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Submission of the Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment inquiry on ‘The national trend of school refusal and related matters’.

The Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta (CEDP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

CEDP is one of the largest non-government Catholic school education providers in Australia. CEDP serves a demographically diverse system of 80 schools educating approximately 43,500 students across Western Sydney. The System comprises 58 primary schools, 22 secondary schools, 2 trade training centres and 3 high support needs learning centres.

CEDP is the only non-government school system in NSW that has a dedicated interdisciplinary attendance team (social workers, psychologists, teachers and counsellors) that specialises in the support and case management of young people who present with school attendance problems. The team has built considerable expertise in supporting young people and their families through therapeutic attendance case management. Our work has been shared at the International Network for School Attendance.

Following are recommendations to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment in accordance with the terms of reference specified:

1. There is a need for education programs and tools that build the capacity of schools to effectively identify school refusal.

- 1.1. Training and tools must be afforded to schools to ensure proper identification of school refusal. School refusal is one subvariant of four widely recognised school attendance problems. It is positioned alongside school withdrawal, truancy and

school exclusion as one possible cause for a young person's problematic absence from school.

- 1.2. Determining a young person is experiencing school refusal is at times difficult due to the multiple factors that may have caused or are maintaining the problem. For example, judgement must be made by an educator or allied health professional that the student is suffering emotional upset and 'reasonable effort has been made by the parents' to warrant school refusal and not school withdrawal.
- 1.3. We find there is occasionally a blurring of 'won't' and 'can't' go to school. We observe some cases where a young person may present with a combination of school attendance problems such as school refusal and school withdrawal (i.e. parents keeping children at home intentionally or unintentionally).
- 1.4. Through our intensive casework, we see school refusal sits within a complex dynamic of contributing and maintaining factors. Training is required for schools to understand a bioecological approach (i.e. the complex relationship between the individual and environment) towards school refusal. Failure to do this will result in linear approaches focusing on punitive measures that consume resources and do not meet the needs of young people or their families.

2. Education systems in Australia need more research and accurate disaggregated data on students who present with school refusal along with other school attendance problems.

- 2.1. Despite growing awareness through anecdotal accounts there is nascent Australian research to validate the increasing number of young people experiencing school refusal, specifically since the COVID-19 pandemic. More research is needed to determine the nature and scope of the problem.
- 2.2. We have data to validate empirically that there has been an increase in the numbers of young people experiencing school refusal since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we are the only Catholic school system in NSW collecting disaggregated data on school attendance problems (school refusal included). We are only able to collect this data through the intensive casework of our attendance team.

3. Alternate provision, allowing young people to remain engaged in education whilst receiving support, as opposed to punitive approaches, is needed to prevent disconnection and drop out.

- 3.1. We have evidence to support that the growing rates of school refusal and school attendance problems since the COVID-19 pandemic have placed significant demands on our schools and the system to support young people experiencing school refusal. Even with an interdisciplinary team, dedicated to supporting

young people and their families with school attendance problems, we are stretched to provide a timely and adequate service.

- 3.2. We find the identification and support of young people who present with school refusal and school attendance problems is labour intensive and thus resource heavy. The complexity of the presentations of school refusal intertwined with parent withdrawal are usually beyond the resources of a single school.
- 3.3. We see evidence to support limited resources to adequately identify and support school refusal forces schools and systems to apply increasingly linear and adversarial (i.e. legal, administrative) approaches to this complex problem.
- 3.4. It is clear that the current legislative and regulatory framework in NSW governing schools responsibility towards school attendance drives funding and provision of support. Resourcing for supporting school attendance is constrained to an administrative process (e.g. sending letters to parents). The result for young people and often families is that the school refusal continues to manifest, becoming intractable as it is not properly understood.
- 3.5. Our experience is that school refusal is symptomatic of much broader issues within the provision of education in Australia. The utilitarian 'one-model-fits all' approach to educating young people, whilst meeting the needs of most, does not work for all. Alternate provision, allowing the young person to remain engaged in education whilst receiving support, as opposed to punitive approaches, is essential to prevent disconnection and drop out. This must be combined with deeply embedded wellbeing culture and practice across all schools. Resources are needed to make these alternate options sustainable for education systems.
- 3.6. We find the barriers young people present with attending school (e.g. internalising anxiety, family disadvantage, cultural barriers) are also the same barriers that prevent them accessing the support they need to address school refusal. Increasing collaboration between community allied health and social services is required to extend the reach of support beyond the school gate.
- 3.7. Investing in wellbeing ensures that schools are physically, emotionally and culturally safe for all young people.

4. The Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta is leading best practice in supporting families and young people who are experiencing school refusal.

- 4.1. CEDP recognises the importance of attendance as an indicator of the System's wellbeing. Evidence of this is our unique interdisciplinary (i.e teachers, social workers, psychologists, cultural officer and counsellors) school attendance team. We are the only Catholic Diocese in NSW that provides intensive support for students experiencing school refusal and their families.
- 4.2. The attendance team is resourced to support attendance in schools and also provide a therapeutic case management approach for young people who present with school attendance problems. The team members work intensively with families, young people and schools to understand and provide support in getting the young person back to school.
- 4.3. CEDP invests significant resources into professional development and networking with international leaders in the field of student attendance. The team recently facilitated a workshop and presented at the International Network for School Attendance (INSA) in the Netherlands.
- 4.4. CEDP also provides access to a flexible learning centre for young people who are experiencing school attendance problems. This centre provides a significant protective factor for young people who are at risk of completely disengaging from education. The centre allows young people to re-engage and make the transition back to full time schooling.
- 4.5. Our experience has been that there can be significant shame and feelings of failure for parents/ carers who are experiencing school refusal with a child. To support families we employ a family clinician who runs a regular family therapy clinic. The family clinic provides a means to bring young people and their families together to explore family dynamics that may contribute or maintain school refusal.
- 4.6. Creating cultural safe spaces are key to cultural inclusivity and belonging. We have a cultural officer as an integral member of the attendance team. In addition, the CEDP Jarara Indigenous Education Unit is also a significant support in creating culturally safe schools.

5. Early intervention and effective methods of referral are essential in preventing the emergence of school refusal

- 5.1. In line with emerging international research, CEDP employs a multi-tiered system of support to embed universal wellbeing practices, identify concerns and provide a graduated intensity of response to attendance problems that align with need.

- 5.2. Through the development of a 'Wellbeing Model of Care', CEDP is developing a shared understanding of the presentations of school attendance problems requiring more intensive levels of adjustment and intervention.
- 5.3. Our experience has been that success is highest when support from specialist teams is nuanced, multi-dimensional, evidence-based and developed using the expertise of the school staff and multidisciplinary teams.

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