Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal

Submission to Senate Education and Employment References Committee

9 December 2022

This submission is made by Save the Children and 54 reasons.

Save the Children is a leading global non-government organisation focused on children's rights which has been active in Australia for over 100 years. 54 reasons delivers Save the Children's services in Australia, working alongside children and their families and communities in accordance with the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This submission reflects our perspective as Australia's leading child rights organisation. It is grounded in our experience applying the insights from child rights-based and child development-focused approaches to develop effective policy and system reform solutions. Our positions and recommendations are strongly informed by insights and evidence from our evidence-based programs that operate in schools as part of integrated responses to support student wellbeing, engagement, learning and development.

Our Hands on Learning program is particularly relevant. Hands on Learning is a practical in-school program that builds wellbeing, engagement and attendance by creating opportunities for students to discover their talents and experience success through significant and authentic hands-on projects. 54 reasons provides quality assurance to support 140 Hands on Learning partner schools across Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and Tasmania, reaching over 2400 students at risk of disengagement in 2022. This includes primary and secondary schools. Almost one third of those schools have been implementing Hands on Learning for at least five years, with some for more than 10 years. For more information, see Attachment 1.

Children's right to access education that supports wellbeing, engagement and learning

All children have a right to education that is inclusive and meets their individual circumstances. This fundamental entitlement includes the right to receive the support they need in order to access and engage with education. These rights are held by everyone aged up to 18, in line with the definition of a 'child' in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[1]

Equally fundamental is children's right to develop to their fullest potential. This encompasses a holistic understanding of child development and wellbeing, including cognitive, social, emotional, psychological, spiritual, moral and physical development. The right to development recognises the importance of the family, community, cultural and broader contexts within which children's development occurs. It is fundamentally linked to children's right to have a voice and to be heard and taken seriously in all decisions that affect them.[2]

Wellbeing, engagement and learning have been called the three pillars of quality education.[3] They are inextricably linked. Student wellbeing and engagement are the foundations for successful learning, healthy development and long-term life outcomes. Better student wellbeing promotes engagement with

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[1] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28.
[2] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 6 and 12.
[3] Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018, *Student wellbeing, engagement and learning across the middle years*, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, p 14.

learning, and better engagement with learning in turn improves wellbeing. Enhanced student wellbeing and student engagement are each strongly associated with improved resilience, educational attainment, academic learning and employment outcomes.[4]

School refusal in context – the underlying issue of student engagement

School refusal should be understood in the context of the broader concept of student engagement.

All students are on a continuum of engagement with their education, from highly engaged to highly disengaged. Individual students' experiences and 'position' on this continuum typically vary over time due to a complex and dynamic range of factors.

Students who are engaged with education feel connected to education and school, participate in school activities, have a sense of belonging and inclusion, believe they are learning and developing meaningful skills, take ownership of their learning, and feel that what they are doing at school is purposeful. By contrast, disengagement occurs when those things are absent, and encompasses students who are attending school but either passively or actively disengaged in their classrooms as well as those who are repeatedly absent or have stopped attending school altogether.

School refusal is towards the more severe end of this continuum, and is usually associated with a student experiencing emotional difficulties or distress.[5] However, school refusal is not a fixed or constant state. Nor does school refusal have a single cause that can be identified or addressed in isolation. The recent trend in increased school refusal is best understood as a manifestation of the broader trend in increased disengagement from education over the same period, and this understanding should guide attempts to recognise and respond to the needs of students who are facing these challenges.

Student disengagement and school refusal – the impact of COVID-19

Disengagement from learning is widespread across Australia,[6] yet has consistently received little focus and attention from governments and the public relative to the significant harm it causes. Of particular concern is its increasing incidence among primary school aged children. Even before COVID-19, Australia's high rate of disengagement from education could fairly be described as a national crisis, given the lifelong adverse impacts of educational disengagement for individuals and society as a whole.

