



20 April 2023

Submission to: The national trend of school refusal and related matters inquiry

About Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network

The Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network (QIS Parents Network) is the peak body representing the families of the more than 141,000 students enrolled in Queensland's 232 independent schools.

We are regularly consulted by government and other education stakeholders on policy matters that affect the parents and carers of independent school children.

We are also a strong advocate for positive and respectful learning partnerships between schools, parents and children – a burgeoning area of research known as 'parent engagement'.

The QIS Parents Network is governed by a Board of Directors and our Executive Officer is supported by a Consultative Committee of parents from small and large independent schools across Queensland, which helps ensure our views are reflective of the diverse sector.

About the Queensland independent school sector

Independent schools form a key part of the education landscape in Australia and sit alongside government and Catholic schools in contributing to society.

While independent schools are sometimes colloquially referred to as 'private schools', in reality independent schools are not-for-profit educational institutions and are as diverse as the communities they serve.

Queensland independent schools range from small community schools and special assistance schools through to large P-12 colleges and boarding schools and have varying educational philosophies.

Independent schools are a valued education choice for an increasing number of Queensland families, educating 16.2 percent of all school-age children in 2022 (up from 15.7% in 2021, according to the ABS 2022 Non-Government School Census (Commonwealth)).



Key points

- School refusal or 'school can't' is a live issue in the Queensland independent school sector and an area of growing concern for parents and educators.
- Anecdotally, it is occurring in large schools and small schools and impacting families across all socio-economic groups
- In our research for this submission, Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network has spoken to many principals, teachers and parents and it is clear school refusal is a complex problem and its causes are also difficult to pinpoint, however COVID-19 and and/or pre-existing anxiety/depression conditions are commonly cited.
- Individual dispositions, neurodiversity, bullying, puberty, social media influences, gaming addictions, unstable world events and the pressure of schoolwork are other factors cited.

Impact on parents & carers

- School refusal has a significant impact on parents and carers' mental health and wellbeing. In some cases, it also has an economic effect. We have spoken to parents who have had to quit their jobs, significantly scale back their hours or take extended leave to care for a child who is refusing to go to school and can't be left unsupervised at home either due to their age, or fears that the child may self-harm.
- Parents of high school students often talk of the despair they feel when faced with a distressed child who won't physically get out of the car at drop off.
- Mobile phones and smart watches are cited by some parents as adding to the family distress around school refusal as students will often call or message their parents repeatedly during school hours asking to be collected.
- Most parents are doing their very best to support their child and navigate very complex situations, without adequate mental health support/resources for them or their child
- There is a real feeling of 'shame' amongst parents about their child 'refusing' school.
- While there are an increasing number of articles and resources online for parents on strategies to deal with school refusal, many parents speak of feeling overwhelmed and unsupported and unsure of where to go for help. For many it is a day-by-day situation they are trying their very best to manage.
- *Please see attached (Attachment 1) a first-hand account from a Queensland independent school parent who has two children experiencing school refusal.*



Schools supporting families

- School teachers and principals do their very best to support students and families but are sometimes under-resourced in terms of available support services/mental health support.
- Smaller schools and distance education schools are being sought out by parents as a potential better fit or 'fix' for their child who is refusing school, resulting in overload on schools with limited resources compared to their larger counterparts; One small school principal we spoke to takes on the one-to-one work with students and families experiencing school refusal as no other resources are available.
- In some cases, the children who are refusing school have parents with anxiety or complex situations, so supporting a child can sometimes also involve supporting their parents.
- Early intervention is seen as an important step, but some school staff say they often aren't made aware of the deeper issue going on until school refusal is well entrenched.
- *Lisa Coles, Executive Principal of Arethusa College, an independent school in Brisbane, will join me at the public hearing to answer any questions about her experience supporting parents whose children are experiencing school refusal.*

Absenteeism notification

- Some parents and educators believe an overhaul of the absentee notification system/legislation is required, where 'school refusal' is an option for parents, rather than a generic sickness notification.
- Parents admit it is sometimes easier just to say their child is 'sick'. Schools say if they were aware at an early stage the illness was in fact school refusal, they would be able to deploy extra support for the student or it would trigger a meeting with the family.

Parent engagement

While school refusal is a complex problem, we believe the research around parent engagement in schooling is very relevant to this discussion, and the research and resources we are producing for schools is worth highlighting.

