

Submission:

Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into school refusal for consideration by the Education and Employment References Committee.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, representing more than 150 community service organisations, students, and individuals. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community, and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives. We work closely with community service organisations, government, other peaks, philanthropy and business to make sure vulnerable children are seen and heard and supported to thrive.

Introduction

As defined by the Committee, *school refusal refers to difficulty attending school associated with emotional distress and can mean that children have trouble going to school or trouble leaving home.*

Based on consultation with our members, it appears that school refusal is having a significant impact on young people, their families, and the services that support them. This submission describes some of the main impacts reported by our members.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on school refusal

The COVID-19 pandemic and extended periods of lockdown in Victoria during 2020 and 2021 have contributed to a noticeable increase in school refusal according to our members. In Victoria, lockdowns resulted in several months of children and young people participating in online learning rather than face-to-face. While school refusal is not new, it has been exacerbated by the global pandemic. Post pandemic, services have also seen an increase in primary school aged students experiencing school refusal.

The pandemic has had an impact on young people's 'screen time', including their use of social media, online gaming, and streaming TV shows and movies with many young people relying on social media as a form of connection and escape during the pandemic. Bullying via social media was highlighted as a common contributor to school refusal, affecting children and young people's ability to cope with workload demands and academic progress. One practitioner from a member agency reported that:

Isolating from schools and peers resulting from COVID lockdowns have increased the school refusal significantly. Also, during COVID families were required to push children to increased screen time, which is also believed to have significantly negatively impacted on their mental health, which only increases the likelihood of school refusal. The ripple effects of a child at home with poor mental health moved beyond the child to the immediate family causing other negative impacts for the family and child alike.

Research into the mental health of children and parents in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic by the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne found that remote learning had a significantly negative effect on

children in Victoria, who experienced loneliness and social isolation during lockdowns.¹ Remote learning affected friendships and connectedness for more than half of children they surveyed, and one in four children were somewhat, very, or extremely anxious about attending onsite school over a two-week period in December 2021.² The research highlighted that in December 2021, '50 per cent of children were still experiencing negative effects of remote learning on their mental health, 53 per cent had negative impacts on friendships and connectedness and 52 per cent required extra help with their learning because of a lack of face-to-face learning in throughout the pandemic'.³

Impacts of school refusal on children and young people

Service providers reported being particularly concerned about a decline in children's mental health and an increase in their social isolation resulting from school refusal. This in turn affects young people's ability to maintain support networks amongst friends, plan for their future, continue their education after finishing school and gain employment. In some cases, service providers said that social isolation is resulting in criminal offending, self-harm or using violence in the home.

It is difficult to break the cycle of school refusal once children or young people are engaged in it, and service providers highlighted the complexities faced by parents or carers when school refusal becomes an ongoing issue. When a young person misses a significant amount of school, they usually fall behind academically, and over time it can become overwhelming to catch-up on the content they have missed. When students miss a significant amount of school, they miss vital learning opportunities beyond only academic work. Our members highlighted the detrimental impacts on a student's ability to enter future study or paid employment with one professional describing the negative impact in this way:

It (school refusal) is affecting their mental health as well as affecting their capacity to set long term goals and effectively transition to adulthood given, they have lost the opportunity to explore employment opportunities and appropriately interact socially with peers. Some students who school refuse engage in anti-social behaviours, and this has been something that has also been reported a lot recently in my role. Further, given the lack of education due to missing school, students and young people are missing key information such as safe sex education, healthy relationships, AOD education which can have detrimental impacts on their life trajectory.

If left unaddressed, school refusal can result in dropping out from school altogether.⁴ When young people drop out of school early, they are at far greater risk of social exclusion, unemployment, engaging in crime, low income, and health risk behaviours, highlighting the critical importance of identifying issues and seeking solutions early.⁵ Service providers emphasised how important early intervention and prevention are when treating school refusal, and the increased need for services that specialise in treating the early warning signs of school refusal.

Impacts of school refusal on parents and carers

It is difficult for parents and carers to support children and young people experiencing school refusal. Our members report that school refusal has led to an increase in young people using violence in the home.

¹ Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (May 2022). *Mental health of children and parents in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic*, The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.