COVID-19 threatens to turn this significant existing problem into a generational rupture. The pandemic has disrupted children's learning, weakened their connection to schools, placed severe pressure on their mental health and wellbeing, and significantly increased disengagement.[7] We have seen these effects clearly in the schools where we work, and in their communities, with many schools reporting a reduced sense of belonging and desire to attend school among students since remote learning.

All parents have seen these impacts on their children to varying degrees, and there is increasingly – if belated – broader awareness of the scale and 'long tail' of the problem as children continue to struggle to adjust to the years of social, emotional and academic learning that they have lost. The current

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[4] Deloitte Access Economics, 2012, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*; K Hancock et al, 2013, *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia; J Abbott-Chapman et al, 2014, 'The longitudinal association of childhood school engagement with adult educational and occupational achievement: findings from an Australian national study', *British Educational Research Journal* 40(1): 102-20; S Lamb et al, 2015, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Mitchell Institute; Dandolo Partners, 2022, *An Independent Analysis of Hands on Learning – 2021*.
[5] J Sewell, 2008, 'School refusal', *Australian Family Physician* 37(6): 406-8.
[6] P Goss and J Sonnemann, 2017, *Engaging students: Creating classrooms that improve learning*, Grattan Institute.
[7] Save the Children, 2022, *The true cost of COVID-19: A generation left behind*.

increased rates of school refusal are unquestionably connected to these broader impacts of the pandemic.

Moreover, for many children, the pandemic is compounding significant existing challenges to engaging with learning. This includes children who have experienced a major natural hazard such as the 'Black Summer' bushfires of 2019-20 and the major floods that affected NSW and Queensland in 2022 and are still only in the early stages of recovery from these disasters.[8] It also includes children who were already struggling to engage with learning, experiencing poverty or other socio-economic disadvantage, or otherwise at particular risk of disengaging. COVID-19 has reinforced and widened the divide between students and families with the resources and opportunities to engage with education and those who do not.

Priorities for addressing school refusal and disengagement

The pandemic has shone an unforgiving light on a crucial and long-standing deficiency in Australia's education system – a systematic undervaluing of the importance of student wellbeing and engagement.[9] The consequences of this long-term oversight are all too clear in the increasing rates of school refusal and broader school disengagement that are now apparent.

To address these escalating problems, schools, education systems and governments should urgently focus more on student wellbeing and engagement as critical outcomes of education in their own right.

The Federal Government has an established national leadership role working with the States and Territories on important school education policy areas, and has responsibility for primary mental health care. It is also responsible for the national economy and economy-wide policy decisions. This is significant because school refusal and disengagement have significant implications for Australia's future productivity and fiscal position,[10] especially with the impact of COVID-19.

Further, with some exceptions, State-based education systems have historically not realised the full potential of partnerships with external agencies to address issues such as student wellbeing and engagement. In part this is due to government silos and the cross-portfolio nature of these challenges.[11]

Taken together, this means the Federal Government has a clear mandate and unique capacity to take a leadership role in addressing school refusal and disengagement at a national level, especially in responding to COVID-19. There is ample scope for this to be done without intruding on States' and Territories' role as school system managers, seeking to dictate how States manage their school systems, or impinging on existing State activities.

The Federal Government should coordinate the establishment of a national strategy to keep students engaged with learning, to be developed jointly with States and Territories. This would include addressing issues of school refusal.

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[8] See, eg, Save the Children, 2020, *Children's experiences and needs in the 2019-20 bushfires: Consolidated submission to inquiries into the 2019-20 bushfire season*; Save the Children, 2021, *After the storm: A perspective on the immediate relief and recovery approaches implemented to support children – Submission to Phase 2 of the Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season*; Save the Children, 2022, *Inquiry into the response to major flooding across NSW in 2022 – Save the Children's submission*.

[9] For recent recognition of this deficiency, see: Productivity Commission, 2022, *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Interim report*, ch 4.

[10] See the references cited in above n 4.

