Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

SUBMISSION

TO THE

SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT REFERENCES COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL REFUSAL

Sharron Healy
President
December 2022

One voice for every child in government education

Please indicate your name if an individual, or your organisation name if you are responding on behalf of an organisation

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations is a peak community organisation and the
One voice for every child in government education

Do you wish your submission to be treated as confidential?

No

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AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

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SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT REFERENCES COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL REFUSAL

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the one voice for every child in public education in Australia. As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee Inquiry into school refusal

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence, and participatory democracy.

Australia is a multicultural and democratic society in which every individual has the right to achieve personal fulfillment while respecting the rights of others and developing cooperative relationships essential to living in society.

ACSSO believes that education is integral to both the development of the individual and the development of society and it both reflects and exercises an influence on the values, attitudes, and practices of society.

The aim of education is to help the individual to develop fully as a person and as a member of society. A high-quality education, therefore, is in the interests of a society as a whole and is the right of every individual. Education is a lifelong process which neither begins nor ends with formal schooling or formal education, although the role of the school is crucial in the development of individuals, and through them society.

Few would argue that the state of the Australian education system has plenty of room for improvement. However, developing a plan to take schools in the right direction is easier said than done. The first challenge lies in identifying underlying dilemmas keeping students from engaging today. This challenge, in part, is because the issues may change considerably depending on who is labelling them, whether it is students, parents/carers, educators or politicians.

We recognise that reasons for school refusal are complicated and include biological, psychological, and social factors.

ACSSO would suggest that the young person is not necessarily *refusing* school but rather avoiding school because it has become inaccessible to them.

Biological factors that impact school avoidance also include neurodevelopmental differences, such as being autism spectrum. However, feedback from parents and our member organisations has identified one of the leading causes of school avoidance is bullying.

Children and youth with mental health challenges sometimes experience difficulty going to (or at) school for a variety of reasons. ACSSO has had conversations with parents whose children are struggling to attend or sometimes not even being allowed to stay at school due to mental health needs not being identified nor addressed.

ACSSO is also aware that accessing the services that children and youth may need, to help them better manage and support their mental health needs at school, can be quite challenging; and addressing mental health needs in school is critically important, because around 13.6% of Australian

children aged 4-11 are experiencing a mental health disorder.[1] It is also very concerning that one in ten young people aged 12-17 years old will self-harm, one in 13 will seriously consider a suicide attempt, and one in 40 will attempt suicide.[2]

We know that mental ill-health can affect classroom learning and social interactions, both of which are critical to the success of our youth. However, if appropriate services are put in place to support a young person's mental health needs, we can often maximise success and minimise negative impacts for students.

One of the problems we hear that families frequently run in to, is getting the school to recognise the role of mental health disorders in relationship to the difficulty their child is having. Getting agreement to put strategies in place to address mental health issues and help the young person to better manage his or her mental health symptoms at school is sometimes equally as challenging.

Mental health can affect young people in a variety of ways and to varying degrees in the school environment. One child's symptoms may be hard to manage at school while another child with the same condition may not have much difficulty. Like all of us, young people with mental health challenges have good days and bad, as well as times when they are doing well and times when their mental health symptoms become more difficult to manage.

When determining the types of supports and services to put in place, it is important to keep in mind that all people are unique, with differing needs and coping mechanisms. The mental health interventions that are chosen, need to be based on the individual needs of each person and be able to flex to provide more or less support, as needed.

Impact of COVID-19

While COVID-19 is becoming a more accepted part of daily life, it can still present challenges. Starting school, transitioning from primary to secondary or even post-secondary can be stressful, effective preparation is one factor that determines whether an individual experiences the transition as positive or negative. Indeed, the opportunity to cultivate social and navigational capital enables young people to settle quickly into their new environment. COVID-19 has denied a large cohort the opportunity to cultivate this social and navigational capital which empowers them to manoeuvre within the perceived unsupportive or hostile environments of our schools. As this transitioning experience has been lost to a whole cohort of young people, how do we help these students: -

- navigate our schools
- Interact with teachers
- Interact with student-support staff
- Interact with their peers

How willing are we to acknowledge that our schools, both their structures and cultures, have a history of, and may still in many ways be unsupportive to many young people, their families, and communities.

During the COVID-19 crisis, we saw an incredible number of large-scale efforts to use technology in support of remote learning. At the same time, this crisis exposed the challenges for technology in education, including many inequities starting at the lack of access to computers and the internet.

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[1] https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/20210525_Childrens-mental-health-and-wellbeing.pdf
[2] https://www.beyondblue.org.au/media/statistics (accessed 30 November 2022)

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports some sobering figures in this regard, figures ACSSO believes are strongly reflected in Australia. On average across OECD countries,

- 9% of 15-year-old students do not have a quiet place to study in their homes, and this is disproportionally the case among disadvantaged students,
- only about half of 15-year-olds are enrolled in schools where an online learning support platform is available,
- 35% of 15-year-olds are enrolled in schools where teachers do not have the necessary pedagogical and technical skills to integrate digital technology in education, according to school principals.

Those from advantaged backgrounds found their way around closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities, supported by their parents. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds remained shut out when the school shut down. In some circumstances there has been an reluctance to return caused by schools inability to reengage. This crisis exposed the many inequities in our education system – from the broadband and computers needed for online education, through the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to our failure to attract experienced and innovative teachers to the most challenging classrooms.

When we fail, we can experience a range of uncomfortable emotions such as shame, disappointment, sadness, worry, anger, and embarrassment, disconnection, and frustration amongst others. These emotions hurt, and our instincts are often to escape from them by suppressing or avoiding them (flight or fight).

