



The Therapy Place

School Refusal Committee additional document

Proposed program vs current program

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The below is a comparison summary between the current Navigator Program and the proposed Empower Program.

Area	Navigator	Proposed new 'Empower' program
Referral system	Referral made by anyone involved with the young person via online form.	Referral made by anyone involved with the young person via online form or phone call.
Managed by	Contracted community service organisations.	Managed by Empower team.
Eligibility criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 to 17 years of age (inclusive) be enrolled in, or intend to enrol in a Victorian education setting (including non-government schools) have attended 30% or less of the previous school term, or equivalent, or not be attending an education setting at all. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> be enrolled in, or intend to enrol in a Victorian education setting (including non-government schools) have attended 20% or less of the previous 4 weeks, or equivalent, or not be attending an education setting at all. be identified by a school or caregiver as needing assistance to engage in the school setting.
Attendance	<p>Monitored by the school in accordance with current policy.</p> <p>Attendance: Policy education.vic.gov.au</p>	<p>Monitored by the school in accordance with current policy.</p> <p>Attendance: Policy education.vic.gov.au</p> <p>Additional attendance data selection to include school refusal as an option for non-attendance. This data can then be assessed on a weekly basis by each individual school to identify any students at risk of school refusal. Data can also be used by the Department of Education to track, manage and</p>



		mitigate school refusal. It is recommended that this requirement become part of the school attendance policy.
Re-engagement program	To be completed by the school in partnership with outside organisations.	<p>To be completed by the treating mental health professional in consultation with the school, carer, and child. This may be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mental health professional working with the child from an outside organisation. • An assigned mental health professional sourced through the school disengagement team from an outside organisation. • A mental health professional within the school disengagement team. • A mental health professional employed by the school the child attends.
Implementation of school engagement program	Monitored by the school in partnership with outside organisations.	Monitored by the Empower team in partnership with the school, caregiver, and child.
Funding for school refusal	Not found on Department of Education website.	<p>Additional funding to be assessed on an individual basis by the Empower team. Funding may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term funding for the school to employ an additional aide to support the child to meet the child/parent at the school gate in the morning and assist them to prepare for classes and/or to attend classes with the child as a direct support. • A funding package for tutoring to support the child's learning. • Funding for mental health support should this not be in place. • Short-term funding to support the family financially

		while the child is not attending school.
Family and social work support	Managed by contracted community service organisations. Supports not currently listed.	Managed by the Empower team. Supports may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health support for family/caregiver. • Link to migrant resource centres for specific cultural needs in conjunction with other care. • Link to social service agencies for those at risk of homelessness or poverty. • Support for family violence

Additional Information:

Referral system: Currently any person who is involved with the child can refer the child via the online system. Parent/guardian consent should be obtained. This system safeguards children who may not have the required parent/guardian support. It also allows parents/professionals to refer the child if the school is not actioning parent concerns regarding school refusal. This referral system should remain in place.

Management of the program: The Navigator program is managed by different contracted agencies as is the School Focused Youth Service FSU program for children aged 5-12. This can lead to differences in how the program is administered and what help the children/families have access too. It is recommended that the program be managed by the Empower team to allow consistency, follow up and accountability.

Eligibility Criteria: The current criteria to access the Navigator program is only for students 12-17 who have attended 30% or less of the previous school term. By this stage, children are usually in full school refusal mode and intensive intervention is required increasing the amount of time and resources that are needed. In some cases, it is too late for remedial intervention by this stage.

The School Focused Youth Service program is run for students 5-12 years. This program has no set eligibility criteria however is for students that are vulnerable to or showing signs of disengaging from school. This program is run by external organisations or local councils. At The Therapy Place, we have not had any of our children referred to this program through local primary schools over the past 10 years of practice. No parents or staff are aware of the program, giving an indication that it is not functioning in the way it is intended.

The proposed program would see eligibility extend to all children enrolled in a Victorian school, including both primary, secondary and those students in a VCAL or VCAT program attending thorough a TAFE program. The criterion for eligibility is detailed in the table above. Although this may initially see a rise in cases referred, in the long term, many of these cases will be resolved earlier, allowing for less need of intensive intervention. If addressed at the early stages, and effective interventions are implemented, research shows that the severity and length of school refusal for a student is significantly shortened with better outcomes for both the student, family, and school.