[11] Tasmania provides a valuable example to consider where the Department for Education, Children and Young People's student engagement and attendance unit are partnering with 54 reasons to support school leaders and expand access to Hands on Learning as a proven intervention for schools in that State.

A key objective of this national strategy should be to ensure that evidence-based programs with demonstrated impact in re-engaging students or keeping at-risk students engaged are available to all schools across Australia, including mechanisms to support proven programs to scale nationally. This could be delivered through a National Student Engagement Program or similar (see Attachment 2 for more detail).

Such a national program could provide an effective vehicle for coordinated social investment by Australian governments to prevent more acute disengagement by enabling schools and school systems to intervene early through evidence-based interventions focused directly on supporting student engagement and addressing the factors driving school refusal.

Disengagement and school refusal also needs to be responded to in the context of efforts to support students facing mental health challenges. A national focus on children's mental health and wellbeing is required, with particular focus on filling existing gaps in prevention and early intervention, and in support for children aged below 12. The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy[12] fills these gaps. It should be fully funded and implemented.

Recommendations

As outlined above, we recommend that the Federal Government:

1. Coordinate the establishment of a national strategy to keep students engaged with learning, to be developed jointly with States and Territories.

2. Through this national strategy, ensure that evidence-based programs with demonstrated impact in re-engaging students or keeping at-risk students engaged are available to all schools across Australia, including mechanisms to support proven programs to scale nationally, such as through a new National Student Engagement Program.

3. Fully fund and implement the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

School refusal and disengagement are complex issues. Addressing them effectively requires a range of actions and initiatives, and coordinated action by governments. Accordingly, we additionally recommend that the Australian, State and Territory Governments work together to:

4. Develop improved nationally consistent data collection to more effectively measure student wellbeing and engagement.

5. Establish arrangements for regular reporting on student wellbeing and engagement in a form that can be disaggregated to school level and analysed against student learning and attendance data, integrated with the existing My School website – a 'NAPLAN for wellbeing'.

6. Develop a national evidence base to help schools across Australia identify 'what works' to support disengaged students and those at risk of disengagement.

7. Intervene early wherever possible, starting in primary school and through the 'middle years', a crucial period where school refusal and broader disengagement frequently first manifest.

8. Better support transitions between primary and secondary schools, as this transition presents heightened risks for those already experiencing disengagement in the late primary years.

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[12] https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/5b7112be-6402-4b23-919d-8fb9b6027506/National-Children%E2%80%99s-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-Strategy-%E2%80%93-Report.

Lastly, we note the critical importance of working with students' families and communities to support their engagement with education. This submission has focused on priorities for the school system, particularly initiatives that take place within schools, but this focus must be accompanied by an integrated emphasis on working with families to ensure that all relevant aspects of the student's circumstances and environments are addressed in supporting their educational engagement and wellbeing.

Further information

We would be happy to provide further information about anything in this submission. To discuss this submission or for more information, please contact:

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Attachment 1 – Hands on Learning

Hands on Learning builds at-risk students' connection to school by engaging them in practical, hands-on activities that are meaningful to them and their schools, increasing their sense of belonging with an explicit focus on teaching, building and measuring social and emotional skills development. The program is facilitated by trained artisan-teachers and strengthens students' capacities, connection to their schools and learning, and sense of meaning and purpose. Participants are students who are at risk of disengagement.

Hands on Learning continued operating throughout the lockdowns and remote learning requirements of the pandemic, responding to the particular challenges that those requirements – and the broader wellbeing impacts of the pandemic – created for student engagement, particularly for students already at risk of disengagement.

The program was first piloted at Frankston High School in Victoria in 1999, expanding to a regional cluster of partner schools by 2008 when Hands on Learning Australia was established as a charity. Hands on Learning Australia and Save the Children Australia (now 54 reasons) joined forces in 2017.

Currently 140 partner schools are implementing Hands on Learning across Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and Tasmania. In 2022, the program reached over 2400 students at risk of disengagement, around 25 per cent of whom were in primary school.

