



09 December 2022

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
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Interrelate's Response: Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters

Dear Senate Committee,

Interrelate is a not-for-profit provider of relationship services with a 96-year history of providing quality services. As a purpose-led organisation, all our objectives and decisions are driven by making sure we deliver on our purpose of *empowering people to thrive in the most vital part of their lives - their relationships*. Our programs and services empower families and individuals to build and navigate strong, resilient, and healthy relationships, from primary school through to adulthood. For further information <https://www.interrelate.org.au/about-us>

Interrelate takes an early intervention role in schools through the Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS) also referred to as Connect. The Connect service provides accessible, responsive, and integrated community mental health support that, assists families with children and young people affected by, or at risk of, mental illness. Connect works in partnership with children, young people and families in addressing risk factors for poor mental health; it targets positive change in mental health outcomes by reducing risk factors and increasing resiliency. We are committed to strengthening the capacity of families to remain focused on the needs and best interests of their children by providing strengths-based support. It is a holistic approach that includes working in partnership with the family and other agencies to improve the wellbeing of children and young people.

The following response is based on the experience of staff in our Connect Team based on the Central Coast and Lake Macquarie. Responses to the Terms of Reference are provided below:

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

- Staff have observed a significant increase in school refusal (or mention of) as seen in the increase in referrals to our service, related to school refusal.
- The topic of school refusal is usually, a common theme heard at an interagency meetings and when speaking with school staff.

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;

- Staff have observed that fines from government are exacerbating financial strain on families and promoting resistance to support refusal.
- School refusal is affecting parents' ability to work and creating job security risks. Creating less capacity against the costs in seeking external support outside school.
- School refusal is having a 'domino affect' on the family unit, increasing levels of stress amongst everyone attached to the young person's struggle.
- Parents and families are struggling to know where to find appropriate support once school refusal has become entrenched behaviour
- The cost of parents seeking psychological support is increasing and wait times are lengthy. This includes a lack of crisis intervention services and books being closed in certain locations. GP costs have also gone up with many no longer bulk billing. This makes it difficult for parents to pay for a long consultation to set up a Mental Health Care Plan for their child
- There are no transition programs for children entering back into the normal structure of school, especially for those that were experiencing anxiety or distress during Covid restrictions.
- Sleep patterns have been affected with young people having excessive screen time with increased social media use during Covid restriction periods in last two years.

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

- It is becoming more common that school refusal is at crisis mode by the time referrals are received in early intervention services like ours, where we are not able to provide the amount of support family's require.
- As an early intervention service, we have not had capacity to be able to provide support to families where school refusal is entrenched due to having only a short amount of time to intervene with clients in our caseload (e.g. Working one hour with a young person per week), in accordance with the Operational and funding guidelines.
- As an early intervention service, we are attempting to still support families on a short-term basis with appropriate referral pathways, but are struggling to find an appropriate pathway that specialises in this area or has capacity to support. We are also struggling to fit this in within our own caseload capacity. The families experiencing school refusal are often in crisis and this does not fit within our funding requirement. Connect is funded to provide early intervention and there are gaps in supporting families in crisis.

Recommendations:

1. More funding is required for programs that specialise in supporting families regarding school refusal. This support could be based within the school (both primary and high school).
2. New models are required to support child-centric education. Schools need to be seen as communities and a safer place for more children to re-engage.
3. More awareness and training for teachers and parents is needed for mental health support within schools.
4. Mental Health Care Plans should maintain an extended number of sessions for young people up to age 21.
5. Better communication between the NSW Department of Education and service providers is needed in local area districts. For example, this could include earlier communication regarding students showing signs of school refusal.

We are hopeful that the inquiry will consider supporting the needs of families and children regarding school refusal. We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with the Committee to share further information about our experience.

Yours faithfully,

Mellita Bate
Regional Manager