



SUBMISSION FOR THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE NATIONAL TREND OF SCHOOL REFUSAL AND RELATED MATTERS

The Association of Parents & Friends of ACT Schools thanks Jeanette Redcliffe for the opportunity to participate in this discussion and put forth the following perspectives.

1. **Schools need to be addressing the issue of providing learning spaces that are psychologically safe for all students regardless of disability, mental health status or sexual orientation.**
2. **Family education perspectives to be considered in this national enquiry. Parents need to be supported in gaining a better understanding of why school refusal and avoidance occur, here inclusivity of gender and ethnicity need to be considered.**
3. **Historically the focus has been on getting the school-avoidant student back to the school environment rather than a holistic approach that looks at what is causing this response and how to mitigate that.**
4. **Parents of children who are school-avoidant students require a multifaceted support system to better help them help their children.**

APFACTS is the peak body and advocate for parents and carers whose children attend non-government schools, with 40 years of experience in representing parents in the ACT.

APFACTS advances the interests of the broader non-government parent community through engagement with government, key stakeholder groups, as well as keeping its membership informed on latest and emerging education issues.

As a non-denominational and a-political organisation, APFACTS aims are to support parents and parent associations, promote and facilitate parent school partnerships and parent engagement, promote the views of parents to education stakeholders, government and key stakeholders in the ACT, advocate fairness, equity and improvement in education for all children in the ACT and to respect and represent the right of parents to choose the best schooling fit for their child without unreasonable financial disadvantage.

ACT parents value choice and diversity in education providers to partner in the education journey of their children. The ACT education landscape shows enrolments of over 38% of children in the non-government sector, the highest in the country. (ABS 2020 census figures)

We welcome this opportunity to contribute our views on school refusal and related matters from the parent perspective.

Kind regards,

Patricia Falcetta
President, APFACTS



1. **Schools need to be addressing the issue of providing learning spaces that are psychologically safe for all students regardless of disability, mental health status or sexual orientation.**

School-avoidant students become school-avoidant for a myriad of reasons, however, the vast majority of students struggle with psychological safety at school. School, policies and teacher education needs to have a focus that is rooted in the psychological safety of children. Educators need to be well-versed in what psychological safety and distress look like in youth. Policies need to support children to celebrate their diversity and attend school in environments that are welcoming, inclusive and safe for them to explore their gender identity, express their mental health and respect their sexual orientation.

2. **Family education perspectives to be considered in this national enquiry. Parents need to be supported in gaining a better understanding of why school refusal and avoidance occur, here inclusivity of gender and ethnicity need to be considered.**

Historically there has been a divide in between parent empowerment and the confines of the school day. The key to getting children who are struggling with school refusal is to work collaboratively with parents and families to empower both the child and the family to support a transition back into education. There needs to be more education for parents and care givers on the reasons for school-avoidant behaviours, the causes of school refusal and the best way to support their child. School refusal is usually a symptom of another psychological crisis, rather than the issue at hand. School refusal is more prominent in children who are neurodiverse or victims of trauma, and it is important that these complex situations are taken into account while designing family education. It is through education that parents will best understand the discussions and support that they can offer their children, as well as the supports that may be required to support children back into education, in whatever form that may take.

3. **Historically the focus has been on getting the school-avoidant student back to the school environment rather than a holistic approach that looks at what is causing this response and how to mitigate that.**

Children displaying school-avoidant behaviours are typically labelled as being truant, wagging or defiant. APFACTs support the sharing of data surrounding the behaviours of children who become school avoidant as to attendance patterns, frequency of attendance and successful or unsuccessful interventions. School refusal is becoming a more prominent issue that not only requires, education, action and support, but research into early interventions that could prevent total disconnect of the child from their chosen learning environment.



Once this disconnect has occurred it is imperative that children are considered as to how they will best perform in their education, and the alternative pathways to return to school while avoiding falling further and further behind. If the pandemic has taught us nothing it is that education can be more flexible than a traditional classroom model. Children who are battling school-avoidant behaviours need to be afforded opportunities for engagement, regardless of physical presence in a classroom.

4. **Parents of children who are school-avoidant students require a multifaceted support system to better help them help their children.**

Parents of children who are going through school refusal and other related matters are suffering in how best to support their child and how to achieve the goal of completing their education. Schools and parents are both bound by legislation that mandates school attendance, while the child in the centre of the situation is suffering with the thought of attending their place of education. Schools and parents need to work in partnership to ensure that these children are supported to complete their education and to transition back into an educational pathway that supports the goals of the child, family and educators.