Neurodiversity

A key facet that needs to be addressed when inquiring into school refusal is the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many ways; there is no one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences should not be viewed as deficits.

When students fail, they may feel like they're disappointing the adults in their lives. Young people who learn and think differently experience failure more than others do, based on standards set by school and individual teachers. So, they are more likely to take it to heart. And they may also worry about what people will say to them when they fail and feel marginalised and frustrated. These emotions are exhibited through behaviour. These behaviours are often deemed inappropriate by teachers.

How would our young people feel if we viewed differences like ADHD, autism, and learning disabilities differently? If everyone noticed the strengths that can come from these differences first, instead of the challenges. They're not problems that need to be "fixed" or "cured." They're simply variations of the human brain.

The idea of neurodiversity indicates that learners in psychologically protected classroom environments have better well-being and self-confidence. It must be the top priority for teachers, as it means eliminating barriers to learning and participation for neurodivergent learners.

We need to provide an opportunity for these young people to share their experiences in a comfortable and considerate environment. Listening to their perspective and understanding their struggles, will sometimes create challenges. However, ACSSO believes understanding the strengths of these young people will lead to creative problem-solving and the development new ideas — things that benefit everyone.

Service Providers and Schools

Interventions in mental health promotion in schools are increasingly gaining salience as schools seek to provide more relevant and meaningful education to our youth. And while teachers are playing an important role, the reality is that teachers have many different capability levels. Teacher professional learning is certainly required in this space to be able to identify and action early intervention opportunities.

Engaging with families from day one, as respected partners in their child's school learning journey, will facilitate the trusted relationships needed to discuss a student's wellbeing. As ACSSO's recent National Survey on COVID-19 showed, it is too late to try to form such a relationship in the middle of a crisis.

To facilitate such relationships between educators and families, Family Engagement modules should be mandated in every teacher training course, and there must be regular professional development sessions in Family Engagement strategies, and in wellbeing awareness. The rates of children/young people presenting with mental ill-health are skyrocketing at an alarming rate. There is a need to investigate the cause as too often we seem to be treating the child alone, and not examining the underlying cause and providing wholistic support.

Government failure to provide sufficient resources to government school systems can be seen as critical in the responsiveness of departments, schools and thence teachers to the needs of those with significant special needs. ACSSO is also aware of a significant group in the population who because of socio- economic circumstances do not even get identified for needed support. Resources and needs on the ground are just so great that need remains unidentified and unaddressed. We are concerned that there is potential for the funding and resourcing in so far as it is available, flows to those who have greater political power.

Relevance

Relevant education is vital to the wellbeing of any society, but it is especially crucial to the survival of a strong democratic country such as Australia. Whilst the Australian curriculum is regularly reviewed there is an urgent need to provide real life skills, encourage innovation, and support student talents.

We know that education develops critical thinking, teaching young people how to use logic when making decisions and interacting with others, and it helps us meet basic job qualifications and makes us more likely to secure better jobs.

ACSSO strongly supports the need for a quality education, however, international reviews have identified that the Australian school system is one of the most inequitable and socially segregated amongst the rich countries of the world. We know that this is not a recent finding. During the last decade, evidence from overseas and findings from Australian studies have called for a change of course in policies — and the politics behind them — that drive school education in Australia. So why do we continue to believe that our schools will get better by doing things that all successful education systems around the world have found to be ineffective?

Australia once had a progressive and future-looking education system that led the way and provide good learning for all children. Instead, we currently have a conservative, ineffective and outdated school system moving backwards in time.

Following discussions with parents, ACSSO is of the opinion that if the nations students were surveyed, about half would state that they do not feel what they learn in school will help them outside the classroom. We still have failed to address the challenges created by the change to the

school leaving age. ACSSO supports this change however, the expectation was, that secondary education would be relevant and engaging for the cohort of continuing students.

In addition to the steady decline in social equality and the growing inequity in Australia's school education systems, ACSSO sees three major issues facing educational relevance today:

- *Resistance to change*
  Change requires a large group of like-minded individuals who share goals, plans and results. It's much easier to adopt new teaching strategies when we have positive evidence that students will ultimately benefit.
- *Inflexible Education Budgets*
  Australian politics plays an important role in determining the potential for making great strides towards 21st century learning. Currently, Australia's education budgets are determined behind closed doors and supported by "special deals" that prevent the money going to those in most need.
- *Outdated professional development strategies*
  Professional development can significantly improve teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Schools and jurisdictions must start thinking strategically about their programs. By identifying and supporting programs that are integrated with a system for evaluating teachers' strengths and areas for improvement and not offering the same set of training courses each year without regard for how they might fit into a comprehensive program or how effective they are.

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence, and participatory democracy. It is interesting to note that in most successful education systems today, the strengthening of equity of outcomes in education has become a common strategy.

Levelling the playing field in Australia's education systems should be the aim of every educator and politician in 2022 and beyond. In the wake of the global pandemic, equity in education must increasingly be at the forefront of discussions by educators, the government and special interest groups.

Students who come from less advantaged households, have English as a second language, and/or have different learning abilities have historically been at a disadvantage at school. Although special education needs, and other support systems are in place in most schools (in varying levels) it's an ongoing challenge to reach students who need additional and different support, than the standard practices and curriculum have to offer. Now more than ever, equity is important.

Providing equity in education across Australia requires honesty about inequality and a commitment to individuals with unique needs and those who are disadvantaged by systemic inequalities.

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*When a child refuses to go home from school, alarms go off everywhere, the
same alarms should go off when a child does not dare to go to school."
Professor Marie-Lisbet Amundsen[3]*

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[3] https://www.usn.no/news-archive/when-bullying-causes-school-refusals accessed 2 December2022