

Professor Jim Watterston
Dean
Enterprise Professor, Education Systems



28 November 2022

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

Dear Senator Allman-Payne,

RE: Senate Inquiry into School Refusal submission

I am writing to you regarding the recently announced Senate Inquiry into School Refusal. I wish to draw your attention to the attached report, *Those Who Disappear*, which I wrote with Megan O'Connell and published in November in 2019. In this report, we conservatively estimated that 50,000 young Australians of compulsory school age were not enrolled in any type of formal education. This figure is based on the 2016 census, estimations provided by two Australian public school systems and annual UNESCO data from across a range of countries including Australia. In reality, the total could be far higher.

I trust that you and your committee will find the data and recommendations outlined in the report of assistance as you undertake this very important Senate Inquiry. I would be most pleased to speak with you further about this topic should you require further advice or input.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Jim Watterston
Dean



Melbourne
Graduate School
of Education

AN MGSE INDUSTRY
REPORT #1

THOSE WHO DISAPPEAR

The Australian
education problem
nobody wants to
talk about

Dr Jim Watterston + Megan O'Connell

About the Authors



Dr Jim Watterston

**Dean, Melbourne Graduate School of Education
Enterprise Professor, Education Systems**

From his first job as a teacher in a rural Indigenous classroom in his home state of Western Australia to his recent appointment as the Dean of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, Professor Jim Watterston brings more than 35 years of successful experience across a diverse range of educational roles and sectors.

Jim spent his first ten years in the profession as a teacher before being promoted to the position of principal in a range of primary and secondary schools. He then progressed to the role of Regional Director in WA and Victoria before he was appointed as the Deputy Secretary of the Victorian Education Department, and Director General of both the ACT and, most recently, Queensland Departments

of Education and Training. Jim was awarded a Doctorate in Education at the University of WA in 2004.

In addition to appointments to many educationally related Boards, Professor Watterston has previously served for six years as the National President for the Australian Council for Education Leaders, and is recognised as an influential advocate for the education sector. His contribution to education has been acknowledged both nationally and internationally with awards from a number of professional bodies and educational institutions including the highly prestigious Order of the Palmes Académiques (Chevalier) by the French Government in 2014 for a distinguished contribution to education.



Megan O'Connell

Honorary Fellow, Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Megan is one of Australia's leading policy experts, with experience across the entire education spectrum – early childhood, schooling and vocational and higher education. She has a strong focus on ensuring children and young people develop the skills and capabilities they need to navigate a changing future. Her work frequently underpins policy that improves outcomes for young Australians.

Megan has spent more than two decades dedicated to developing policy and programs to support children and young people to thrive through education. Megan has conceptualised and initiated key projects focused on youth at risk, led curriculum reform projects to improve their currency with industry skills and managed key career initiatives including a careers curriculum framework.

Megan is an Honorary Fellow of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education and an education policy consultant.

As Director of Megan O'Connell Consulting, Megan continues to work with schools, early childhood organisations and academics to develop policy that improves access to and outcomes from education. She is currently engaged in projects focusing on career education and reforming the senior secondary curriculum. Megan has lead pivotal and much cited research projects on the future of work, and consultancies on school-industry partnerships and career education.

Contents

- 03 Executive Summary
- 04 Recommendations
- 05 Key messages
- 06 Children of compulsory age who detach from formal education
- 08 How do we know about the school-age detached students in Australia and how many are there?
- 10 What are the causes of school detachment?
- 12 So how do we actually lose track of students?
- 14 Causes of disengagement
- 16 Cost of disengagement
- 20 Don't all children need to be in school? What are governments doing to keep young people in education?
- 22 Problems with current policy responses
- 25 Conclusion
- 26 Endnotes
- 27 Reference list

Executive Summary

Australia has a very serious educational problem that we seemingly do not want to acknowledge. It is an issue that needs to be brought out into the open and receive urgent attention.

This report focuses on the young people across Australia of compulsory school age who, for multiple reasons, are not participating in a school or an education program of any type. They are not absent from school: they simply aren't in one. Young people of all ages have been able to detach themselves from formal education and we don't know who they are, where they are, how this has happened and why they remain largely hidden.

These are not the young people who are distracted or disengaged from learning nor those school refusers who are known to be attending school irregularly. These detached young people are of compulsory school age and are no longer enrolled in a formal education program of any type.

Unfortunately, education departments and governments nearly always use the term *disengaged* as a catch-all for those students who are challenged by their school experience while not explicitly identifying that many thousands of students have just simply detached and disappeared. By not making the distinction between *disengaged* students and those students who have *detached*, the extent of this hidden crisis is masked.

While there is no national data set that records the number of detached students, we know they are out there. This report's conservative estimate, based on two state education departments' internal data analysis and used as a population and comparative for each state and territory, is that there may be upwards of 50 000 unaccounted detached students across the country. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Census found that for 174 932 school-aged children there was no information provided about student status or type of educational institution they were attending. UNESCO

data, in comparative international monitoring, estimates that in 2017 the number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth of primary and secondary age in Australia was 39 314.

Factors affecting disengagement leading to detachment include identity issues, learning difficulties, lack of financial resources, family dysfunction, mental illness, extra-curricula activities, school connectedness, academic motivation, relationships with teachers and peers, and bullying.

This report includes eight recommendations to address this national crisis;

- » a national commitment to ensuring all children and young people are supported to access a quality education that suits their needs and personal challenges
- » a national accountability strategy, data sharing across all schools, school systems and related departments
- » early intervention to prevent disengagement and detachment
- » support for teachers and schools to identify and intervene for those students at risk
- » a national commitment to ensuring all children and young people are supported to access a quality education
- » support for children and young people currently detached
- » increased investment in psychology, mental health and allied support services
- » remove the systemic barriers that contribute to a culture where students are primarily judged on nationally tested literacy and numeracy rather than on a more holistic view of student wellbeing and achievement.