More than 60 years of research in Australia and overseas shows that harnessing the power of parents in students' learning and wellbeing – a concept known as "parent engagement" – has many benefits.



When parents are engaged by their child's school, work in partnership with their child's teacher and can value-add to what is being taught, students generally:

- Do better
- Stay in school longer
- Are more engaged in their homework
- Behave better
- Have better social skills

Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network is supporting schools and families navigate the parent engagement puzzle with our longitudinal research project Engaging Parents in Curriculum (EPIC), in partnership with Griffith University and Independent Schools Queensland.

Engaging Parents in Curriculum (EPIC) is filling a gap in the literature about what parent engagement looks like and how it may be achieved in practice by schools.

EPIC is reaping rich results. A quick summary of EPIC's findings from the past two years include:

- Parent engagement in learning often involves only small tweaks to teachers' existing practice.
- Parents are often 'waiting in the wings' - (Parents: 'invite me in a way that is accessible to me, and I'll be there!').
- Schools tend to find success from making invitations to parents 'short, sharp, often, optional, personalised and with purpose'. What will suit one parent won't suit another; schools need to diversify options, with an empathy for families' busy lives.
- Follow up any invitation to parents with a chance for them to feed back any contribution into the classroom. EPIC calls this 'closing the loop' and participating teachers attest to the impact of this strategy on students' learning and wellbeing.
- Teachers have told us engaging parents (i.e., having parents involved in the learning process) makes their job easier, not harder – and deeply rewarding.
- School leadership is crucial. If school leaders value the role of parents in children's learning (and model it), teachers will also prioritise it.
- Watch [a short video about EPIC](#) and [read more](#).
- *See attachments 2, 3, 4, 5 of parent engagement snapshots/factsheets we have produced for schools. These are all current and evidence-based.*

We believe parent engagement is relevant to this conversation as the evidence shows students' wellbeing and achievement can soar when schools and parents view each other as partners in the education of a child, work together and respect each other's' unique roles.

Ensuring there is a focus on parent engagement practices in initial teacher training and as part of ongoing professional development for teachers is critical as part of a long-term strategy in our view.

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The way forward

Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network would advocate for:

1. Increased - and equal - mental health and wellbeing resources for students across all education sectors.
2. Increased - and equal - mental health and wellbeing resources for parents experiencing school refusal in the family, across all education sectors.
3. Targeted, evidence-based support for students who are repeatedly refusing school.
4. Evidence-based education and information for families about school refusal including steps they can take and advice on where they can go for assistance.
5. A review of the absenteeism notification processes and legislation, to accurately track school refusal and potentially 'catch' some school refusal cases at an earlier stage.
6. Ensuring there is a focus on parent engagement practices in initial teacher training and as part of ongoing professional development for teachers at schools across all education sectors.

Thank you

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this very important discussion and for considering solutions that will improve support for families impacted by school refusal.

END



Attachment 1

Statement

As a mother of two teenage daughters completing Year 10 and Year 12 I am deeply concerned about the tumultuous start to the academic year we have endured so far. Though my daughters have always been enthusiastic learners, though this year they seem to be grappling with some unforeseen challenges, particularly my eldest.

My husband and I have had the philosophy towards education to always do your best, we have never put academic pressure on our girls and in fact when the reports come home, we look only for effort scores. We value education, I work in [redacted] both he and I attended private schooling, and our girls attend an Independent School however we have come to the realisation that school is not for everybody. (And now had to reinforce to both) that this is '*just something you have to do until you finish Year 12*'.... to try and get them through.

Its difficult (and embarrassing) to sit in the carpark at the school with one or both in tears, they won't physically get out of the car. It can take up to half an hour, sometimes, other times I have been lucky enough to find a teacher to help me get them out and moving off to lessons and sometimes I have timed our arrival with their friends, to make it easier so get them going. On top of this, more often than not, throughout the day I will be bombarded with text messages including photos of them crying in the toilets telling me how sad are and lonely it is for them, texting me that no one understands, how no one listens, how 'sick' they feel and how much they struggle how they don't want (or need) to learn a specific (core) subject (e.g. Chemistry / and aspects of mathematics etc).

I have to share how hard it is being the bad guy all the time, the ones to continually say "no – you must stay at school all day today". My husband and I are at our wits end, if we do give in and let them leave early for the day, we make deals and promises, that they have to say at school for the rest of the week / term. Unfortunately, the next day the cycle begins again which is another difficult conversation in the morning getting them moving again to comply with the promises that were made.

