



Association of
Independent Schools
of South Australia

9 December 2022

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/ Madam

Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters

The Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA) represents the interests of 104 South Australian Independent schools which educate students from a wide range of socio-economic, religious and cultural backgrounds and geographic locations. The AISSA welcomes the opportunity to respond to this important inquiry.

Feedback from member schools has indicated that school refusal has been an increasing issue which, while predating the COVID-19 pandemic, has been exacerbated by the impacts of a range of government and health strategies which were put in place to contain the spread of COVID-19 including stay at home directions, isolation requirements and remote learning. Anecdotally, it appears that school refusal is occurring in children younger than previously seen and that gender may play a role. Further research and analysis is required to determine whether the range of issues which lead to school refusal affect all students equally, regardless of gender and gender identity, or if the responses to these issues are just expressed differently by different students.

While noting that the focus of this inquiry is on school refusal as distinct from truancy, the AISSA would caution against a narrow view which separates school refusal from both absenteeism and truancy as for some students these exist on a continuum. It is important to also acknowledge other potential pre-existing contributors to school refusal, such as mental health concerns and gaming addictions, and the individual context/s within which the refusal occurs.

School refusal can have a significant negative impact on students and their families, with students missing out on the opportunity to access and participate in education. Schools provide a safe place for students to connect and belong, and not being at school can negatively impact a student's social and emotional wellbeing and development. Over time, this may also lead to a lack of opportunities for the student to engage in appropriate future employment.

The impacts of school refusal are not confined to the students themselves. For many families, supporting children who refuse to attend school can limit parents' opportunity to engage in full-time paid employment. This is particularly the case for parents and carers of younger children. In addition, feedback indicates that considerable stress is placed on family units which are dealing with school refusal on a daily basis.

A key issue in support for families and schools dealing with school refusal is the lack of access to external professional service support for students, in particular, students who are in the early stage of school refusal. This access is limited due to a number of contributing factors, including the lack of available external allied health professionals. In South Australia, all school sectors have access to senior social work support for assistance with dealing with extended absences. However, due to the considerable demand placed on this support, priority is given to students most at risk. The AISSA has previously called for increased resourcing for this service so that more students can be supported and it will continue to advocate for this to occur.

Whilst teachers are trained educational professionals, it is unreasonable to expect that they are able to provide therapy support for students who may, in some cases, have significant mental health difficulties. There are also currently significant barriers for both schools and families in engaging support from trained mental health professionals, including psychologists and counsellors. In some instances, the complexity of the family dynamic necessitates parents having the skills to access appropriate and timely external support which is not always available. While progress has been made, there remains stigma around diagnosis and accessing support for mental health conditions affecting school refusal. Families where care givers work full-time may also find it difficult to access support outside of business hours.

Effectively addressing school refusal will require a whole of community, and a sustained, long-term approach. It is essential that approaches to reducing school refusal are evidence-based, underpinned by best practice and, importantly, support families and schools as well as students experiencing this issue.

Yours sincerely

Carolyn Grantskalns
Chief Executive