Recommendations

The following recommendations need to be considered by an expert group empowered by the Prime Minister, in collaboration with states and territories, to lead the direct action required:

01

A national commitment

We need a national commitment to ensuring all children and young people are supported to access a quality education that suits their needs and personal challenges, especially those at risk of disengaging or detaching. This includes funding and long-term support for accessible tailored programs and alternative and/or flexible schools for at-risk children and young people to remain engaged and achieve success.

02

Sharing data

We need to share data across all schools, school systems and related government departments to ensure that we are able to identify the educational status and current location of every school-aged student in the country. This requires a unique student identifier but much more than that it requires a 'relay baton' approach with individual schools and systems held accountable if they 'drop the baton' and thereby allow students to disappear.

03

Early intervention

It is essential to prioritise focus on identification and intervention of students at risk in the early years to enable the ongoing provision of support for children and families based on identified need. This includes support for a high quality early years workforce, and ongoing funding for all children across Australia to participate in quality early childhood education. We must ensure adequate and effective case management for all students at risk, providing intervention as early as possible to stop students falling out of the system.

04

Support for teachers and schools

It is imperative that professional learning and improved support services be provided for all teachers and schools across the country in order to be able to better identify at-risk students and families and to be able to provide more inclusive education programs that better cater for students with complex needs and challenges.

05

Accountability

There must be national accountability with transparent indicators to guarantee full student participation and ongoing attendance across all levels of education, including requisite supports to enable all students to participate.

06

Support for children currently detached

We need to identify and support the children who are currently detached from education to re-enter the education system and to successfully complete their education. To do this effectively, we must guarantee the rigor and effectiveness of all current alternative and flexible schools, and to ensure that suitable options for students at risk are available to all students across the country.

07

Increased investment

To bring about the changes so urgently required, there needs to be a significantly greater investment in psychology, mental health and allied support services to ensure all students and families receive the care required to achieve at their optimal level.

08

Remove systemic barriers

Importantly, we must remove the systemic barriers that have contributed to a culture where school success is primarily judged on nationally tested literacy and numeracy results rather than a more holistic view of physical, social and emotional health and well-being, and preparing young people for a post-school pathway, alongside cross-curriculum academic achievement.

Key messages



We have a serious problem with young people detaching from schools in Australia.



Conservative estimates are that at least 50 000 children and young people of school age have detached from any educational program or institution, across the country at any given time.



Australian education systems do not adequately keep track of detached young people, so they 'disappear'.



A multitude of factors lead to school disengagement and then detachment.



We do not have enough alternative schools/settings to pick up detached school aged young people when they detach from school.



There is no national response to disengagement or detachment in schools beyond a broad national Year 12 or equivalent completion target of 90 per cent.



Prevention of detachment needs to start with identification and intervention in quality early childhood education settings.



The social and economic costs for each early school leaver are large: a fiscal cost of \$334 600 and a social cost of \$616 200 over their lifetime.

Introduction



Students of compulsory age who detach from formal education

Not every young person in Australia is able to access or benefit from our education system. This is something we need to talk about. It is currently a hidden and shocking educational problem that must be brought out into the open and made into a national priority.



This report is about those young people across Australia of compulsory school age who, for multiple reasons, are not participating in an education program of any type.

It is almost incomprehensible that, in Australia, young people of all ages have been able to detach themselves from formal education and that we don't know who they are, where they are, how this has happened and why they remain largely hidden.

A transformational education liberates and enhances life outcomes in terms of health, income, satisfaction, relationships, creativity, curiosity and wellbeing. As a comparatively well developed and prosperous nation, we pride ourselves on the fundamental commitment, right and universal provision of a free and secular education for all. A quality education system across all parts of the nation is vital for our economic development, social harmony, environmental sustainability, equality of opportunity and our cultural distinction of a fair go for all.

This report aims to shine a light on the lack of equity and opportunity that undermines our seemingly high quality education system. It's well beyond time to examine our collective conscience and peel back the veneer of compulsory school participation, in order to expose the plight of those young Australians who do not benefit from what the rest of us think is an inescapable entitlement. That is, to be educated. This report is about those young people across Australia of compulsory school age who, for multiple reasons, are not participating in an education program of any type. They're not absent from school; they simply aren't in one. We've allowed them to opt out and disappear through a range of different 'trap doors'. These young people are invisible to most of us and they desperately need a voice to make this intolerable problem everyone's business.

It is almost incomprehensible that, in Australia, young people of all ages have been able to detach themselves from formal education and that we don't know who they are, where they are, how this has happened and why they remain largely hidden. Ironically, many concerned and generous Australian citizens care so much about the access for all to a quality education that they nobly donate money and sponsor impoverished children in developing third world countries to ensure that their life chances are improved through basic school provision. All the while, most of us don't realise that significant numbers of young people in this country are suffering from the same deprivation.

Let us be clear who we are talking about; we don't mean the many young people who are distracted and disengaged from learning nor those school-refusers who are known to be attending school irregularly. By detached we mean a complete uncoupling from formal education by a student of compulsory school age who is no longer enrolled in a formal educational program of any type. For the most part, it seems that nobody seems to be in a hurry to locate or reconnect these young people.

There is a tendency to use the word *disengaged* in an educational context to identify those students who are struggling at school, which is often related to issues such as poor attendance, anxiety, bullying, mental health issues, disability, family dysfunction, behavioural problems, suspensions and exclusions. These students need to have their educational challenges addressed before school disengagement turns into school detachment. This report acknowledges the prevalence of student disengagement across the nation as a serious barrier to achievement, however, we don't want to confuse the term *disengaged* with the even more devastating issue of *school detachment*.

