the top five concerns raised by young people across the state is transport. Whilst not a "hot button" topic like the environment, mental health or bullying, transport is central to how young people experience their community and affects almost every aspect of their lives.

The three major challenges young people face in relation to transport have been identified as cost, accessibility, and safety.

The availability and affordability of public transport underpins children and young peoples' capacity to engage with school, employment, sport, hobbies, interests, and other social and recreational activities. When transport is lacking, unreliable, unsafe, or unaffordable, it has a disproportionate impact on the quality of their lives.

Adults often forget that young people have complex busy lives and can be as time poor as they are. To fully participate, young people need to be able to get themselves to all the activities they have committed to, regardless of their personal circumstances or geographical location.

Public transport routes in towns and cities across South Australia primarily travel along major arterial routes in a hub and spoke configuration.

Many young people have expressed the need to travel against the grain, both within and between suburbs, often for relatively short distances. They can lose hours from their day when having to take two buses, or a bus and a train, to travel just three or four kilometres to a rehearsal, training session or part-time job they undertake after school. This can mean a commute of over an hour is being required either side of say two-hour training session or three-hour work shift.

The same young people who are being hampered by these longer travel times on public transport are those who are less likely to be called in for extra hours during a rush period or take up opportunities they may be offered in sporting arena's because of the difficulty they face around transport.

For those young people trying to get their driver's license, the need to regularly find a willing, fully licensed driver to help them complete the required hours of day and night driving experience can be a problem.

Young people that use bikes as their connective transport have described the struggle they face taking bikes on and off trains and trams. The ticketing requirements and lack of understanding from adult passengers and transit staff, make the experience unpleasant and inefficient. The fact that bikes cannot be taken on buses at all shuts off another option to their mobility.

Worries about personal safety on all forms of public transport are a concern for young people across South Australia, regardless of their economic and social circumstances. This extends to walking through, or waiting in public spaces, especially at night.

Young people have described how important night-time lighting is, and how reassured they are when they see businesses open late, so they can be confident there are some responsible adults around in case they need help. For young people who rely on public transport at all hours of the day and evening, travelling on empty train carriages and waiting around deserted bus compounds can lead to significant feelings of anxiety and vulnerability in relation to their personal safety.

It is critical that the South Australian Public Transport Authority (SAPTA) identifies ways to engage young people in the development of public transport policies and strategies that comply with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. This could start with embedding child safety and wellbeing into organisational leadership, governance, culture and training and placing an emphasis on creating child safe environments in all public places and spaces that children and young people can be found.

Our advocacy around transport safety will focus on:

- **Supporting a more child focused public transport system that addresses issues likely to restrict children and young people's access.**
- **Introducing free travel to and from school and community activities for children and young people from low-income families by expanding the government School Card Scheme to include transport.**
- **Working with government and community groups to provide programs that support young people with driving instruction and attainment of their learner's permit and full license. This includes providing mentoring and financial support to enable young people in regional and metropolitan locations to attain their driver's licence in the shortest possible timeframes and cost.**

▶ **For more information, download the Public Transport – It's Not Fine report (2019).**

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITY: CHILD POVERTY ACT

Introducing a Child Poverty Act to establish a long-term approach to reducing the impact of poverty on South Australian children would underpin our commitment to delivering on the wellbeing priorities outlined above.

Under Article 26 of the UNCRC, children have the right to receive assistance from governments if they are poor or in need.

A State that prides itself on the national values of 'a fair go and justice for all', must act to ensure all children and young people in South Australia have adequate nutritious food, a home, their own bed, suitable shoes and clothing, education, opportunities to go on school trips, and enjoy an occasional family outing. We must create opportunities for those 'less fortunate' to play regular sport or participate in an activity that is of interest to them, such as learning to play a musical instrument or developing an artistic talent.

Child poverty is real, and in a country of relative abundance and enduring economic growth, it should not, and must not be tolerated. We must work together to eliminate poverty in our own backyards once and for all. We can do this while also contributing to the national effort to end extreme poverty around the world, a key target among 17 ambitious global sustainable development goals that the world's nations agreed to work together to achieve by 2030 at the United Nations assembly held in 2015.