A recent review by Dandolo Partners (2022) highlighted that 95% of participants finish school or get an apprenticeship or a job. The independent analysis found the program 'meets a clear need', 'is grounded in evidence and demonstrates a commitment to measuring impact' and has a 'very low threshold for investment in the program to break even and to deliver a positive return on investment. If only 1.1% of their annual cohort finish school when they wouldn't have otherwise, they break even.'

Our experience through Hands on Learning has taught us any wellbeing intervention to support student engagement should consider the following:

• Interventions need to be flexible to meet different students' needs and not be prescriptive about participation lengths (eg a one size fits all, 6 or 8 week program). In this respect, interventions to support student engagement may differ from some evidence-based interventions that are focused instead on social and emotional wellbeing, where more targeted interventions may sometimes be highly effective.

• Support inside the school gate that allows students to remain connected with their traditional academic timetables school is critical. Sending students offsite should only ever be a last resort as it sends an implicit message of rejection.

• The experience of support for students inside the school gate should have a different look and feel to 'normal school' which students are struggling to engage with. This may include things like shape of the day, student-teacher ratio, and student group composition (eg cross-age students to foster leadership and mentoring among the group).

• A more intensive ratio of student to teacher in groups with smaller sizes than are typical in classrooms may be most effective. Our experience suggests team dual-worker models with groups of 8-10 students may be ideal in many cases, although this varies depending on the program.

Applying these principles to our Hands on Learning approach has resulted in strong impact. For example, in surveys of over 1200 parents of program participants over the last 4 years:

• 90% of parents say Hands on Learning plays a vital role in supporting their child's wellbeing.

• 77% of parents say Hands on Learning is the key reason their child is more engaged and motivated to attend school.

Attachment 2 – National Student Engagement Program

A National Student Engagement Program would enable all schools across Australia to access evidence-based programs with demonstrated impact in re-engaging students or keeping at-risk students engaged, such as where school refusal is occurring or there is heightened risk of its occurrence.

It would provide a vehicle for proven solutions to be accessible nationally and at scale to address the national problems of school refusal and disengagement.

It would fill the current gap in the accessibility of evidence-based programs at a national level – a gap which exists largely because schools are unable to easily access the proven programs that are already operating, and programs face challenges in scaling nationally to meet need in the absence of schools having an available mechanism to access them.

Scope

The Program would enable schools to easily access proven, evidence-based programs and interventions that operate in schools, or with a strong connection to schools, to support students' engagement with education.

It could include specific focuses on priority drivers of disengagement or cohorts experiencing disengagement, such as where school refusal is occurring.

This focus on supporting educational engagement would be distinct from, and complementary to, existing efforts in various jurisdictions to ensure the availability of programs and interventions to support students' mental health (such as the Schools Mental Health Menu in Victoria) and build the skills and capacity of standing in-school workforces.

Implementation considerations

The Program would include parameters about the types of programs and interventions that could be accessed through it. It would be limited to programs and interventions that are evidence-based and proven to be effective in supporting students to remain engaged, or re-engage, with education.

This would include a strong focus on programs focused on prevention and early intervention, but could also include more targeted and acute support.

Funding to implement programs and interventions that met these parameters would be available to any school where there is an identified need for such support, with criteria to guide assessment of the level and urgency of that need.

These criteria would include specific risk factors for disengagement, including particular vulnerability to the impacts of COVID-19, exposure to a major natural hazard or other community-level trauma, and other indicators of vulnerability such as socio-economic disadvantage and regional or remote location. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score of a school could be part of the criteria.

Program structure

The Program could be delivered through an intergovernmental agreement between the Federal, State and Territory Governments.

It could take the form of a fund that could be accessed by schools as needed, or a direct allocation to school budgets with a requirement that the allocation be used in line with the Program parameters.

Funding could be administered by State and Territory Governments as system managers, or 'passed through' directly to schools as agreed by governments.