Unfortunately, education departments and governments nearly always use the term *disengaged* as a catch-all for those students who are challenged by their school experience while not identifying that many students have just simply detached and disappeared. By not making the distinction between *disengaged* students and those students who have *detached*, the extent of the hidden disaster is masked. It should be our most urgent national educational priority; that is the care, protection, reconnection, wellbeing and life-chances of our children. Our refusal to talk about this issue allows us to assume that it couldn't be happening in this country.

This report is about a potentially huge number of young Australians who are being left behind and whose future is bleak, to put it mildly. These young people are evading detection or identification and do not regularly come under the notice of government departments or not-for-profit agencies that could reconnect them back into fit-for-purpose schools that better meet their needs and challenges. In an era of 'big data' and measurement on everything, somehow we've never been able to, or perhaps wanted to, calculate or identify the number young people of compulsory school age across the country who have detached from a formal education institution and are not participating when they legally should be. Surely we track the educational participation, progress, health and wellbeing of every school-aged young person in Australia? But, the answer is that we do not know, and we appear to be in no hurry to find ways to do so.

It would be easy to be sceptical about the magnitude of such a problem that so far cannot, or indeed has not, been accurately measured. Unfortunately, however, this problem is real, and it is reflective of the intransigence of governments at all levels across the country to share information in order to identify the magnitude of this scandal.

How do we know about the school-age detached students in Australia and how many are there?

While dedicated data sets identifying the number of students who have detached from schools around the country do not appear to be explicitly maintained, most senior educators are well aware of the magnitude of this ongoing problem.

In the same Census, there were 206 486 children for whom there was no information provided on the Census form about their student status or the type of educational institution that they were attending.

Furtive attempts to address and understand the extent of this problem have been attempted but were, in many cases, discontinued. There have been isolated efforts at various times by some school systems, districts and schools to set up programs to track and re-attach such students. Despite isolated educators in various locations advocating internally for significant recurrent funding to address this issue on a more transparent basis, we have found little evidence of long-term strategies for success. A cynic might take the view that some governments and ministers don't think they can win elections in the short term by exposing long term and ongoing flaws in education systems.

Given there is no specific national coordination and tracking of the actual or even potential number of detached students of compulsory school-age in this country, it is difficult to estimate the numbers. However, it is important that we try. By using census data, UNESCO data and anecdotal evidence we have formulated an estimate of the magnitude of this issue in Australia and the numbers are most concerning.

Compulsory school ages vary slightly across all Australian states and territories but all children must be in school (depending on their jurisdiction) between the ages of five and six, although most children start in pre-school programs between four and a half and five and a half.ⁱ The compulsory leaving age also varies across Australia but in general a student must be 17, although it is possible (depending on location) for students to leave school after year 10 and engage in alternative education programs, training and/or employment.

According to the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics Census (2016), there were 3 460 766 children aged between 5 and 16 years living in Australia in 2016. In the same census, there were 206 486 children for whom there was no information provided on the Census form about their student status or the type of educational institution that they were attending. That is, the person completing the household census form listed the presence of children in the household but did not provide the required information on their student status or the type of educational institution that they were attending.

According to the national Census, of all children aged five years, 16 755 were reported as not attending an educational institution, and neither were 3 894 adolescents aged 15 years and 10 897 aged 16 years. Thus, we know that 31 554 children aged in those three demographics were not reported as being engaged in education which still leaves 174 932 unaccounted school-aged children. It is possible that some parents of the children aged five years may have decided to delay their entry into formal education. A number of 15 and 16 years may have left the education system early to seek employment or vocation-based education, but we cannot be certain.

The Census requires that children of all compulsory school ages who are home-schooled should be reported in the Census as being either full-time or part-time students on the Census form. Therefore, it is unlikely that a significant number of home-schooled children are included in the remaining unexplained 174 932 (6–14 years of age) children missing based upon Census responses relating to education status. It is, however, likely that some household responders may have chosen not to complete the educational institution type question for a multitude of reasons, so the figure is certainly likely to be lower than the almost 175 000 young people not reported.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) data in comparative international monitoring estimates that in 2017 the number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth of primary and secondary age in Australia was 39 314.ⁱⁱ This data is devised by subtracting the number of children in school from the total population. To produce the data, UNESCO collects data through harmonized education surveys sent to Member States on an annual basis, so it is verified by the countries of origin.ⁱⁱⁱ UNESCO notes, however, that these numbers may not reflect the exact magnitude of out-of-school children due to discrepancies between data sources.

The 2019 Garma Program in North-East Arnhem Land provides a compelling example; the Garma Institute reported that '8 out of 10 Aboriginal students in the local region do not continue school past Year 8 meaning 8 out of 10 young adults are not job-ready or life-ready.'

In addition to informed approximations and estimates, significant anecdotal evidence of detached school-aged young people is provided by many staff and leaders of educational institutions known as 'alternative settings'. This term refers to a number of government and independently funded specialist schools and educational providers who cater for disengaged students and detached young people who are looking to reattach in more suitable and supportive educational environments. Many stories and case studies demonstrate the evidence of a large cohort of previously detached young people of school age who have spent varying amounts of time outside of formal education institutions.

The 2019 Garma Program in North-East Arnhem Land provides a compelling example; the Garma Institute reported that '8 out of 10 Aboriginal students in the local region do not continue school past Year 8 meaning 8 out of 10 young adults are not job-ready or life-ready.'^{iv} We cannot afford to sit back and allow emerging but marginalised adolescents to miss out on the necessary educational foundation required for future success in a turbulently globalised world.

As part of the research for this report, bureaucrats (who preferred not to be named), in two State Education Departments, who conducted a detailed analysis across relevant student data-sets, identified approximately 8 000 potentially detached students across one state and 10 000 students in the other. While acknowledging that these evidenced-based numbers may not be completely accurate, it is reasonable to suggest that the total number of detached students across the country is uncomfortably and inappropriately large. Based on these informed professional estimates and the comparative populations of each of the states, we estimate that there may be upwards of 50 000 unaccounted detached students across the country.