To achieve a significant and sustained reduction in child poverty, South Australia should introduce a Child Poverty Act to establish a shared vision for children's wellbeing. The Act would identify the measures, indicators and targets that are needed to focus the SA community on developing strategies to actively reduce child poverty.

Education

Young South Australians are successful learners

Student-centred schools

Education is not only a fundamental children's right – it is key to realising other human rights and to accessing social and emotional development and economic participation in society thereby fostering active and informed citizens.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration sets out Australia's goals for education at a national level. It establishes that education must prepare young people for active citizenship and meaningful engagement with the labour market. Education systems must also prepare young people for lifelong learning, while simultaneously promoting equity as well as excellence in education outcomes.

In addition to these international obligations, the South Australian Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People states that 'all children should be successful learners and that this can be measured by their readiness to take advantage of learning environments, be engaged in their learning, and have a positive experience of their education'.[24]

A 'good life' is measured by how physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy a child or young person feels on a day-to-day basis. This includes feelings of being safe and involved, inspired and engaged, a successful learner, and an active participant in society.

To achieve this for SA children and young people, we know we must take a proactive, preventative, and participatory approach. This involves building environments where all children and young people are thriving, feel respected and valued, and are encouraged to achieve their full potential.

Despite this aim, SA children and young people and their families, continually report that they feel our education system is failing them. Young people have said some formal and informal processes make them feel unwelcome at school.

In some cases, they say schools appear to be working to actively exclude them from participating in their education. They also say the current focus on treating symptoms, means the causes of young people's disengagement from their education is often completely ignored.

Our advocacy to improve the education outcomes for all children and young people in South Australia will focus on:

- **Provide learning environments that are engaging and rewarding for children, with support for every child to attend and be included, and easy, timely access to supports.**

School exclusion

Recent Australian and international research highlights a clear relationship between exclusion from school and 'a range of behaviours that are detrimental to the health and wellbeing of young people'. It also shows that excluded and marginalised young people, are at higher risk of exposure to and involvement with the youth justice system.[25]

Suspension and exclusion from school are punitive processes that have long-lasting effects on a child or young person's educational treatment within the education system, and the level of education they ultimately attain.

Anything with the potential for such a substantive impact on a child's wellbeing and future potential must be subjected to the most rigorous examination of the standards of justice and representation that are currently being applied.

Young people report that formal and informal processes of exclusion and suspension make them feel unwelcome, thereby actively preventing them from accessing the mainstream schooling to which they are entitled.

Advocates, therapists, and support workers describe their frustration with the apparent lack of willingness on the part of schools to acknowledge that current behaviour management practices are not working. They add that in many cases, these practices are causing harm to the children and young people who are being impacted by them, many of whom are disabled.

They despair that children starting their education are being excluded in their Preschool and Reception years, often because there is a lack of adequate support being made available to help a child regulate their emotions in the 'new' school environment in which they find themselves.

We must remember that the purpose of our education system is to deliver on the needs of all South Australian children and young people. Where this isn't being achieved, it is up to us to change the system to meet those needs – not blame the child or young person for what the education system lacks.

Behind every child excluded from school is a story of loss and pain, both for the child and for their loved ones. Our response as a State should never be to impose a sanction that further excludes a child. Instead, it should be a response that takes an inclusive approach – that ultimately aims to eliminate the use of exclusion as an option or tool for behaviour management or punishment of a child whose needs are not being met by the system.

Many young people said exclusion from their education was caused by the system's failure to support their attendance in the context of their lives, needs and circumstances. The language they used reflected a perception that exclusion was often meted out on young people due to external factors and decision-making that was beyond their individual control, and that these decisions were more about the systems lack of supports, infrastructure and resources required to ensure they could access their education.

Parents and carers have repeatedly spoken about their desperation with the types of behaviour management practices currently being used in SA schools, and how these adversely affect the wellbeing of their child.

These practices include how they fail to account for the complex needs that their child's disability, medical condition, or developmental level requires, and how exclusion or suspension of their child also impacts on their own ability to fulfil their parental and work commitments and ultimately provide adequately for their family.

