

Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment

Education and Employment References Committee

Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters

December 2022



ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

The parent voice on public education

ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations is the representative body for Parent & Citizen associations in the ACT. Council represents parents and carers in ACT public schools.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and waters where we live, work and learn, and pay my respects to elders past, present, and future.

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Executive summary

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliate parent & citizens associations (P&Cs) and make representations to government on behalf of parents and carers across all ACT public schools.

This submission is based on engagement with our member P&Cs, the ongoing business of Council, and feedback from a special meeting of our Disability Working Group.

Parents are thankful that the issue of school refusal is receiving national attention. School refusal has a significant impact on students and families in many areas of their lives including, socially, academically, financially and mentally.

Council asked members for success stories and solutions that could help address the issue of school refusal. Feedback indicated that schools need to be flexible and responsive to students' needs, students need access to appropriate and timely allied health services and that systems should be adopted to identify students at risk of school refusal earlier.

Should the committee require clarification or more information please contact our office on 6241 5759 or via email: contact@actparents.org.au

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Governments should ensure that schools are provided with flexibility to implement individual solutions to address school refusal.

Recommendation 2

Council recommends governments ensure that all education professionals in public schools (school leaders, teachers and learning support assistants) have access to quality inclusive education professional development.

Recommendation 3

Governments should ensure that schools are provided with the resources required to address individual student needs and support students to return to the classroom.

Recommendation 4

Governments should invest in parental engagement strategies, resources, staff, partnerships, and professional learning for educators as the relationship between schools and families is critical to addressing the issue of school refusal.

Recommendation 5

Invest in further capacity and capability to bring allied health practitioners into schools to work with students and teachers at an early stage.

Recommendation 6

The Government should recognise the wider issues with access to allied health practitioners in certain regions, including the ACT, and the flow on effects this has in schools, families, and communities, and invest to improve access for all.

Recommendation 7

Governments should explore ways to identify students at risk of school refusal early to ensure that strategies can be implemented to support students and reduce the likelihood of the issues escalating.

Recommendation 8

Council strongly recommends governments ensure that school infrastructure supports all students to engage in learning, particularly those with complex, challenging behaviours, by providing ramps, lifts, sensory spaces, and quiet and calm spaces.

Recommendation 9

Council suggests governments implement approaches to individualised learning, to ensure that all students reach their full potential. Especially students with learning difficulties, gifted and talented students and those with disabilities and complex needs.

Recommendation 10

Council calls on governments to offer remote and online learning at every public school for students who need it or are unable to attend.

Recommendation 11

Governments should explore what can be done to provide a softer transition to high school, including investigating a middle school model where students in the first years of high school have a home room where most of their learning occurs.

Introduction

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliate parent & citizens associations (P&Cs) and make representations to government on behalf of parents and carers across all ACT public schools.

Council's members provide a unique insight into the lived experience of families and can provide an important perspective into the issue of school refusal and how it impacts students and families. Our members can also provide insight into what has worked to get students back to school and what systemic changes may help address this issue.

Our members are thankful for the attention that the issue of school refusal is getting. Whilst we don't have any official statistics to show whether or not school refusal is increasing, our consultations on this issue have shown that it is a relatively common occurrence. COVID lockdowns showed students that education could be delivered differently. Whilst many students relished the opportunity to get back into the classroom with their friends and peers once lockdowns lifted, some students preferred the experience of remote learning.

Our consultations with members have shown that there are a diverse range of experiences with school refusal, with some families experiencing a short-term episode (often not fully resolved but the student can function well enough to return to school most days), others on part-time arrangements, some needing to be granted exemptions from school attendance and others finding the only solution was to move their children to home schooling arrangements.

Council recognises the difficulty in trying to find appropriate terminology to describe the issue of school refusal. Members have indicated that they prefer the term school can't, because they believe this more accurately reflects that school refusal is not a choice, rather that the level of distress experienced by the student is so great that they can't go to school.

Whilst Council represents the views of parents, we also feel that it is important for the Committee to hear from affected students on this matter. We would hope that the Committee is looking at options to capture student voice.

Understanding and addressing the reasons for school refusal

In order to be able to address the increasing rates of school refusal it is important to understand the reasons for it. In Council's consultation with members the reasons for school refusal were varied, although in most cases anxiety over issues emanating from school was the driving force.

