



Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters

9 December 2022

The Australian Professional Teachers' Association (APTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters.

As the peak body representing state and territory joint councils of teacher associations, and with a network of up to 200,000 teachers across the various sectors, the Australian Professional Teachers Association is in a key position to provide comments relevant to the Inquiry.

Our strength as an organisation lies in our ability to represent the interests of practicing classroom teachers across Australia. We are a voice for teachers and an effective conduit between decision-making bodies and the classroom. APTA provides an alternative to principal committees or teacher unions, with a classroom-focused, practitioner perspective that is directly connected to the student, rather than a managerial perspective of school operations.

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

The literature confirms that the last two years of COVID and the uncertainty that has been caused by this pandemic have impacted on the wellbeing of young people. The Education Council (2020) reports that young people are becoming increasingly anxious about the uncertainty of their futures. According to a study conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2020) 29 percent of young people experienced mental health issues. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) report that young people are particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of community-wide emergencies and crises. They assert that nearly one in three young people have experienced lasting negative mental health and wellbeing effects. Truwell (2022) collected data from more than 400 teachers and approximately 2900 students during the first two terms of 2022. The data demonstrates that a third of all students are not coping and that the capacity to cope had declined from 74 percent in term one to 61 percent in term two. The study found that an acceptable level of hopefulness and happiness was missing in 30 percent of students and their wellbeing was suffering. These findings are confirmed by Buckley Flack, Schoeffel, Walker and Bickerstaff (2022) who conclude that a third of 20,000 young people who were part of a pilot study struggled with their wellbeing each week.

One significant wellbeing effect has been the increasing number of young people who are experiencing separation anxiety resulting in poor school attendance. According to several NSW principals who were contacted, school refusal is not as great an issue in metropolitan schools, and it is even less pronounced in independent schools. However, according to the Financial Review (September 2022) in regional and remote areas only 61 per cent of students and 41 per cent of First Nations students are attending schools.¹

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.

Poor school attendance instigated by wellbeing issues has a negative impact on student learning and academic performance (AIS NSW, 2022). The research (Ansari and Gottfried, 2021; Kirksey, 2020) that is affirmed by principals and teachers concludes that high levels of student absenteeism impact negatively on peer relationships, essential literacy and numeracy skill acquisition and school engagement.

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

¹ <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/absenteeism-on-the-rise-amid-falling-school-performance-20220920-p5bjey>

The 2022 Monash University Teachers' Perceptions of their Work Survey indicates that there are many issues facing Australian teachers. One of those issues is the behaviour and social needs of children and young people. Absenteeism exacerbates the behaviour and needs of young people. Some families expect teachers to provide online work as they did during lockdown. However, the workload of blended learning is not manageable. Moreover, the absenteeism is increasing student behaviour problems as students become increasingly disconnected from school and their peers and less able to socialise. Australia is already facing a looming teacher shortage.

The teaching associations across the country have been providing much needed resources and materials for time poor and overwhelmed teachers, and contextually relevant professional learning. Many teachers new to the profession are increasingly approaching their associations for professional learning on managing classroom behaviour. The crucial role that is played by the associations has become even more apparent with the escalating pressure on teachers.

References

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