Most times, we don't feel safe to leave (particularly my eldest) at home alone for fear of self-harm which in turn leaves my [redacted] husband the one that usually has to support her. This adds to the household stress as he is losing productivity and income.

Often, we too become depressed and anxious with the circumstance, and of course it has a knock-on effect towards our younger daughter. School refusal affects the entire household. As far as I am aware there is no such help for parents in our situation.

We have observed that social media seemed to have exacerbated the pressure on girls (in particular) to achieve unattainable perfection, leading to fear of failure and hopelessness, therefore a real lack of trying in the first place. This, we believe, has contributed along with the COVID challenges during a pivotal time in the educational journey to our daughter's school refusal.



Despite the school's best efforts in providing support by way of a reduced timetable, and specialised wellbeing support. We also recognise schools have stretched resources already and should not be expected to provide this specialised and individualised level of support to families. School refusal is a much deeper and intrinsically problem. I see it becoming an epidemic in the future if something is not changed drastically. Youth depression and mental illness is at unprecedented levels, (you will know that) the current burn out rates in the teaching profession are at an all-time high. The status quo is simply not working for anyone.

Part of our concerns as parents is the inability to have school refusal recorded as an absentee option. Additionally, I believe that the current Australian School Curriculum (even with the recent Version 9 update) is increasingly obsolete, with a greater emphasis on test scores, the expectation to memorise and reproduce work rather than any real-world application. I further note that schools appear to have become more of a business and seem to prioritise data-driven performance rather than holistic education, ultimately failing to equip children with essential life skills such as resilience, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities as well as social and emotional intelligence. The assumption that all students in the same group such as gender, age or even socio-economic group have the same or similar learning needs is absurd given scientific facts of how different (or best) we all learn.

Until a full review or reimagination of the P-12 School Curricula is undertaken, I believe that we will continue to fail to ensure that every student can graduate and be successful in their own right. The school system must adapt to the changing needs of the world and empower our children to thrive as I see that they are barely surviving.

END

Engaging Parents

What We Know



Decades of research have consistently shown the value and importance of engaging parents* in student learning and wellbeing.

1. Recognised benefits for students

- Enhanced wellbeing and higher academic outcomes
- Increased confidence, motivation and engagement in learning
- More positive attitudes about school and improved behaviour
- Improved school attendance, continued enrolment, and higher rates of graduation
- Increased likelihood of participation in higher education

2. Momentum for parent engagement continues to grow

- Governments—nationally and internationally—recognise the imperative of engaging parents.
- Parent engagement is a focus in three Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

3. Engagement and Involvement are different

- Parents keeping time at the sports carnival or fundraising for the fete are worthwhile school involvement activities as they may prove the first step toward engagement, but engaging parents is more effective.
- Parent engagement is an active process designed to bring parents and their child's learning and wellbeing closer together.

4. Positive, respectful relationships are crucial

- Effective parent engagement is possible when schools and families work in partnership and respect each other's unique contributions.
- A good relationship between school and home also means that when challenging situations arise—around a child's learning or wellbeing—conversations, and the outcomes for all involved, are more likely to be productive.

5. Parents appreciate personal, two-way approaches

- Parent engagement is enhanced when schools and teachers use easy, direct, personal forms of contact and communication which offer parents ways of *staying* connected.
- Some approaches may not genuinely engage parents in their child's learning, so their effectiveness should be regularly reviewed and changed or adjusted accordingly.

6. Keep it simple

Engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing does not need to be overwhelming. With every opportunity, ask:

- How can I bring parents closer to what their child is learning in the classroom/school?
- How might parents contribute in easy, effective ways?

These initial snapshots of ideas for schools come from the research project, *Engaging parents in student learning and wellbeing: Using inquiry curriculum and online technologies during COVID-19* (EPIC, 2021) conducted by Linda-Dianne Willis, Beryl Exley, and Narelle Daffurn from Griffith University in collaboration with ISQ and QIS Parents Network.

*We describe *parents* generally to include carers and families and broadly to include communities with the responsibility and care for a student's learning and wellbeing.