When we asked parents what the reasons for school refusal were, the responses we received included:

- students didn't feel safe at school;
- school didn't address disability needs or provide an inclusive environment;
- sensory overload or unsuitable sensory environment;
- lack of appropriate support for the student;
- bullying;
- changes in school routine;
- friendship issues;
- boredom and lack of interesting or relevant work;

- student didn't feel like they belonged;
- unmet needs;
- mental health issues; and
- family issues.

Parents highlighted that behaviour issues in schools impacted on the issue of school refusal. If students don't feel safe in the school environment, they won't attend. In one case the trauma suffered by a student with a disability at school was so great that they had since received a formal diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Parents have reported that students don't always feel valued by the school and that this compounds the effects of school refusal. It is clear that in order to address school refusal, education providers need to make schools safe, supportive and inclusive places that meet the needs of their students.

The impact of school refusal on the student

School is important not just for the academic benefit that students receive but also for the social connections that students make and sense of community. Students for which school refusal is an issue, miss out on experiences that most people take for granted. Feedback from our members suggests that school refusal can have a significant impact on the student in terms of not just academic progress but also socially, emotionally and mentally.

Academic progress

The most obvious impact on students that don't attend school is that their academic progress is hindered. If students are regularly having days off school, are on part-time arrangements or not attending at all they are missing important course material. The effects of this accumulate the more days off a student has, making it even harder for the student on their return to school as they also have to manage with catching up on work.

Social implications

Students that have frequent absences from school miss out on social interactions. Parents reported that this also flows on to out of school as they no longer have the connections with friends and peers which results in reduced opportunities for social activities. Students may also struggle to form friendships when they do attend school as their attendance pattern may be irregular or minimal and they find themselves out of the friendship loop. They also miss out on developing social skills as their exposure to social situations is diminished, which may have longer term implications post-school life.

Mental health

The impact on students' mental health was seen as the biggest impact of school refusal. Most parents reported significant anxiety among their children for whom school refusal was an issue. For some families this was occurring in the morning when it was time to go to school, or if the student was able to attend school, they might become distressed and need to be picked up early. Concerns about anxiety being carried on to later in life were also raised. Parents also reported a reduction in self-belief and confidence among students for whom school refusal was an issue.

The impact of school refusal on families

School refusal has the potential to have a significant impact on families, both financially and emotionally. Feedback from our members indicates that the impact on families is broad and extends to most aspects of their lives.

Financial stress

Schools fulfil an important role in our society of educating children, but they also fulfil another role in enabling parents to access employment opportunities. When a student, particularly a young student, is unable to attend school, it often impacts on the family's employment and in turn their financial situation as a care giver needs to stay home with the child.

Our members reported that financial instability was a concern when a student was unable to attend school. A flexible workplace was seen as important as sometimes parents might need to start later than planned or leave early to pick up their child at short notice. Parents with students on part-time school arrangements, with non-attendance (exemptions) or who had chosen to home-school faced even greater financial pressures as they tried to balance employment around school attendance.

Mental stress

The mental stress and distress felt by the student about going to school was often projected onto their family. Parents felt concern about whether their child would be able to finish formal schooling and what the future held for them.

Parents reported that not knowing whether your child would attend school from one day to the next resulted in stress in the morning both from a practical and an emotional perspective. One parent described it as "always feeling like walking on a tightrope". Another member reported that they felt like they were "unable to plan for the future".

One parent reported that they had to put everything on hold, including their post-doctorate study, to become a full-time carer for their child. Burnout of the primary carer of the student was also highlighted as an issue.

Other

Council also received a lot of feedback about the impact of school refusal on siblings. The distress that their sibling was going through often caused the sibling to be distressed. There were also reports of siblings questioning why they had to go to school when their sibling didn't, sometimes resulting in both children not attending school.

The impact of school refusal also extended beyond the household. One parent reported increased pressure on extended family support networks (such as grandparents) to look after the student to enable the student's parents to work.

Responsive schools working in partnership with families

Council considers, students' experience of school is enhanced when parents are an effective partner in the education of their children. Teachers and schools get a better understanding of the needs of individual children, what supports they either have or lack outside of school and can adjust their practices accordingly.

Parents have told us that success in getting a student back to school depends on a good partnership with the school. Schools that listen to families and are prepared to work together to address the issues preventing the student from attending have the most success. Flexibility by the school and the ability to consider and implement solutions that may be considered "out of the box" were also seen as important.