Our advocacy around school exclusions will focus on:

- **Monitoring and reporting on the experiences of children and young people in relation to school exclusion and improving procedural fairness and transparency through public reporting.**

▶ **For more information, download The Blame Game report (2020).**

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITY: INDEPENDENT APPEALS FOR CHILDREN EXCLUDED FROM SCHOOL

Introducing an independent appeals mechanism/body for children who have been excluded from school will ensure that no child misses out on their right to access an education focused on the needs of each student and not blame the child for the inadequacies of the system.

Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC recognises the rights of every child to access and participate in education that respects their dignity and develops their individual personality and talents to the full.

Access to education is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and within the UNCRC where it is included as a fundamental child right. Yet despite this, children and young people and their families report formal and informal processes that actively exclude them from the mainstream schooling system.

Suspensions and exclusions are punitive processes that can have long-term negative effects on children's educational attainment and treatment within the school system. Anything with the potential for such substantive impact on a child's wellbeing and future attainment must be subject to the most rigorous standards and oversight.

Currently, the Department for Education's policy does not meet contemporary understandings of procedural fairness and transparency. Nor is there a pathway to an independent appeal body.

The South Australian Government should draw on international best practice by establishing a new Independent Statutory Body – the Education Ombudsman – to act as an independent, effective, accessible, transparent, safe and enforceable adjudicator of decisions, (dispute resolution and appeals) as per the recommendation made in the 2020 Inquiry into Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian Government Schools.

Independent review is a crucial element in improving governance and reducing opportunities for abuse of power.

Young carers

South Australian support agencies estimate there are more than 14,800 young people under the age of 18 years who are required to take on caring roles for younger and older members of their family. This figure equates to 2 or 3 students in every SA classroom.[26]

Many South Australian children and young people with carer responsibilities have described dealings they've had with their school that are less than ideal. This indicates that the education system is not putting the best interests of children and young people front and centre to ensure it is their needs that are being considered and met.

In effect, these children and young people are being overlooked and discriminated against by the system. They're not receiving the support they're entitled to, or which they require to be able to thrive and develop despite their carer duties. They're also not being asked for their views or opinions on decisions impacting on their lives in myriad ways.

Some young carers provide significant amounts of care to people in their lives. The kind of care they provide can either be physical, emotional, or a combination of the two, with some young people providing intimate personal care and/or childcare to family members over many years.

Young carer responsibilities can often include interpreting for a family member who is sick, has a disability, a mental illness, or a substance misuse issue, or who may be suffering with a combination of two or more of these.

Many young carers emphasise that their caring role is a positive experience for them, which brings many rewards. However, research indicates that, where a young carer is not being adequately supported, the physical and mental strain caring places on them can have an immense impact on their own health and wellbeing, and on their education outcomes.

But just knowing that young carers are not doing as well as their peers is not enough. We have a duty of care and an obligation to ensure young carers fulfil their own potential and have the same

opportunities as their peers. It is our responsibility to support them to achieve the outcomes we have set, so that they can be healthy, safe, nurtured, inspired and engaged in the same way that their peers who do not have carer responsibilities – able to actively participate in school, work and social activities like others their age can.

While many of life's domains can be affected by caring responsibilities, young carers invariably talk about their experiences they have at their school, describing it either as a sanctuary or a source of major distress.

For those young carers for whom it is a sanctuary, school provides a break from home and supports communication with other children and young people. It can provide them with a regular connection to an adult who cares about them and enable them to focus on a future that is different from the one they have now. Unsympathetic adults in education settings mean young carers often experience stigma and shame, thereby adding to the pressures they already face within the school environment.

Our advocacy around young carers will focus on:

- **Development and implementation of school-based supports for students with significant caring roles to improve their educational, social, and community inclusion and learning outcomes.**

▶ **For more information, download the Take Care report (2020).**

Sexually and gender diverse students

The *Education and Children's Services Act 2019* states that students should not be discriminated against based on their gender or mental or physical impairment, religion or race, or that of their parents. A child's best interests must also be of 'paramount' consideration in the enforcement of this Act.