The numbers are too high and something must be done about it.

174 932

School-aged children unaccounted for (2016 Census)



39 314

UNESCO estimate of number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth of primary school and secondary age in Australia (2017)



50 000

National estimate based on state provided data and state & territory populations

What are the causes of school detachment?

It is possible that some of these young people ‘detached-from-formal education’ may never have been enrolled in the first place, others would have moved locations and not re-enrolled, with a great many more just silently departing from their current school and disappearing out of sight.

There are no nationally consistent tracking mechanisms, and no articulated or dedicated support mechanisms across the country to ensure that children re-engage with the education system once they leave.

Why school can become too hard

Bullying



Domestic violence



Anxiety



Sexual acceptance



Boredom



There are no nationally consistent tracking mechanisms, and no articulated or dedicated support mechanisms across the country to ensure that children re-engage with the education system once they leave. Community care organisations and alternative schools working in the margins to support incredibly vulnerable young people that mainstream institutions have disregarded or closed their doors to, know very well the tragic circumstances of many of their lives. There are far too many stories of young people who don't fit the desired profile of regular everyday schools due to issues related to bullying, domestic violence, dysfunctional home-lives, anxiety, disability, mental health issues, anger management issues and behavioural disorders, boredom, gender and sexuality acceptance and a multitude of other and allied issues. These students either disappear or, worse still, are silently ushered out of the ‘back door’ by school leaders concerned about the reputational impact of these students on potentially lowered NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) and ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks) scores or due to community concerns about their behaviour or ‘fit’.

We have been told a number of stories about school administrators who have firmly suggested to ‘difficult’ and ‘poor performing’ students that it may be in their interest to move to a ‘more appropriate’ institution that could better cater for their complex needs.

Kristy DeBrenni is a remarkable Principal of the life-saving Pathways College which is located across six campuses in Queensland. ‘Pathways’ is a public alternative school that is devoted to reconnecting young people who have rejected, or been rejected by, mainstream schools. She says that of the 220 enrolled students in 2019, about 10 per cent had previously been able to just detach and disappear from formal education, with another 20 per cent transient (moving in and out of various institutions) and the majority of the rest of her students having departed from mainstream schools through the various issues identified above. Most predominantly, the issues were connected to adverse mental health.

Kristy DeBrenni believes that mainstream schools reject students with challenging conditions because *“If schools ‘save’ these kids then school performance data is negatively impacted and the school can be deemed by significant others as a failure.”*

In other words, there is little incentive for mainstream schools in today's narrow and competitive educational environment to attempt to take in and rehabilitate detached and disengaged young people because the consequences appear too negative. Thus, high needs students often become collateral damage in the quest for higher academic performance and enhanced reputation.

Alternative schools like Kristy's that have a moral, ethical, compassionate and customised approach to doing whatever it takes to provide the fundamental life-skills and holistic support for ongoing success, are also regarded by many as academically underperforming and unsuccessful despite being the only hope that our most marginalised young people have. It seems that we have developed a performance and funding culture across Australia that doesn't value anything beyond literacy and numeracy. What we so desperately need to focus on is also social and emotional health in addition to student engagement across a broad curriculum that excites and creates opportunities for students to follow their passions.

As Kristy says: “For those students that society has neglected, once reattached and fully supported, they often don't want to leave upon graduation because, for many, their school has become their family”.

Indeed, like all of the student centred and unique alternative schools located around the country, Pathways College doesn't need to advertise. Most are full and doing their best to save as many young people as possible. Unfortunately, there aren't nearly enough of these bespoke educational alternatives to cater for the numbers of students who need them so many just simply detach and disappear.

Detachment Case Study:

'Jack'*... where hopelessness becomes hope

One such example, typical of the life trajectories that we never hear about, is Jack who met with me at his school in 2017. He arrived with a freshly washed and ironed white shirt replete with a new bow tie and slightly oversized, and clearly second-hand waistcoat. His shoes were polished and he was confident, proud and keen for me to recognise his incredible achievement. It was however, a seemingly simple achievement that most Australian parents, guardians and students take for granted.

Jack's beaming badge of honour was that after five years detached from formal education of any form (except the school of super-hard knocks), he was now enrolled in a caring and compassionate, albeit incredibly unusual, school. Jack considered that his commitment to finding his way back to an educational arena of any type after all that he had been through, to be both his lifeline and his greatest achievement.

He wanted me, as the Director General to personally know that not only was he now attending school, he was for the first time in his life committed and determined to be successful. He also wanted a photo with me, not so much as his keepsake, but for me, as the Director General, to remember him and to acknowledge the great school and caring staff that would have a person with a history like his as a student.

Like many unfortunate and 'invisible' young Australians under the age of seventeen, Jack left school during the formal compulsory years and nobody noticed. It seems his school did not report him missing when he stopped coming in Year five. If it did, then the NSW school system did not undertake any regular audit and investigation that would have revealed that Jack had been lost to education. His family simply did not care that he had just walked out the door and disappeared. He didn't initially come to the

It seems his school did not report him missing when he stopped coming in Year five. If it did, then the NSW school system did not undertake any regular audit and investigation that would have revealed that Jack had been lost to education.

attention of, and wasn't initially supported or directed by, the juvenile justice or health systems, not-for-profit community organisations or any other agency that we all imagine would prevent our most vulnerable kids from being abandoned by school systems.

As Jack told me that day, he just left home at ten years of age and slept either on the streets or, when fortunate, on friends couches and, along the way, he became an ice-addict. For five years from the age of ten to fifteen, he was addicted to methamphetamine.

For Jack to be in a school with committed teachers who helped him locate and lease a small apartment and find basic furniture so he could live and support himself, was nothing short of a miracle. Unfortunately, not everyone who is down and out gets to experience miracles, especially in our Australian education systems. We don't harness or, in many cases, even share our student data (even if we actually attempted to record and identify detached students) across government departments to cross-reference and find those who are lost to society. We do little to ensure that stories like Jack's don't happen.

