Submission to the Senate Inquiry into School Disruption

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Introduction

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

It is also my role to ensure the State fulfils its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the UNCRC). The UNCRC sets out the rights of all children, including the right to an education that develops their personality and talents to the full (Articles 28 and 29) and the right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives (Article 12). The goal of education to support every student to be the best they can no matter where they live or the challenges they face and is a means by which other human rights and an inclusive society can be realised.

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

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role of schools as places that provide more than just academic instruction. Schools are places that foster opportunities, relationships and skills critical to children's development, health, safety, wellbeing, confidence and aspirations. For some children, school can be a sanctuary, a place of inspiration and a safety net when things are challenging. However, others experience school as restrictive and exclusionary, and a place where they do not feel accepted and safe. Often this is reflected in their behaviour at school and may ultimately lead to disengagement from school and education.

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

This submission includes direct quotes from children and young people whose lives or those around them have been impacted because their behaviour has been perceived as disruptive and they are seen as a 'problem'. Often, they have experienced or witnessed bullying and discrimination, access barriers and poor treatment in educational settings and services failing to deliver on their fundamental right to education. Often these experiences result in children not wanting to return back to school. The impact of systemic failures in education systems on children's lives are often long-lasting, not only influencing their experience of schooling but their engagement with a range of services and their aspirations, as well as how they view themselves and their place in the world.

Background and summary of recommendations

I welcome the Senate Education and Employment References Committee's Inquiry into the 'issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms' as it is an opportunity to look at the drivers - within society and the educational system – behind behaviour that is perceived as 'disruptive' and to consider what systemic changes are needed to support all children and young people, particularly those experiencing trauma or dysregulation in the classroom, and to better equip educators to respond in positive, evidence-based ways.

The Inquiry's Terms of Reference wording and tone is concerning as it focuses on the response to behaviour rather than the underlying causes of behaviour labelled as 'problematic' or 'disruptive'. It also:

- Frames children in a negative light as it focuses on behaviour rather than causes behind any behaviour.
- Does not adequately consider the impact of disability, despite the fact 1 in 4 students are receiving adjustments due to disability in South Australia.
- Does not consider children and young people's experiences and views.
- Narrowly focuses on NAPLAN, when research has shown that the increased reliance on these results has coincided with a decline in the relative performance of Australia on global league tables[i]. There is even evidence that it has been counterproductive in its aims to raise achievement[ii]. It has also coincided with a decrease in student wellbeing.[iii]

- Perpetuates a false narrative that every generation is becoming more self-centred and "privileged". This has not been experience. I have found them to be kind and caring individuals who want to help their peers who are "doing it tough".

When the focus is on addressing the behaviours alone, the structural and environmental factors that can influence behaviour too often go unnoticed. It is only by examining the structure and culture of school practices and environments alongside individual and family factors that we can ensure appropriate, timely and holistic responses to school disruption. This includes looking at how students learn, what they learn and the environments in which they learn. Numerous inquiries and data reveal that the majority of children that 'disrupt' classrooms are doing so because of underlying factors. These include groups of children:

- Living with disability. As outlined in the Submission by the Disability Discrimination Legal Service, these children are often discriminated against due to the lack of understanding that any behaviour is probably in response to an unmet need, difficult environments or situations.[iv] Our [Checkbox to Commitment](#) report provides the views of these children and the barriers they have, including at school.
- Those experiencing trauma or are experiencing problems at home, in care or with mental health issues. They are often bringing this stress to school and cannot concentrate on school work.
- Living in poverty, who often arrive at school hungry and are unable to concentrate. We know at this time more and more families are turning to food banks to feed their children. Free school meal programs have been trialled in parts of Australia and New Zealand and have been shown to result in marked improvements in student attendance and behaviour.[v]
- With undiagnosed medical issues. For example, children with undiagnosed hearing issues often have more challenges at school and this could come across in the way they react to classes. Research also shows that the earlier these issues are addressed the more likely a child will engage in learning and schooling[vi].
- Who experience discrimination not only in schools, but in the community. This includes bias against certain groups of children, including those living with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children in care, gender diverse children and children in poverty.