Australia's largest study of the health and well-being of LGBTQIA+ young people (the *Writing Themselves In* survey) shows that school is the most likely place for abuse and harassment to occur. Involvement in bullying – whether as a bully, victim, or both – is associated with poor mental health and a higher risk of suicidality.[27]

Children and young people speak about the concerns they have in relation to all forms of intolerance, racism, sexism and homophobia, as well as the impact of sexuality and gender-based bullying. They speak openly about their commitment to a multicultural and inclusive community, and their desire for education settings that teach respect and tolerance for differences alongside religious teachings that promote love, justice, and compassion.

Although there are positive examples of inclusion and respect for students who are sexually and gender diverse attending schools in South Australia, there are also school environments where this is not the case. Some young people have said they have peers who identify as gay and non-binary who they see being discriminated against and subjected to bullying at their school by other students as well as by teachers, and that they want to see this stopped.

Other LGBTQIA+ young people have said they keep this aspect of their identity "secret" to avoid unwanted attention from teachers and peers. Many LGBTQIA+ young people have reported feeling unsafe in their school environments, and that adults often don't show them the respect or protection they need.

That any child or young person should feel unsafe or insecure in their interaction with adults, whether at home, while in care, at school, or in other community settings, reflects directly on us as adults, and it is our responsibility to do something about it.

Our advocacy for the safety of sexually and gender diverse students will focus on:

- **Monitoring incidences of sexuality and gender-based bullying within schools and advocating for inclusion of LGBTQIA+ young people in the development of ways to better promote their safety at school.**

▶ **For more information, download the No Exceptions report (2021).**

School disengagement

School non-attendance rates of students living in our most disadvantaged communities are triple the rates of those who live in SA's most advantaged regions. We know young people who complete schooling have greater labour market prospects and long-term health outcomes than those who don't.[28]

Young people who are detached from school describe a series of events and experiences that occur in primary school and continue into their secondary education that impacts on their capacity to remain connected to their education.

Whether as a result of bullying, mental health issues, domestic and family violence, poverty or financial difficulties, parental dysfunction, racism, sexism or ableism, many young people find themselves in school environments that are unable or disinterested in meeting their needs and providing them with the support they require and seek to complete their education.

The issue of school disengagement by South Australian young people who fail to complete their education is systemic. It is not the fault of any young person. This means that the solution must come from a change in the way schools respond to the needs of young people at risk of school disengagement, and that this needs to occur before this impacts on their capacity to complete their education and enjoy the benefits this offers them for their future.

Many young people who disengage from mainstream schooling do enrol in schools who can provide them with specialised assistance or support via flexible learning option (FLO) programs. Whilst these opportunities provide flexible adult learning environments and are more student centred in their design and approach, for most of these young people we don't yet have a clear idea of their post FLO destination/s, or other readiness for adulthood.

Our advocacy in the area of school disengagement will focus on:

- **Influencing the education reform agenda by providing postcard data from children in primary school that identifies early indicators of disengagement.**
- **Raising awareness of the systemic discrimination faced by those young people who are not able to access education employment and training pathways because they have not completed school.**

Post school pathways

From a young age, children are asked 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' As children get older this question takes different forms, such as 'what are you doing after school' or 'what are you studying for now?' These simple questions, often asked by supportive parents trying to gain insights into favourite subjects, are now posed against a background of significant and rapid societal and technological change.

Examples include rapid advances in artificial intelligence, machine learning, automation and robotics, which continuously impact the way we do things. The environmental crisis, space exploration, and globalisation, also continue to have a dramatic impact on a whole range of education employment and training pathways available to young people starting out in their careers.

The jobs of today will not be the same as those available in 10 to 20 years' time. Neither will the skills young people will need to succeed in these future jobs be anything like those that were needed by their parents less than a generation ago.

Young people, regardless of their background, location, and circumstances, have consistently reported that being prepared for adult life, and more specifically for entry into the world of work, is very important to them. This includes knowing how they can best prepare for the transition from school to work, either by pursuing further education and training, or by joining the workforce via apprenticeships, internships, casual jobs, or volunteer roles that provide them with work experience in areas and industries in which they have an interest.