Jack graduated from Year 12 at the Pathways College in Brisbane, which is remarkable in itself, but he still has challenges. He is now a 19 year old father who has an onerous responsibility to shepherd his own child along a pathway that will provide more security and opportunity that he has experienced. Time will tell.

It is also wonderful to note that Jack managed to convince his sister to contact the alternative Pathways College in order to enrol; which she did. Like all of the committed and unique alternative schools located in parts of the country, they are not looking for new students. Many have waiting lists and are doing their best to save kids who desperately need a hand. There just aren't anywhere near enough of them to stem this tragic neglect by all parts of our society.

Dr Jim Watterston
*not his real name

Despite his tragic circumstances, 'Jack' is one of the incredibly lucky and determined young people who, through the fog of drugs, homelessness and hopelessness, found his way back to education and another chance at life. There was only a very slim chance that 'Jack' would positively and proactively change his trajectory, but it was one he was prepared to grasp. Jack's self-driven reattachment is so unusual because most schools around Australia, public, Catholic and Independent, are not suitable for the vast majority of detached, disengaged, disabled, angry, anxious, bullied or abused children who have drifted out of view and who are actually spread across the nation right in front of our noses. Not only are traditional schools not always capable of providing for the marginalised and afflicted, but many of our educational organisations, due to resourcing constraints, deliberately do not seek to build pathways back into education for the young detached or disengaged.

In fact, the inconvenient truth is that many of our finest schools have created conditions where our most marginalised and vulnerable children are given no real choice but to leave because, for them, school is no longer tolerable. Some school principals and staff look the other way when problems at their schools become too difficult and challenging with 'mainstream' parents calling for stronger discipline and less tolerance for non-conformist behaviour. For many schools, it is much easier if problematic students, who are often battling mental health issues, just do not turn up at school at all rather than having to go down the esteem-ruining suspension and exclusion pathways.

We were told by a number of people interviewed for this report that, disturbingly, there is even a common term used to reference those students that schools find easier to 'move on' rather than to address their challenges. The 'back door exit' approach for schools is commonly and apparently widely known in alternative education circles as *being burned*.

If the notion of *burning* kids who don't fit our one-size-fits-all industrial model of education doesn't make you feel sick, then there probably isn't much point reading the rest of the paper.

So how do we actually lose track of students?

You would think that school systems could manage the care and inclusion of all students as simply as running a relay race but they don't.

A relay team functions by each runner working carefully together to safely hand the baton to the next runner while under intense pressure to complete the race. Unfortunately, our school systems drop the baton (precious students) all the time and as a result students disappear because there is no 'relay runner' to pass the baton to for the next part of the race. Olympic athletes train extensively not to drop the baton and so should schools and school systems. Every school must hold on to 'the baton' until a student is transitioned into a suitable and caring educational setting.

So how do we drop the baton and 'lose' students in our school systems?

Some children are driven from the system

Across Australia a significant number of students are formally expelled from their school every year and therefore need to find a new school or education provider. As previously noted in this report, some students are also informally 'burned' or pushed out the back door. Based on feedback from staff in alternative education settings we know that some of these children never step in the door of a school again. These expulsions can be formal and recorded in education department statistics or informal, with young people told not to return but never officially exited from the system. It is impossible to know, at this stage, how many young people fall in the latter category.

While it is not possible to find consolidated national data on the issue, we do know, for example, that in 2017 suspensions and expulsions increased in Victoria prompting an Ombudsman's inquiry. Formal expulsions in Victoria rose from 267 in 2014 to 309 in 2015, before falling to 278 in 2016.^v The Victorian Ombudsman raised the issue of informal exits, contending that some of the 6 800 disengaged (detached) Victorian year 9 to 12 students in the same year may have been informally exited. This statement was supported by evidence presented during the Ombudsman's inquiry relating to students being asked to leave school, but not formally expelled.

In the South Australian public school system exclusions of up to ten weeks were recorded in 2018 for 231 students while the number of suspensions has risen since 2014, from 3550 to 3824 in 2018.^{vi} Across the New South Wales Education Department, suspensions and expulsions have decreased marginally over time to 311 in 2017. Nonetheless, suspensions remain high with over 30 000 students receiving a short suspension and over 12 000 receiving a long suspension.^{vii}

The suspension and exclusion rates in Queensland have risen over time, particularly given the recent transition in some states of Year 7 students into the secondary school system. Queensland records both exclusions, where a decision is made to exclude a student from an educational institution for up to 12 months, and cancellations whereby a post-compulsory student is not participating in a program of instruction. In 2018, nearly 1800 students were excluded whilst over 1000 had their enrolments cancelled.^{viii}

Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be excluded from school than other students,^{ix} with the Victorian Ombudsman finding that students from out of home care, indigenous students and students with disabilities were also over-represented in expulsion figures.^x Common causes of exclusion relate to anti-social behaviour – children with a disability are particularly vulnerable to being excluded due to behavioural problems that may be affected by their disability.^{xi}

Based upon the Victorian Ombudsman's advice, and the views of many teachers in alternative schools that pick up a fraction of these students, the informally expelled (burned) are likely to be far higher than formal expulsion figures. School drivers, such as NAPLAN and ATAR, may therefore work against schools ensuring all children attend, as often children who are at risk of leaving school are struggling academically. It is, therefore, a prevailing view, articulated to us by a range of stakeholders, that some school leaders have taken the view that it is not in their school's best interests to retain students who may bring down their academic results.

A common story repeated to us involves school aged students who have sought permission to leave school early to take up apprenticeships in the workforce, only to find the work is not to their liking or that they have been sacked within a short period of time.

