Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA)

National trend of school refusal and related matters

Submission

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A thriving public school system is essential to nation building. Australian Government schools cater for the majority of students including those students who experience disadvantage. At a time when the myriad of socioeconomic and related health impacts on children are being discovered, and uncovered, the Australian government has an opportunity to lead and support their communities by setting and maintaining funding levels that facilitate a thriving public education system filled with excited children at the heart of families proud to send their children to government schools.

Equity of educational outcomes

Universal access to education does not currently translate to a nationally consistent minimum standard of education provision for all students. The national goal that all students achieve their potential requires a powerful funding response that closes the gaps that exist in the universal, yet imbalanced education provision that prevails today. There is also evidence from across the nation, that the proportion of students with higher and more complex learning and social needs is growing in government secondary schools compared to other sectors.

In a country where the government has a public, moral and human rights obligation to every child, any funding model must have social justice and equity as a foundation. Our current system is high quality but low equity.

This disparity in income distribution is acknowledged internationally (OECD reports) as an indicator of student performance on any measure - that is, that students from families with higher income are more likely to achieve at higher levels than students whose families' incomes are lower. Low income is not a guarantee of low levels of achievement, but the data comparisons are compelling and deeply concerning.

As a Nation, for what purpose do we provide education for young Australians?

It is the position of the Australian Secondary Principals' Association that the Federal Government has an obligation to ensure that high quality public secondary education is provided to every young person no matter what their geographic, social or personal circumstances.

Education in our Nation is a democratic and human right. In contemporary Australia, the provision of education also comes with an expectation of a minimum standard that ranks highly when international comparisons are made. Australia has slipped in this area in recent years. For more than a decade funding models for school education have not targeted school performance and need, but relied on a distribution of resources that did not best nurture the future prospects of the young in Australian communities - Australia's future.

The adolescent years are **high stakes years** as they are significant predictors for life success and wellbeing. It is during these years that exposure to adult and community problems have the potential to change the lives of young people. The opportunity to fund and support the needs of each adolescent is essential. The inclusive priorities of our national secondary school system should be the centerpiece of a fair and productive school-funding model. Further, there must be recognition that the core purpose of all secondary schools is education and that funding and additional resources should be targeted to ensure that all secondary schools can focus on the key work of teaching and learning.

Only government can ensure that there is a quality secondary schooling option for everyone and only government, working with the profession, can require achievement benchmarks that reflect the quality of that schooling. Transparent, consistent and equitable funding of national secondary education will be the measure by which the young people of this nation, their parents, teachers and principals will judge the commitment of governments to the education of all Australians.

Australia's challenge is to redress disadvantage through investment in government education, where the greatest challenges demonstrably lie. The review of Funding for Schooling Final Report (2011) provided more than sufficient evidence to suggest that Australian education was not meeting the needs of the most vulnerable. The Report outlines the findings by a highly credentialed independent review body. This was the most comprehensive review undertaken and it has not been fully implemented.

The Australian Secondary Principals' Association advocates for the full implementation of the needs based funding model to enable school leaders to put in place sustainable interventions and staffing to address the needs of students in their communities.

A non-political approach to Education:

It would be reasonable to assert that our educational leaders are best placed to make strategic decisions about the educational future of schools and systems but it appears unfortunately, that many decisions concerning education are made for political reasons and not necessarily sound educational reasons.

Something as important as education should not be dependent upon political funding or election cycles. It is time for agreement from all political parties around education to secure the future for our students. Education needs our political leaders and our education leaders to commit to a long term (10 year plus) plan and a structure for regular review. The further challenge then is to commit to its sustainability by ensuring adequate funding. Finland made a conscious decision in the recent past to adopt a non-political approach to education; making universal decisions about key factors that would not change with election outcomes. Australia **MUST** take this path if we are to achieve the outcomes desired by all Australians.

There is general agreement from all sides of politics on the aims for education and goals for our students. There is much common ground but we get tangled up in political cycles and trying to solve the same problems in different ways.

We have to get commitment from all parties to State initiatives and transparent long term planning and funding which will enable the systematic achievement of common goals. The education of our children is too important to let politics get in the way.

The following is ASPA's response to the Terms of Reference.

a. the increasing number since the COVID-19 pandemic, of young people and their families who are experiencing school refusal;

Without a doubt, schools have seen an increase in the number of young people and children who cannot attend school regularly. The disruption in society and the increased anxiety and mental health issues not just our students, but society as a whole as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, has greatly contributed to this trend amongst our students. School refusal is associated with risk of disengagement from school and completion of school education. Some of the issues which have contributed to school refusal include:

- Over the years we have seen a significant trend in the number of students unable to attend school due to high levels of anxiety and mental health issues. This trend was amplified during and post COVID-19 and is happening at an alarming rate. Mental health issues have only increased, and young people were isolated from school-based counselling services or support during lock down periods. Schools have not had the resources or time to invest in the reflection and recovery phase post COVID-19 and are struggling to resource the interventions that are now required.