Many young people worry about what life will be like for them after school. Likewise, many parents and carers don't feel equipped to adequately support their child through this stage. By examining the views and practices of schools, educators, and industry stakeholders through a series of surveys,

structured interviews, and targeted focus groups, it has been possible to identify some of the barriers and challenges that currently exist.

As a community it is clear we need to work together to develop ways to remove these barriers to enable better outcomes for young people. Solutions include supporting young people to navigate post school short term employment opportunities with confidence, and to pursue further education pathways that will lead directly to jobs and careers in growth areas.

A secondary focus involves developing ways in which parents and other adults can be supported to help young people make this transition more easily and successfully. This means going beyond the school to university pathways, which are already well understood, to encouraging pursuit of further education and training opportunities in trades and other blue collar jobs and including removing any stigma associated with making such choices.

Not only is the transition from school to work tending to take longer it is also considered to be much more precarious. Although youth unemployment has improved over the last few years, it remains high in comparison to adult levels. This is particularly so in regional centres where fewer young people can find full-time ongoing work because of the continued trend toward 'casualisation' of the workforce.

Neither do traditional pathways from university offer the employment rates they once did. Many young people are reporting that they struggle to find roles in the fields in which they have studied for years, having accrued significant debt to do so. This suggests a mismatch between university course options and employment opportunities due to a rapidly changing world of work.

Our advocacy around post school pathways will focus on:

- **Supporting businesses to provide school students with work experience and internship opportunities that are more reflective of future jobs.**
- **Development and implementation of transition pathways from school to employment that supports a broader range of career options to include trade pathways.**
- **Supporting careers advice in primary school that will expand students understanding of the skills and interests they will need to match with their career aspirations.**

▶ **For more information, download the Off To Work We Go report (2020).**

Work experience

Preparing young people for the world of work is no longer a traditional linear progression from school to employment. It has become a complex journey that requires flexibility, adaptability, and a high level of self-confidence to navigate with success.

Through a series of interactions in their senior school years, both with educators and career advisors, as well as with friends and members of their own family, young people are attempting to navigate this increasingly complex environment with what appears to be less and less practical support.

Plus, they are required to do this while simultaneously trying to determine whether their subject choices are leading them to career opportunities that reflect their true interests and aspirations, not unwittingly be narrowing their opportunities and options.

Work experience is one of the ways in which young people can be supported to navigate this journey more easily. Governments, educators, and industry are all playing their part to try and align education and subject choices more closely with trends in the Australian workforce and associated job market, for the obvious benefits this would bring. However, the rapid pace at which change is occurring makes keeping pace with this moving target an increasingly difficult task.

Research shows that for many young people work experience is an important part of the journey towards making successful post school choices and which will lead them to personal fulfilment and job opportunities.

Young people say work experience helps them to determine whether their ideas about a particular career choice really matches with the reality.

The hands-on, practical exposure that work experience offers young people away from the classroom assists them to work out what is important to them when trying to determine future work choices. It also helps them choose appropriate high school subjects that will either broaden or hone their opportunities.

For those students who are looking to leave high school before they complete Year 12, especially those doing it tough or living in rural and remote areas, work experience can be a reliable pathway to finding rewarding employment within their own local community. Conversely it can also be a great motivator toward completing their education and pursuing more challenging careers, as their confidence levels increase due to the experience and skills their work experience has enabled them to attain.

Many schools lack the knowledge, resources or experience needed to engage with the business community in meaningful ways when it comes to establishing work experience opportunities for their students. In fact, schools reported that their biggest challenge in relation to establishing a work experience program was engaging with interested local businesses who were willing to support their efforts.

Some schools surveyed said that changes in business policy had ultimately led them to cease seeking work experience opportunities all together. Other schools reported that they often struggled to link students with work experience opportunities, and that generally those students who were well placed were those who had enrolled in a school-based vocation education and training program themselves. These students were able to consistently access direct contact with the relevant workplace or industry concerned.