The Committee should not underestimate the importance of schools being places that should be inclusive, safe and nurturing environment for all children. If we fail to do this, we could be at risk of creating a group of children who are deemed 'uneducable' by our mainstream education system. At the same time the Committee needs to acknowledge the unique service model that schools have. Although it is students that are receiving the service, it is not their views or feedback that are driving practices. Often it is the feedback of parents and teachers that drive practices. It is the assumption that "adults know best", minimising student voice and agency, which can result in negative behaviours and disruption.

It is critical that we listen to children and young people to ensure responses understand and address the reality of children and young people's lives, including challenges they face and their day-to-day experiences of school. Active consideration of student voice must be given to addressing policies and practices that undermine children and young people's feelings of safety, trust and wellbeing at school. This includes the extent to which schools respect children's right to privacy or promote student voice and agency, as well as the ways in which schools 'manage behaviour' or respond to bullying and discrimination.

The Committee should also be actively looking at the elements that alternative and flexible schooling sector use to engage the students that are often labelled as "the disruptors" of mainstream schools. Often these schools provide flexibility, a safe space, food and other supports. The significant growth of this relatively new school sector over recent years suggests that fundamental changes to the mainstream schooling system are needed to ensure that it is meeting its responsibility of providing an education for *all* children and young people.

In South Australia, for example, students enrolled in Flexible Learning Options (FLO) account for 3.5% of South Australia's secondary student population. In some schools, this figure is more than 12%. In some schools, upwards of 25% of senior school students are enrolled in FLO. Indigenous students, students with disability and young people in care are overrepresented in FLO programs. Three quarters of FLO students have attendance as their presenting issue.

Rather than delaying responses until after students' behaviours have escalated and they are disengaging, educators and schools need to support proactive, preventative and

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participatory approaches to creating environments that value, embed and incentivise wellbeing, safety, relationships and engagement.

This submission is informed from two perspectives; what children and young people have told me through hundreds of consultations I have had with them about their experiences at school, as well as educators in the school system who want to rethink what schools look like and how to make them more inclusive through my two Keeping Kids Connected to School and Learning Summits.

These summits looked at what elements are needed to make classes and schools safe and inclusive school environments for all, how lessons and classrooms can become more participatory and meaningful and develop more trusting and respectful relationships with peers and teachers.

This office has also produced numerous reports and submissions that look into barriers and challenges that children and young people experience, including in the education system and these should also be considered by the Committee. They include:

- The Blame Game Report – perspectives from children and young people on the impact of school exclusions
- Keeping Kids Connected to Learning and Schooling Summit #2 Report
- Keeping Kids Connected to Learning and Schooling Summit #1 Report
- From Checkbox to Commitment – What children and young people living with disability said about identity, inclusion and independence
- The Submission to the Inquiry into School Refusal
- The Submission to the Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty
- The Submission to the Review of Disability Standards for Education

I hope this submission informs systemic responses on how the education system can meet the needs of children and young people as part of a bigger ambition to address cycles of vulnerability and disadvantage. It also should consider what resourcing and training is required to better support educators, including adopting a multi-sectoral response, should support schools to understand and address barriers to school engagement. If you would like to discuss anything further, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

To address the drivers of school disruption we need:

1. **A system that is child-centred and promotes student wellbeing thereby keeping all children and young people engaged in education.**
2. **Education Departments that give their leaders the autonomy to work with their students in a way that addresses their circumstances and needs as well as the wider community.**
3. **Educators that are respected and provided with the tools, resources and support to work with all students.**

Yours sincerely

Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia

1. A system that is child-centred and promotes student wellbeing thereby keeping all children and young people engaged in education.

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

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

Enhancing student voice and agency

Children and young people have told us that they often do not feel heard or valued or believed at school, and that their worries are dismissed, often resulting in negative behaviours in the classroom.

They want to have more of a say regarding:

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

Young people's ideas for how schools can better support student wellbeing and engaged in learning is for schools and educators:

- Showing understanding of how life 'outside' of school can influence behaviour, mood, and attention, reduce stigma around help-seeking and be willing to

proactively provide support (including referrals to further support) rather than waiting for kids to ask for help.