The link between disengagement, suspensions and expulsions has not been fully explored, however we know that a large number of detached students were suspended from school. Children who are suspended or expelled from school are more likely to enter the criminal justice system. The Victorian Ombudsman found that most young people in juvenile justice had been suspended or expelled, whilst the overwhelming majority of people in the criminal justice system left school early. The Ombudsman heard evidence, including:

"A common feature in many of the aggravated burglary cases has been that the fifteen, sixteen, seventeen year olds appearing before the Children's Court became disengaged from school, typically through suspension or expulsions, only shortly before becoming involved in significant offending".^{xii}

Evidence from a Department of Health and Human Services survey of 1094 young people who were in contact with youth justice found that 60 per cent (651) had been suspended or expelled from school: 150 of those surveyed were assessed as having impaired intellectual functioning and 70 per cent of these had been suspended or expelled.^{xiii}

Similar figures were reported in 2015 from the Education Justice Initiative in Victoria that was formed to respond to the education needs of children who are, or have been, in custody. The initiative found that nearly half of the young people it worked with were not enrolled in school – a third having been exited. Of those enrolled, nearly three quarters had not attended for at least the last two months.^{xiv}

Others become detached following disengagement

Additionally, there are large numbers of students who are still enrolled at schools and in other educational programs but are disengaged. These children, often identified as school refusers, might turn up at school on occasion, or may miss most of the year. Over time, students attending less are more likely to leave education before completion.^{xv}

Around 350 000, or one in five, government primary students miss at least ten per cent of school, which translates to around a month per year. If these absences continue, these students will have missed a year of schooling by the time they reach Year 10.^{xvi}

If we look at government secondary schools, over one third of students are missing at least a month of school a year in years 7–10. Non-government schools fare a little better but still have around twenty per cent of students missing at least a month of school per year.^{xvii}

The situation in rural and remote Australian schools is even worse. Sixty per cent of government primary students in very remote areas miss at least a month of school, rising to over three quarters of government students in years 7–10.^{xviii}

These factors are compounded for many students by a combination of low socio-economic status, low attendance and achievement, and peer and community effects increasing the likelihood of detaching from school.

And some move

Every year many thousands of families with school aged children move to a new house, with a significant number moving interstate. Unfortunately, school movement provides an opportunity for the 'relay baton' to be dropped if schools are unable to confirm that students have enrolled and are attending in their new location. Without a national tracking and confirmation system, we do not know how many children fall between the gap in these circumstances. As is the case for relay runners, it is not enough for a runner to just pass the baton the baton has to actually be safely received by the next runner or else the team is disqualified. So, it follows that it is not sufficient for schools to simply record that a student has left the school. It must also be a responsibility for the school to know that the student was safely received at the intended destination... school or system, alternative setting, apprenticeship, employment, juvenile justice, hospital or any other destination.

A common story repeated to us involves school aged students who have sought permission to leave school early to take up apprenticeships in the workforce, only to find the work is not to their liking or that they have been sacked within a short period of time. Relay batons don't just need to be safely passed to the next runner, ultimately, for the team to successfully finish the race, the baton must cross the finish line safely protected by the final runner. Leaving school prematurely for employment can ultimately cause the detachment of compulsory school aged young people.

Causes of disengagement

There is a multiplicity of causes of disengagement, which can lead to detachment from school, from personal to school level factors, and often a combination of both.

The reasons for non-attendance are similarly varied and complex, ranging from illness to caring obligations, stress and fear of bullying. Key economic factors, and parent and child risk factors often relate to children persistently missing school.^{xx}

The family and community factors influencing attendance are well known. These include socio-economic status, regionality, parental labour force status and educational attainment, homelessness, transience or living in out-of-home care, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status, refugee background, family breakdown/relationship issues and family violence.

A range of personal factors can influence young people's attendance. Factors such as physical and mental health, disability and behavioural issues play a large role in attendance. Young people are acutely aware of the perilous youth job market and are feeling more stressed than before. The 2018 Mission Australia Youth Survey found that more than 40 per cent young people were worried about how they coped with stress, a third were either extremely

or very concerned about school or study problems (33.8 per cent), while around three in ten were concerned about mental health (30.9 per cent) and body image (30.4 per cent). These worries apply to young people in all socio-economic groups.^{xx}

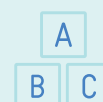
Young people with caring burdens or who are pregnant may struggle to attend school. Young people with offending behaviour or substance issues are also likely to attend less, and to leave school early. School-related factors include learning difficulties, relationships with peers and teachers, lack of engagement in education and lack of student agency.

Young people may often experience multiple risk factors, which may be interdependent. For example, family breakdown may be a factor in substance misuse, which may itself contribute to other problems such as offending behaviour. The impact of risk factors on engagement, health and wellbeing will vary between individuals and depend on their levels of resilience and protective factors such as support from a trusted adult.

Key factors affecting disengagement



Key individual and societal factors affecting disengagement include:



Additionally, a range of school factors affect disengagement including:

Personal attributes such as boredom, identity, school connectedness, academic motivation, sense of belonging and low self esteem

Socio-economic status including financial resources, parent occupation and neighbourhood

Family factors including family dysfunction, mental illness and disability

Race, ethnicity and gender^{xxi}

Attendance – truancy and suspensions

Participation such as homework completion, extra-curricular activities and school transfers

Behaviour

Achievement in literacy and numeracy

Relationships with teachers, parents and peers, bullying, conflict with teachers, poor peer relationships, poor parental communication^{xxi}