The schools where students were most successfully linked to work experience outside VET opportunities, were most often those who had an individual champion from either the school or business that was determined to make it work. These champions often used their own personal networks to assist students find a work experience opportunity. While this is commendable and can work at a contained local level, it often leads to highly variable outcomes.

Individual networks cannot be guaranteed each year and are at risk of dissolving when the champions either move on, become overwhelmed, or change their role. It also appears to be effort that is 'extra curricular' in its nature, rather than embedded in a particular role.

In some cases, schools and employers were able to work collaboratively to extend the opportunities that already existed. However this was rare.

Clearly when it comes to work experience, redefining the relationship between schools and businesses is key to achieving better outcomes for young people. To make these relationships more viable and sustainable over the longer term, they need to be strengthened and developed in ways that will benefit students but also schools and businesses alike.

Our advocacy around work experience will focus on:

- **Working with schools, industry groups and employers to develop and deliver quality work experiences and opportunities and resources, which better connect schools, employers, and young people in ways that can benefit all stakeholders.**

▶ **For more information, download the Spotlight on Work Experience (2020) and the Off To Work We Go report (2020).**

Refugee and migrant young people

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds aspire to contribute to society as productive citizens in the same way other young Australians do. They wish to express this by contributing to their families' success and to that of their adopted homeland, improving their own lives and the lives of those around them as they do so.

Access to education and employment are critical factors in ensuring successful settlement and integration of newly arrived refugees and migrants. This is particularly so for refugee and migrant young people. Research shows that young people from a refugee or migrant background

face significant barriers to achieving rewarding, sustainable and long-term employment.

Most Australians gain employment through networks that are largely 'underground' and 'invisible'. But most young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds do not have access to these same networks.

They often experience difficulties navigating what is a complex workforce system. They require additional assistance to develop an understanding of Australia's workforce culture, along with career guidance on how best to succeed within it.

Lack of a career pathway effectively disengages refugee and migrant young people from education and training opportunities that can create a sense of hopelessness in relation to their future options. This can translate into a belief that they are not likely to find meaningful employment in careers to which they aspire, because of their refugee or migrant background and status.

This belief increases the likelihood of some newly arrived refugee and migrant young people to disengage from their education. Disengaging from their education leads to alienation from the community and Australian society. It can leave them vulnerable and at risk of being exposed to radicalisation, as well as have a detrimental impact on their short and long term health and economic wellbeing.

They key barrier hindering successful transition from education to employment for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds is a lack of critical network of family and friends who are in employment. Extended members of their families can often have limited vocational skills relevant to the Australian labour market which coupled with little or no work experience prior to arrival can lead to long term unemployment that becomes a generational issue.

Our advocacy around employment pathways for refugee and migrant young people will focus on:

- **Developing a refugee and migrant youth employment strategy and associated resources that breaks down the barriers to their employment.**
- **Showcasing the special talents and skills refugee and migrant young people bring to the workplace and to society, and the business benefits a culturally diverse workplace offers all Australians.**

▶ **For more information, download the Leading for our Future: Youth Symposium Report (2018).**

Citizenship

Young South Australians participate actively in society

Participation in decision-making

By improving our children and young people's opportunities for participation in decisions that directly impact on them, we will strengthen our democratic institutions and structures, while simultaneously helping to build a strong state for the futures of all children and young people.

To achieve this, we must value children and young people as the capable citizens they are, able to meaningfully contribute to the decisions that impact on their lives and key stakeholders in our democracy.

Services that have been shaped by the people who use them are always more effective, efficient, and responsive than those that aren't. By empowering children and young people to make decisions about issues that affect their lives, the lives of others, and the environment, we help to reinforce the role children and young people play across our communities as valued stakeholders and citizens who deserve to be heard and to have their ideas acted upon.

Having opportunities for participation creates active citizens who are part of thriving civil societies.

The principles underpinning our work in this area include a commitment to:

- Respecting, acknowledging, and amplifying the advocacy agendas established by young people.
- Developing new representative models in partnership with young people based on mutual interests and needs.
- Strengthening structures already established by young people to meet their youth engagement and empowerment objectives.
- Connecting organised groups of young people to build networks and alliances alongside the sharing of resources and expertise.