- Fostering collaboration rather than competition, including by promoting opportunities for students to support each other and learn from each other.
- Talking openly with children and young people to get to know them and the issues they face both as a generation and as individuals.
- Providing mechanisms for students to give direct feedback on learning and more one-on-one or small-group discussions and support and less 'lecture-style learning'.
- Promoting children and young people's feelings of belonging in classroom and school environments, including through displaying symbols inclusion or children and young people's artwork, making useful and relevant information available to them, or fundraising for causes that matter to them.
- Supporting children and young people to successfully navigate key transitions.

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

"Make school tasks use more imagination so kids can do what they do best."
– 11 year old

"more opportunities to have breaks and be active, more help from teachers and SSOs to help kids feel safe and to learn"
– 12 year old

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

Rethinking behavioural practices

While some young people acknowledged that some of the issues challenging their engagement with their education had their origins outside of the school setting, they felt that the responses being made within schools simply aren't working. Research shows that

exclusionary responses to any behaviour not only fail to reduce problem behaviour but may exacerbate existing challenges and create the conditions for further behavioural issues.[vii]

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

In many cases, exclusion reflects a systemic failure to provide the supports, infrastructure and resources required to ensure every child, regardless of their circumstances and what is happening at home, can access their education. Exclusionary practices disproportionately impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, children in out-of-care, children living with disability and children experiencing poverty or homelessness.[ix]

Some children are being excluded as early as preschool and reception years, often due to a lack of adequate support available to help a child regulate their emotions in a new, unfamiliar environment.

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

– 17 year old

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

– Unknown Blame Game report

Giving students no wrong door

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

They want schools to better understand the range of issues and experiences that affect mental health, including bullying and discrimination, difficulties with friendships and belonging, exclusion, competition and being compared to others. Mental health struggles often begin in childhood, therefore programs and support in schools need to start early to help young children better manage their feelings and behaviour.

Developing positive relationships and trust

Children and young people also talk about the lack of trust in school. Trust is intrinsically associated with behaviour. This includes the 'lack of privacy' at school and a tendency for schools to 'nit-pick over small things' like uniforms 'rather than more relevant issues', fail to 'act out against discrimination' or 'not carrying out initiative organised by students'. They talk about breaches to their privacy, including bag searches, the removal of toilet doors, the use of cameras and bans on mobile phones further degrades this trust and relationships between students and teachers affecting behaviours.

Some young people have reported not telling school staff everything they would like to because 'everybody knows' they will feed what they say back to their parents. This fear of disclosure is a barrier to reaching out and accessing the support they need resulting in negative behaviours at school. This is particularly difficult in regional areas, where 'everyone knows everyone' and there are fewer support services available.

> *"lack of privacy, share everyone's grades to class, don't support students academically, don't act out against discrimination, treat you differently compared to*

someone else due to religion/sexuality etc."

– 17 year old

"school psych sometimes alerting people without permission"

– 16 year old

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

– 9 year old

Having time to play and relax

The physical environment and infrastructure of schools is also associated with students' feelings of connectedness, fun and belonging and learning outcomes.[x] This is consistent with what children and young people have said about the importance of play and barriers to physical activity. Physical activity is very important as it increases concentration and alertness in class. They have called for spaces where they can be active or hang out without feeling 'watched' or judged by older students, spaces that are more relaxed and where children can go to take a break or hang out, as well as more stimulating and interactive spaces that encourage experiential learning. They have also highlighted the importance of creating a uniform policy that supports physical activity, alongside equipment, infrastructure and reliable transport.

2. **Education Departments that give their leaders the autonomy to work with their students in a way that address their particular school circumstances and needs as well as the wider community.**

Many mainstream schools appear to be ill-prepared and ill-equipped to meet the needs of children and young people experiencing homelessness, financial insecurity and poverty, children with caring responsibilities, children with disability, children with mental health, chronic illness and other health conditions. Expecting and requiring children to adapt to a school system that is not consistently able, equipped or willing to respond to their needs is failing. Changes are needed at a systemic level to ensure education and other systems across Australia are meeting the needs of all children and young people akin to any other service model.

School leaders and educators want support and be entrusted to make the decisions needed to keep children actively engaged and safe in school. This includes trusting them with the resources and time needed to make more connections with outside services within the community as well as families to ensure children's needs are met.