REFERENCE

Willis, L.-D., & Exley, B. (2020). *Engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing – Change, continuity and COVID-19*. Our schools – Our Future Issues Paper. Published by Independent Schools Queensland. Retrieved from <https://www.isq.qld.edu.au/publications-resources/posts/engaging-parents-in-their-child-s-learning-and-wellbeing/>

Engaging Parents

Ideas for Teachers



EPIC Research Snapshots

Building Knowledge

What is parent* engagement?

Engaging parents is an active process designed to bring parents and their child's learning and wellbeing closer together.

What can I do to encourage parent engagement?

1. Articulate clearly and early to parents what engaging in their child's learning and wellbeing means. (see 'Engaging Parents: What we Know' snapshot for more information)
2. Share from research the benefits of parent engagement for children's school and life success. (see *Engaging Parents: What We Know* snapshot for more information)
3. Establish regular times and spaces to dialogue cogeneratively with colleagues about engaging parents in the curriculum
4. Network with parents to find out more about them, what they know and can do, and use this knowledge as inspiration for inquiry projects
5. Lead by example, sharing your personal stories so parents come to appreciate the power of personal connections in their child's learning
6. Build knowledge about curriculum inquiry projects and their associated pedagogies so there is a genuine opportunity for student agency and parent engagement.

Inquiring with Parents

What does that mean?

Recognise the power and value of inquiry curriculum approaches for not only engaging students in their learning, but also engaging parents in their child's learning.

How do I do that?

1. Understand the potential of each phase of an inquiry process (planning, teaching, reflecting) for new and different opportunities to engage parents, which may require new pedagogies and practices

2. Recognise teachers as facilitators of knowledge (rather than the fount of knowledge) and allow parents to play new and different roles such as co-teachers in the classroom
3. Choose topics that will interest parents and allow them to contribute authentically. Appreciate that parents will gravitate to topics where they can value-add, and as their other commitments allow.
4. Invite parents into classrooms or virtual spaces to expand the audience with whom students connect about their learning.

Connecting and Communicating

Is there an ideal way to connect with parents?

Consider ways to engage parents that are short in duration, sharp in focus, offered regularly, always optional, and personal to them and their child's learning.

What are some suggestions?

1. Communicate with parents and families in ways they use and value, e.g., a vlog created by students for parents
2. Let parents know what their child is learning at the beginning of each week and *close the loop* by letting them know at the end of the week about their child's learning successes and next steps
3. Create virtual spaces for engaging parents in classroom topics and phases of inquiry curriculum at times that suit them
4. Harness the power of student agency for engaging parents, e.g., have students create a video about their learning, and email it to parents
5. Respond quickly and directly to requests from parents for clarity and/or explanation about aspects of their child's learning and wellbeing.

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Engaging Parents

Ideas for School Leaders



Building Knowledge

Be clear about what parent* engagement means

Engaging parents is an active process designed to bring parents and their child's learning and wellbeing closer together.

How can I embed knowledge of parent engagement in my school?

1. Co-develop with your students, parents, teachers and community a *philosophical and pedagogical statement* for guiding ways to engage all groups
2. Model how that statement works in practice in your school at every opportunity, e.g., on assembly
3. Make the statement friendly for students, parents and teachers so it can be easily understood and applied by everyone in the school community
4. Importantly, recognise the uniqueness of your context and setting, and consider how this uniqueness affects opportunities and possibilities for engaging parents.

Leading the Way

Why is it important that school leaders are proactive and model how to engage parents?

School leaders play a key role in engaging parents as they set the tone and establish a culture of parent engagement at all levels of the school.

How do I start?

1. Create leadership roles with a specific focus on engaging parents
2. Identify parent engagement *champions* from among parents, teachers and community members to support these leaders
3. Build teachers' professional learning for engaging parents through opportunities to learn with and alongside parents
4. Identify barriers to engaging parents at your school and develop plans to address or minimise these.
5. Capitalise on knowledge and insights of engaging parents from learning at home during the COVID-19

REFERENCE

Willis, L.-D., Exley, B., & Daffurn, N. with Independent Schools Queensland and Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network. (2021). *Engaging parents in student learning and wellbeing: Using inquiry curriculum and online technologies during COVID-19*. Griffith University, ISQ, & QIS Parents Network, Brisbane, Australia.

pandemic (e.g., using online platforms to speak directly to parents and students about aspects of learning, rather than only to students)

6. [Re]consider the design of school buildings and spaces (physically and virtually) for increasing the quality, frequency, ease and convenience of engaging parents
7. Ensure parent engagement opportunities are part of the school's pedagogical framework and curriculum planning templates.