² Ibid, p.4.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hancock, K., Zubrick, R. (2015). *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, Western Australia.

⁵ Ibid.

Currently, there is a lack of data surrounding adolescent violence in the home in Australia, and the correlation between school refusal and increased use of violence requires further investigation.

Service providers identified that school refusal has an impact on parents' and caregivers' ability to maintain employment, as well as a financial impact on families who are supporting children experiencing school refusal, and on mental health presentations amongst families. Member organisations noted that where families were unable to encourage children to participate in school, this has often been viewed by schools as neglect. Services highlighted that often schools may put pressure on child protection to get involved with a school refusal issue when this is not their specific area of expertise, and they are not best placed to be assisting students and families in this manner. There is a dire need for services to help and support parents whose children are school refusing, and currently the lack of knowledge and service availability is impacting on families.

Impact of school refusal on service providers

Service providers have seen an increase in demand for programs relating to school refusal following the COVID-19 lockdowns in Victoria and described how cases are becoming more complex and school avoidance behaviours more intense. Some organisations have developed additional groups or programs to support families, but they lack resources, including staff and funding, to meet the demand these programs are experiencing. There has reportedly been increased demand from schools themselves, who urgently require assistance with school refusal. Service providers have also experienced an increase in demand for services relating to adolescents using violence in the home, both directly from families and from other services who cannot meet the demand.

At present, there is a lack of child psychiatrists and psychologists, particularly in regional and rural areas. This has resulted in an increased workload for the child and family services sector, who are trying to assist students to re-engage with school after the COVID-19 pandemic, but lack access to specialists, or must refer families and young people to specialists with long wait lists. School refusal has affected funding for the sector, in some cases, services have experienced increased requests for brokerage and funding for tutoring, and the increased demand from schools to re-engage students has impacted the capacity of budgets.

Victorian Government programs for school refusal

At present, there are few programs that support children, young people, and families with school refusal. In Victoria, the Navigator program works with disengaged young people aged 12 and over to support them to return to education and learning.⁶ However, Navigator is a limited program, which requires additional funding and expansion, as well as an earlier intervention focus post-pandemic. There is a clear service gap for primary school aged children younger than 12 who are experiencing school refusal, and services are concerned about the lack of early intervention and prevention programs for these children, as well as the high threshold of disengagement required to participate in Navigator. Once younger students are starting to disengage from school, it may already be too late to meaningfully re-engage them in education and learning.

In addition, the Transforming Educational Achievement of Children at Risk (TEACHaR program) is in place in Victoria to assist children aged 4-18 who need additional help in the classroom.⁷ TEACHaR has been shown to be an effective program that collaboratively supports children and young people, their carers/parents, school staff and other professionals who may be working with them to 'transform their feelings and attitudes toward

⁶ State Government of Victoria, Navigator Program, viewed 5 December 2022, <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/navigator-program/policy>

⁷ Anglicare Victoria, TEACHaR, Specialist Education Support, viewed 5 December 2022, <https://www.anglicarevic.org.au/our-services/education/teachar-tutoring-for-children-and-young-people/>

learning’.⁸ TEACHaR lays the foundation for a successful school refusal program, and could be expanded and tailored to support the demands schools and services are experiencing following the pandemic.

Recommendations

1. Increase the number of publicly funded paediatricians and child psychologists in Victoria and locate the new positions in community health services, with priority given to regional and rural areas.
2. Expand the scope of the Victorian Navigator program to include primary school aged children to address early signs of school refusal.
3. Increase funding for and the availability of the ‘TEACHaR’ program, with a stream focusing specifically on school refusal.
4. Develop further targeted, early intervention and prevention programs for children experiencing school refusal, run through schools or community service organisations. Programs must have long-term and sustainable funding.
5. Create a training package for teachers focused on school refusal, including recognising the early warning signs, identifying available supports and working in collaboration with students and their parents, created in consultation with all groups involved.
6. Invest in the expansion of targeted tutoring programs to make sure that all children and young people experiencing school refusal have assistance from a qualified teacher to support their learning and engagement in school.
7. Fund further research into school refusal to inform programs and build a knowledge base of the drivers and appropriate responses to school refusal.

⁸ ibid