Attendance: It is recommended that attendance continue to be monitored by the school in accordance to current policy. Additional attendance data selection should include school refusal as an option for non-attendance. This data can then be assessed on a weekly basis by each individual school to identify any students at risk of school refusal. Data can also be used by the Department of Education to track, manage and mitigate school refusal. It is recommended that this requirement become part of the Department of Education school attendance policy.

Separate training for both parents and school staff is required to highlight early warning signs for school refusal. This will be key in identifying students at risk. This training can be offered online. It would be anticipated that this would be no more than a 1 to 1.5 hour training program and include the steps that the parents and school can implement initially and quickly. Referral to the Empower team would be recommended if these steps do not meet the child's needs.

Re-engagement program: The Navigator program outlines that re-engagement programs are to be completed by the school in partnership with outside organisations. Currently, schools do not have the expertise or resources to write a re-engagement program for children with mental health concerns, unless the school employ qualified mental health practitioners. In many instances, the school programs push the children too early to re-engage in attending classes with peers. Although done with the best intentions, the programs often escalate school refusal and, in many cases, result in the child leaving the school altogether.

The proposed program allows for an unbiased trained mental health professional outside of the school community to liaise with the school, family, child, and outside professionals to gain a holistic understanding of the child's situation and needs. This would then be taken into consideration and a program be written and agreed with by all parties, allowing the child to feel a part of the process. This may be:

- A mental health professional working with the child from an outside organisation.
- An assigned mental health professional sourced through the school disengagement team from an outside organisation.
- A mental health professional within the school disengagement team.
- A mental health professional employed by the school the child attends.

In many cases, the re-engagement plan may be written and overseen by the child's current treating mental health professional, as many children with school refusal have access to OT, psychology, or counselling professionals through their NDIS funding.

Regardless of those involved, the process would be overseen by the 'keyworker' from the re-engagement team to ensure that all criteria are being met and the program is effective for the child.

It is recommended that alternative options be provided in schools for those children wanting to re-engage with school but cannot due to mental health concerns. This would be determined by the school and the re-engagement team and additional short-term funding for this be provided: This may look like:

- a modified curriculum such as dropping subjects for a period of time that the child feels overwhelmed in, such as LOTE, PE, or other non-essential classes. This would allow a less stressful timetable. Additional tutoring may be provided in lieu of these subjects to assist the child to 'catch up' academically to a point that they feel confident in keeping up when re-introduced to classroom learning.
- Having a 'interim' classroom for those experiencing school refusal to bridge the gap between home and regular classroom learning. This would allow for a higher staff to student ratio than

if 1:1 intervention was required. This would also allow for the development of social interactions between students to allow them a place of belonging within the school environment.

- Lunchtime clubs designed with the interest of the students struggling with school refusal to allow interactions between students to bridge the social gap between them and peers.

Funding for school refusal:

There was no funding information available online for comparison. One of the major setbacks for re-engagement programs is the lack of staff for the school. If caught early, minimal staff will be required. If school refusal has been building, a set plan will need to be implemented, usually with a need for 1:1 support for some months. This may be meeting a child at the gate to assist them to transition onto the school grounds, help them organise themselves for classes or attend classes as a support person with the child. As discussed in the hearing, to do this, schools need to utilise aides from funded students. This causes disruption to the timetable and all students involved. For most students, the support person does not need to be a trained mental health worker, but rather a person that the child trusts. It is recommended that this be someone at the school who can be an ongoing support. Other aides can be brought in to cover the gaps for the period of the plan. This funding should be additional to that already provided to the school.

If there are several students who are school refusing, setting up a specialized classroom may be a way to minimise the staffing requirements after an initial 1:1 support period.

Family and social work support

Supports for families under the navigator program are managed by contracted community service organisations. Again, this is up to the individual organisations and can lead to differences in how the program is administered and what help the children/families have access too. It is recommended that the program be managed by the enablement team to allow consistency, follow up and accountability. Supports may include:

- Mental health support for family/caregiver.
- Link to migrant resource centres for specific cultural needs in conjunction with other care.
- Link to social service agencies for those at risk of homelessness or poverty.
- Support for family violence

For further information or discussion please do not hesitate to contact us

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