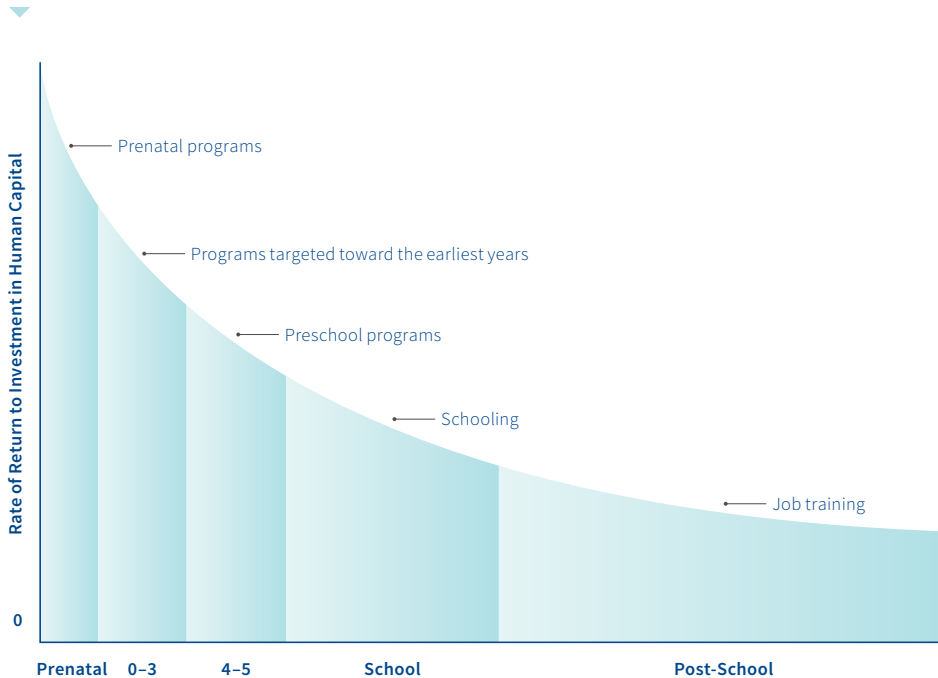


Cost of disengagement

The cost of young people dropping out of school and not returning is known. Stephen Lamb and Shuyan Huo provide an analysis of the numbers and costs of early leaving and disengagement at the age of 24.



The earlier the investment, the greater the return



Source:
heckmanequation.org/resource/the-heckman-curve/

The social cost includes loss of earnings, reduced quality of life, private health costs, loss of productivity spill overs, and the cost of raising taxes to pay for public services taking into account lower education fee expenses.

Using Census data, and cross-checked by HILDA (Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia) data, Lamb and Huo estimate that more than 39 000 19 year old early school leavers in 2014 did not complete Year 12 or its equivalent.^{xxii}

They calculate both the lost opportunity and the fiscal and social costs of young people not fulfilling their potential. The fiscal cost included lost tax payments, increased public expenditure on criminal justice and corrections, public expenditure on health and support programs, and welfare and took into account reduced expenditure on schooling.

The social cost includes loss of earnings, reduced quality of life, private health costs, loss of productivity spill overs, and the cost of raising taxes to pay for public services taking into account lower education fee expenses.

These costs do not include things that are harder to quantify, such as the cost of providing housing or care for young people, or the considerable economic cost borne by non-government and philanthropic organisations. Nor do they include the intergenerational cost of disadvantage.

The conservative estimates of Lamb and Huo are that each early leaver has a:

- » fiscal cost of \$334 600 over their lifetime
- » social cost of \$616 200 over their lifetime.

Each cohort of 19 year olds that left school early have a:

- » lifetime fiscal cost of 12.6 billion dollars.
- » lifetime social cost of 23.2 billion dollars.^{xxiii}

A range of economists have sought to identify where to best intervene to reduce this cost. James Heckman's seminal work developing the Heckman curve examines how to maximise the return from education – the counterpart to the cost of disengagement. He identifies that investment in early education has the greatest return on investment, realising a return on investment of around 13%.^{xxiv}

Recent Australian analysis has identified \$4.74 billion in benefits associated with providing one year of early childhood education, compared to \$2.34 billion in costs associated borne by government (79 per cent) and parents or carers (21 per cent).^{xxv}

These benefits relate both to increased parental earnings due to availability of care, and also a reduction in the costs associated with disengagement including welfare, health and criminal justice costs.^{xxvi} The table opposite provides further details.

As shown there are significant economic benefits to be gained by reducing detachment from education, not to mention the benefits at a personal level to children, young people and their families.

The conservative estimates of Lamb and Huo are that each early leaver has a:

\$334 600

Fiscal cost over their lifetime

+

\$616 200

Social cost over their lifetime

Each cohort of 19 year olds that left school early have a:

\$12.6B

Fiscal cost over their lifetime

+

\$23.2B

Social cost over their lifetime

Cost Component	Description	Cost Type	
Labour market	Lost earnings	Gross income including fringe benefits (health and pension)	Social
	Lost tax payments	Includes federal and state income/consumption taxes	Fiscal
Crime	Public expenditures	Criminal justice system, policing, and corrections expenditures (federal, state, and local)	Fiscal
	Victim costs	Reduced quality of life, monetary damages, lost earnings	Social
Health	Public expenditures	Medicare for persons under 65, and other government agency expenditures on health	Fiscal
	Private burdens	Private expenditures on medical treatments (out-of-pocket, private insurance) and private valuations of health	Social
Welfare	Support programs	Expenditures on social supports (e.g. workforce restraining)	Fiscal
	Transfer payments	Amounts paid to individuals who receive government supports	Fiscal
Education	Public savings	Lower schooling and further education subsidies from government agencies	Fiscal
	Private fee savings	Lower fees and further education expenses for families	Social
Productivity spillovers	General economic gains from a more educated workforce	Social	
Marginal excess tax burden	Cost of raising taxes to pay for public services	Social	

	Group affected	Present value (3% discount rate) \$ Million
Cost of early childhood education		
Cost to government	Government	1 835
Cost to households	Parents/carers	501
Total cost		2 336
Benefits of early childhood education		
Parental earnings benefits	Parents/carers	1 463
Taxation benefits of additional parental income	Government	313
Higher earnings for children over lifetime	Children	1 064
Additional productivity benefits from children	Employers	319
Taxation benefits from children's additional lifetime earnings	Government	495
Reduced expenditure on special education	Government	3
Reduced expenditure on school repetition	Government	11
Reduced health expenditure	Government	605
Reduced crime-related expenditure	Government	522
Reduced welfare expenditure	Government	67
Reduction in welfare payments to individuals	Children	-67
Other costs – additional schooling costs	Government	-58
Total early childhood education benefits		4 737
Net benefits/NPV		2 401
Benefit-cost ratio		2.0

Note: Levels of benefits and costs are not necessarily comparable between policies given that they have different base cases. The benefit-cost ratio (BCR) is a more appropriate comparator.