Our advocacy around strengthening young people's participation in decision-making will focus on:

- **Continuing the annual Student Voice Postcards initiative as the key opportunity for children to have their voices heard by asking every primary school in South Australia to support their students to take part.**
- **Establishing a state-wide Student Representative Council (SA SRC) to offer school students in Years 10, 11 and 12 a new model of representation that ensures they have a voice in policy and decision-making that is led by young people themselves.**
- **Development of a Policy Advocates program that can provide meaningful opportunities to graduates of SA Youth Parliament to help influence the social policy direction of the State.**
- **Support Citizen Researchers who have had experiences of doing it tough, to actively research and survey their peers and report on their findings.**

Digital citizenship

Although the online world was created by adults for adults, the reality is that one in three internet users worldwide are children between the ages of 13 and 18 years.[29]

Setting the minimum safety expectations of online service providers 'on behalf of the whole community' is therefore essential. These safety standards need to reflect the rights, wellbeing, and best interests of Australia's youngest citizens as well as those who are over 18 years.

There is acknowledgement among many leaders and policymakers in government and academia globally, that the rights and safety of children and young people require special consideration when it comes to the online environment.

Service providers must take reasonable steps to design and build online services that have regard to protecting the rights and safety of all children and young people regardless of age. They must also be able to identify this group of users and ensure that a range of child-specific and age-appropriate protection mechanisms are put in place.

There is a clear need also, to strike the right balance between protecting children from harm as a result of being online and promoting their access to the full range of opportunities and benefits that having digital access offers them.

The right to digital literacy so that they can become critical digital thinkers, makers and consumers, and understand the structures and norms of the online services they will use, is also crucial.

In addition, the right to know where their information is going, who is using it and for what purpose, who is profiting from it, as well as how it can be easily removed or edited must ensure children and young people will benefit from online opportunities and environments, rather than be exploited by them.

Managing risk is just one of the many dimensions to children's experiences online. Any steps or measures designed to minimise or restrict children's access to certain material and activity online must promote and protect children's rights and best interests, including their rights to education, information, and participation.

References to children in debates and research on online safety are often limited to their position as 'victims' of adult crimes (eg child abuse, grooming, exploitation) rather than creators, consumers and users of online content.

It is important that we take steps that consider the rights and agency of children as active creators, consumers, and users of digital services. These efforts should be informed by children and young people's own concerns, priorities, and aspirations.

Our advocacy around digital citizenship for children and young people will focus on:

- **Maintenance of an online space for young people to have a say, connect and showcase themselves and other young South Australian thinkers, makers and doers.**
- **Promotion of children and young people's participation in online digital challenges that increase their computational thinking, design thinking and systems thinking skills to foster creativity and innovative problem solving.**
- **Creation and development of a centralised hub dedicated to South Australian civics and citizenship learning and engagement opportunities to inform students, teachers, and parents.**

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITY: FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

Introducing a Future Generations Act will ensure that the decisions we make now take into consideration the impact they will have on future generations of children and young people.

Article 5 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that "in all actions concerning children the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."

The best interests of children should be a primary consideration when making decisions that will affect their future. All children have the right to a good standard of living, health, and development. In the reactive short-termist political world we inhabit, introducing a Future Generations Act is a way to ensure that decision makers build collective capacity for long term planning.

The Act would obligate today's decision makers to fully consider the interests of future generations. Without this requirement, we risk focusing purely on today, rather than planning on how we will manage the crises of tomorrow.

Long term strategic intentions in Australia/South Australia need to focus on building intergenerational capacity. A Future Generations Act can provide us with an independent safeguard for future generations through a sound legislative basis. It can be overseen by an independent body such as a Future Generations Commission to ensure accountability.

Introduction of a Future Generations Act will create a systemic obligation to look beyond short termism and populism and unite competing sustainability ideologies around an agreed vision for the future. In this way we will all be collaborators in creating a State that we want future children and young people to experience.

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