Just as there are various reasons for school refusal there is not a one size fits all solution that will work for all students. It is important that schools delve deeply into the issues for school refusal by talking to the student and family and come up with a solution tailored to the individual

circumstances. Schools need to ensure that they put in place the supports required to enable the student to return to school and actively check in with the student and family to ensure that the supports are working.

Relationships between schools and families are critical, both at the teacher level and the school leadership level. Members reported that belief in the student from the school can help get the student back into the classroom. Parents want to be supported by the school in their efforts to get their students back to school. A strong pastoral care approach with the school also reaching out to pull the student back in was one approach that was successful.

Parents also felt that schools could be more proactive in providing students with greater support at break times. The unstructured nature of break times is difficult for some students, and they may need support to engage with their peers. If students don't have a friendship group or activities to do during break times, it can result in them feeling like they don't belong.

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Access to support services and allied health professionals

Students need access to timely assessment, diagnosis, and treatment strategies for a range of health concerns. Students that find themselves too distressed to attend school, will often be suffering from anxiety or other health conditions, diagnosed or undiagnosed. When a student is first identified as at risk of school refusal, they should be provided with access to appropriate allied health supports. Providing pathways to diagnosis and treatment is important due to the funding and supports that often accompanies a diagnosis.

Public access to allied health practitioners is difficult. Psychologists and occupational therapists are in very high demand, with wait lists extending out as far as 6, 12, or even 24 months. If a child does not yet have a formal diagnosis which is covered financially by NDIS, the cost can be prohibitive. If a specialist practitioner is required (for example an OT with specific experience with autism), then wait times can be pushed out even further.

This can lead to students not getting the help when they need it. Families and teachers are then left to work out by themselves the most appropriate strategies to use to assist those students stay connected with school.

Members have reported that more psychology and occupational therapy support could make a difference in helping students experiencing school refusal. However, wait times often mean that this support is not provided when issues first arise and by the time the student makes it to the top of the list the initial concerns have usually escalated.

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Invest in further capacity and capability to bring allied health practitioners into schools to work with students and teachers at an early stage.

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The Government should recognise the wider issues with access to allied health practitioners in certain regions, including the ACT, and the flow on effects this has in schools, families, and communities, and invest to improve access for all.

Systemic responses

Whilst addressing each issue individually and tailoring responses to individual students has seen some success, there are changes that could be made at a systemic level which could address the issue of school refusal.

Early Identification

If students were identified as at risk of school refusal early on, strategies could be put in place to prevent the situation escalating. One suggestion was a questionnaire completed by students at a regular interval to help identify students at risk of school refusal. Schools could then work with those students to address any issues or concerns before the situation escalates.

Teachers could also be trained to identify early signs of school refusal or indicators could be developed that look at attendance patterns and identify school refusal as a possible issue. Students that were identified at risk of school refusal could then be followed up by the school and appropriate supports put in place.

Calming spaces/suitable environments

One of the reasons for school refusal that we heard from parents is an unsuitable sensory environment. Having a place to go in school to aid calming down and educating the teachers and school staff in co-regulation can help the students before their capacity becomes exceeded. Quiet rooms, withdrawal spaces and sensory gardens would benefit students that need support with sensory issues. This should be addressed at a system level to ensure that all schools have a built environment that is inclusive to all students and provides spaces for neurodiverse students to escape the sensory overload of the school surroundings.

Personalised learning

Providing interesting and relevant learning was identified by our members as something that could increase student engagement and reduce the incidence of school refusal. Learning should reflect students' interests and be delivered in a way that suits the student.

In the ACT it was noted by parents that the Big Picture Program, delivered at Melrose High School and Canberra College, provided highly personalised learning. This program involves students being involved in decisions around what, how and when they learn and has an emphasis on relevant and real-world learning.

Melrose High School also offers a Virtual Learning Academy which allows students to attend school via blended on-line learning. The Melrose High School website notes that "This online offering

allows Melrose Students [that]... experience difficulty in attending school, the opportunity to stay engaged with the Melrose Community and maintain their place as a Melrose student.”

Parents thought that it would be beneficial if personalised approaches to learning were available more broadly across the school system.

Transition to high school

Transition points were seen as a potential increase in risk of students developing school refusal, in particular the transition to high school. Members have indicated that a softer transition to high school could help some students that might otherwise find the high school environment too overwhelming. A middle school model in which students in the first years of high school have a home room where most of the learning occurs has been suggested as an approach that could be beneficial.

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Governments should explore ways to identify students at risk of school refusal early to ensure that strategies can be implemented to support students and reduce the likelihood of the issues escalating.

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