Connecting and Communicating

How can I embed knowledge of parent engagement in my school?

1. Make the distinction between engaging parents and involving parents clear in what is said and written at your school
2. Ensure school leaders are not only visible and accessible to parents (e.g., in the playground, at the school gate), but also that parents perceive this access as always available and safe
3. Establish clear, regular lines of communication to parents based on your context and setting, e.g., taking account of cultural and social diversity
4. Ensure communication to parents includes *feedback loops* to encourage dialogic conversations to parents and *from* parents
5. Focus on relationship-building with parents, e.g., set up a parent community group to listen to parents' wants and needs for their children
6. Share the outcomes of these discussions with the school community through newsletters and social media to encourage student and parent ownership of initiatives

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SSOOPP Framework

Developing Effective Practices for Engaging Parents



SSOOPP (pronounced SOUP) is a mnemonic teachers can use to develop and filter their practices when engaging parents. It stands for **short, sharp, often, optional, with a purpose, and personalised** to parents and their child.

EPIC Research Snapshots

	Some useful questions to develop and interrogate your pedagogical practices when planning for engaging parents.	Examples from research – middle and senior secondary years and early years.
S SHORT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will the activity take you long to prepare and/or organise? Will the activity be onerous for parents and/or students? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have older students email their parents directly to ask questions relevant to the curriculum such as: <i>How are forces used in your everyday home or work context?</i> Ask younger students and their parents to respond to personal/high-interest questions or find photos together: <i>Where and when was I born? What is your special place?</i>
S SHARP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will the invitation to engage parents value-add to what you are already teaching in the classroom? Have you included specific details about what the topic/activity is and the process involved? Have you included examples to illustrate what you mean? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have older students video one another in pairs talking about their learning (e.g., a book study). Let students email the video to their parents, with the invitation to: <i>Ask me about my video at home.</i> Develop a survey for parents to interview younger students about some aspect of learning (e.g., redesigning classroom spaces).
O OFTEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you let parents know why, when, and how you will communicate with them about their child's learning and wellbeing (e.g., email, newsletter, class website, text message, homework, diary). Do you communicate with parents at the beginning of each week and also let them know how learning and teaching went at the end of the week? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For all students, let parents know specific topics and areas of focus each phase or week of inquiry. 'Close the loop' with students by regularly inviting them to share what they talked about at home. 'Close the loop' with parents by letting them know what happened in the classroom when students listened and learnt together. Share with the class what each parent contributes through discussions, or using physical (e.g., library) or online spaces accessible to all students and parents.
O OPTIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are opportunities to participate framed as invitations? Do you use friendly language? Do you remind parents (and students) they don't need to accept every invitation to engage in their child's learning? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For all students, invite parents to contribute in different ways (e.g., photos, emails, letters, videos, PowerPoints, stories, songs, poems, objects, games, social media posts, classroom visits, demonstrations, presentations).
P PURPOSEFUL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you make the connections to students' curriculum learning and wellbeing clear? Do opportunities encourage parents'/students' curiosity, interest, enjoyment? Will opportunities invite meaningful, relevant, parent-student discussions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help parents navigate conversations with their child by providing them with conversation starters. For older students, email suggestions to parents after each lesson/lesson sequence. For younger students, put suggestions on student wristbands before they leave for home.
P PERSONALISED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do invitations call on parents' knowledge of the world, topic, experiences, and/or their child? Are opportunities to engage personalised to parents as well as their child? Are there opportunities for intergenerational conversations? Are engagement opportunities inclusive of different families (e.g., single parent, blended families, LGBTQ+ parents)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have older students ask their parents to share a story, comment, opinion about a theme in a current book study (e.g., <i>Can you share an anecdote about a first meeting? Why was it memorable? What happened next?</i>) Have younger students talk to parents/grandparents about life in the past (e.g., <i>What has changed/stayed the same? Can we find pictures together of our talk?</i>)

REFERENCE

Willis, L.-D., & Exley, B. (2022). *Pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents and communities in children's learning and wellbeing*. EPIC 2022 Final Report. Our Schools—Our Future. Report to Independent Schools Queensland and Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network. School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.