- Disruption to face to face learning and loss of routine to physically attend school regularly. This disruption has questioned the need to attend school every day when learning can still occur at home. Students have shown that they can still continue to learn at home and are making a selective choice of attending school. The disruption also led to students lack of routines and expectations. Schools have seen an increase in inappropriate behaviours and suspensions. Again, having the time to re-establish school expectations and expected norms with the challenge of staffing shortages and combined classes has impacted on a schools ability to do this well.
- Routines are critical for young people to engage in schooling. Transitioning back to school and reinstating the routine of schooling has been a challenge for some parents, especially those who have adolescents and not have the skills to deal with a young person's school refusal.
- The number of home-schooling enrolments has increased significantly during the pandemic and this trend has continued post pandemic. Some have found it too hard to get their children back to the routine of attending school every day so have looked for the home-schooling option. Some families refused to send their children and young people to school out of fear and health concerns of the increased risk of other vulnerable family members catching COVID-19 from the spread amongst students. And again, resorted to the home-schooling option.
- Students from lower social economic families did not have the same access to remote learning through online technologies. This increased the learning gap as students were unable to access remote learning– research demonstrates that a huge contributor to school refusal is success in learning.
- That was even more highlighted for Aboriginal young people in remote and very remote communities. In remote and very remote Aboriginal communities, an increase in community violence, overcrowding in housing, poor health, increased use of drugs and alcohol along with a lack of health and police officers (who were repurposed to borders, vaccination and testing centres during COVID-19) contributed to school refusal.
- Another contributor to school refusal is the increasing issues caused by children and young people's unrestricted use of technology. This has included an issue with gaming addictions and a parent's inability to address this. This contributes to lack of sleep and an over obsession with using their time for gaming. Another issue is the increase in bullying via social media, which results in a student refusing to attend school out of fear and reprisal.
- Another trend we have seen which impacts on the increasing mental health issues of young people, is the saturation through technology of expectations and pressure to 'be or act' in a certain way. Before we were worried about how media placed unrealistic expectations on young people, now this is uncontrollable through 24/7 technology. These often-unrealistic expectations are contributing to our mental health crisis.

b. how school refusal is affecting young people and their families and the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents and carers;

- Research has clearly shown the importance of connecting with peers and creating a strong sense of belonging to create a personal identity and purpose for life. Not being physically engaged in schooling impacts on a young person's ability to connect with their peers at this stage of their development.
- Connection through social media is not a replacement for the face to face interactions and friendships young people need to make to develop a healthy purpose for life. When not in school young people miss this crucial developmental opportunity when they are not connected with their peers and this has contributed to mental health and wellbeing challenges.
- When school is not seen as purposeful to a young person's employment choices they do not see the purpose for completing schooling which impacts on their ability to engage in meaningful work. School refusal impacts on disengagement and completion of a young person's school education, and therefore success to gain meaningful work.

c. the impacts and demands of the increasing case load on service providers and schools to support these students and their families;

- Families lack access to the professional support required to address mental health issues impacting young people who are unable to attend school. A lack of professional service providers in society has reduced the ability for families to get urgent, timely support when needed. To access private services is costly and prohibitive for our most vulnerable families.
- Human and Financial constraints impact on a school's ability to provide the individualised support required for students refusing to attend school due to mental health issues. This is particularly evident in government schools who are not funded at a level which matches the mental health and wellbeing needs of their students.
- Teachers are increasingly having to teach more and more outside of the curriculum content, knowledge and skills to address the increasing levels of mental health, social and wellbeing issues. For example, teachers are asked to teach self-regulation, mindfulness, consent, respectful relationships, within an already overcrowded curriculum. This contributes to teacher workload and the stress, let alone their need to be continually upskilled in how to address the mental health and wellbeing issues of students they teach.

d. *how relevant state, territory and federal departments are working to monitor and address this growing school refusal challenge;* and

- Every school, principal, teacher and staff member in a school works tirelessly to address the issues of school refusal. Many schools have a Wellbeing Team or Wellbeing and Mental Health Leaders in their schools but with increasing numbers this is a huge challenge without the matched financial, human and physical resources to do. Schools are not financed to address this increasing challenge and this must be considered carefully if we are going to monitor and address this issue.
- Addressing the growing school refusal challenge is not something that can be done in isolation from other agencies- Health, Families and Children, Youth Justice, Housing, Police, Tertiary Education just to name a few- as this requires a wholistic approach across agencies to address the needs of families and their students.
- Schools often know who are the vulnerable families that require support for school refusal but do not have the resources and are frustrated by the lack of service providers to provide families the intense support required to address this issue.

e. *any other related matters*.

- Another issue which relates to school refusal in Indigenous Communities is the increasing trend for young people to be partnered early in life. Once teenage males go through 'ceremony' to become men they are 'married up' or find partners and refuse to go to school. Young girls have babies at a young age and then do not attend school. This can be at age 14 or 15. Some schools provide Young Mum Programs but again resourcing is required for this to be successful.