Leaders and educators often say they want their schools to be hubs to better support children and their families, but they often have to 'jump through hoops' to do this. Depending on the school community it could include having health support and services located in schools, from general practitioners and psychologists to lawyers. It also means opening schools up to community programs and work experience programs that build 'social capital' and keep children and young people connected and engaged. There are examples of schools successfully providing these services, but it appears that many of these 'success stories' are not widely known by other schools. These success stories should be shared widely for other schools to adopt and know how to implement.

Leaders and educators also wanted support and guidance to better engage with families and carers who play a key role in children and young people's engagement with schooling and learning. They consider it important for schools to engage directly with families to understand their needs and expectations and to build a shared understanding of the power of education.

It is also important that schools actively promote cultural diversity, cultural understanding, and learning from different cultures as central to a truly inclusive school culture. Educators and leaders would like to see the Department provide greater support for schools to raise cultural awareness, be respectful of cultural diversity and bridge language barriers and gaps.

Educators and leaders agreed that schools should be welcoming places where students feel comfortable and confident and have opportunities to learn, play and relax. The lack of adequate play spaces, particularly in secondary schools preventing play and movement can help with concentration in the classroom as it expends any excessive energy.

The growing number of "super schools" and the challenges for these schools to create and maintain a sense of community and mitigate the risk that children will 'get lost in

sheer numbers' can make children and young people feel just like another number. These schools should become more community orientated and segmented into smaller school environments, with separate teaching and play areas. Separate leadership and staffing for junior and senior schools, or even junior, middle and senior schools would also help foster a sense of community.

Educators also supported smaller class sizes insofar as they allow educators to really get to know students as individuals and their needs which can decrease school disruption. Some participants emphasised the need for more support in classrooms, particularly School Service Officers (SSOs), so that each child gets the support they need without teachers being 'overstretched'.

There also should be consideration in relation to the structure of the school day to meet the needs and developmental ages of children. Although the current structure of the school day is generally accepted as 'normal', it is also well-known that teenagers sleep in and tend to be more productive later in the day.[xi] As such, it might be worth exploring opportunities for school hours to be more flexible.

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

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

- Young people having a voice about what, where, when and how learning occurs.
- Focus on wellbeing, which is considered necessary in order to engage in 'learning'.
- Consistency in staff and environments that foster predictability and reliability.
- Culturally safe environments and practices.
- Small class sizes and higher number of staff per student than mainstream schools.
- Different composition of staff connecting with young people, including social workers, youth workers, volunteers as well as teachers.
- High expectations for all children and young people.
- Celebration of 'small successes', both academic and non-academic, to build young people's confidence, independence, and aspirations for the future.

3. **Educators that are respected and provided with the tools, resources and support to work with students that are more challenging.**

Leaders and educators clearly recognised the link between student wellbeing and teacher wellbeing, and between teacher wellbeing and teacher capacity. However, there is some dissatisfaction on the level of support they receive to maintain this.

Educators wanted to be provided with the skills needed to better support themselves and their students. This includes positive, trauma-informed, relationship building and non-exclusionary 'behaviour management' approaches that focus on strengths rather than deficits. They want support for educators to be able to 'look beyond behaviour to the cause' and respond appropriately rather than blaming children for non-engagement.

Adequate training and support is especially important for new teachers so they are prepared to teach. This makes induction programs and appropriate mentor support particularly important to them so they are given the tools and learning to ensure students are positively engaged and active participants. New teachers need to develop

a broad range of strategies to prevent any behavioural issues that may arise. However, teachers should not be expected to respond to complex disability-related behaviours and this is where collaboration with NDIS and other mainstream services should be readily available within schools.

All teachers need to learn how to intervene effectively to de-escalate issues when they arise and have ready access to the experts that can support them to do so. Experienced teachers know that an engaged classroom is about developing relationships with students and the implementation of long-term classroom management strategies. Yet many new teachers are employed casually or on contracts meaning they may miss out on the school-based induction programs related to positive behaviour management strategies. Leaving a gap in their classroom management skills and strategies.

The Committee could consider the extent to which current Teacher education provides the practical experience in a diversity of educational setting and communities to build skills and repertoires before they complete University.

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