Source: PwC Analysis (www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO_ANALYSIS_Full_Report.pdf)

Don't all children need to be in school? What are governments doing to keep young people in education?

This problem is not simply a legislative one.

Overall, one in five children start school behind their peers, and half of these do not finish their education or go on to employment.

Across Australia the official school leaving age is 17: different legislation applies across the country regarding penalties for failing to ensure a child attends school, although these are rarely invoked. A range of processes must be followed in order to prosecute parents and this usually includes departments working with families to resolve barriers to attendance. There is a low level of prosecution across the country for parents of children missing school.

This may represent a reluctance of systems to penalise parents and a desire to work with families. Alternatively, it may reveal a lack of action when students stop attending; chasing non-attending students is labour intensive, particularly if they are transient. It is a difficult task given the multitude of issues a young person may present with and one for which schools are not resourced.

All Australian governments have committed to young people finishing school. In 1990, Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires Australia to recognise the right to education for everyone under the age of 18 years. Australia has long had targets for Year 12 or equivalent completion. There have been periods where it appears that governments were arguably more concerned about the issue of young people not completing school. Back in 2009, all Australian governments agreed to a goal that, by 2015, 90 percent of young people would complete Year 12 or its equivalent. To support this, governments agreed to a range of initiatives under the moniker of the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions which was in place from 2009/10

to 2013/14. This National Youth Participation Requirement required all young people to participate in schooling and/or education, training or employment until the age of 17 years. Nationally funded initiatives included Youth Connections, a program explicitly focused on linking young people who were disengaged (detached) from education back into school or an alternative setting. Under this program around 4000 young people per annum were re-engaged with education, with survey data showing the majority who were engaged (re-attached) to education stayed after exiting the program.^{xxvii} Unfortunately, National Partnerships are time limited in nature, so many of the initiatives supported through these programs including Youth Connections have now closed.

While the societal ramifications of student detachment are still a largely undiscovered priority, some jurisdictions are still seeking to actively intervene and re-attach young people back into education. For example, the Navigator program in Victoria is seeking to replace many of the functions of the defunct Youth Connections program – to work with young people, their families and support networks to address issues underlying disengagement and to help them re-engage with their education. It is delivered by community agencies, who work closely with local schools and school area teams. From 2019, services will be available across 11 Department areas, each tailored to its local community.^{xxviii} In a further move to seek out detached young people, the Victorian Department of Education and Training is running a pilot on finding early leavers.

In 2009, all Australian governments agreed to a goal that:

90%

Of young people would complete Year 12 or its equivalent by 2015

Victorian Department of Education
and Training Case Study:

Reducing Early Leavers Project

The Victorian Government has set a target that aims for the proportion of students leaving education between years 9 and 12 to halve. To support the achievement of this goal, every government secondary school has been provided with a list of early leavers from 2018, and asked to follow up and re-engage these young people in education. Over 7000 young people were identified for follow up, with a sample of 58 partner schools being supported by the regional office to prioritise and approach young people. The project is still in its formative phase but has identified barriers related to the mental health of young people, a lack of clarity on who should follow up early leavers and an inconsistency between legislation mandating school attendance until 17 with a policy desire of all young people achieving Year 12

or equivalent. (Once students turn 17 they are able to legally leave school before achieving Year 12 Graduation.) The findings of the project available later in 2019, will inform future practice.

The challenge however, for any school system proactively seeking to re-attach 'lost students', is that a suitable array of alternative education and customised support settings that would be less confronting for those young people who have been traumatised or disenfranchised in mainstream schools, are not equitably available in all areas. It is abundantly clear that not all young people are able to flourish at their local one-size-fits-all (survival of the fittest) school so it should be incumbent on governments to ensure that suitable alternatives settings and programs are in place for these young people.

Problems with current policy responses

Despite some ‘green shoots’ on an otherwise barren policy landscape, current responses to the issue of detachment from school are generally ad-hoc, short-term and jurisdictionally based.

National data collection tends to focus on the outputs of schooling, with jurisdictions measured on improvements in NAPLAN scores or PISA performance. Even when jurisdictions focus on attendance this is at an aggregate level of attendance rate averages and levels, therefore masking students who are chronically absent.

Lack of national policy

A range of National Partnerships, primarily the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions and the Smarter Schools National Partnership, included supporting children and young people from detaching from education as part of their aims to support the national goals of 90 per cent Year 12 or Certificate II completion by 2015. While this goal was not achieved a further COAG target of 90 per cent achievement of Year 12 or Certificate III completion by 2020 has been set.^{xxix} The National Schools Reform Agreement retains the 2020 goal and has a priority outcome of ensuring that equity groups attend school more regularly and complete Year 12 or a Certificate III. The challenge for schools however, is that these noble and important goals may unintentionally work against other priority outcomes, such as lowering the proportion of students in the bottom achievement levels of PISA (Program for International Assessment) and NAPLAN testing which will continue to prove to be a disincentive for schools and school systems. Further, initiatives specified in the agreement are overarching, such as reviewing the teacher workforce, and likely to miss the precise needs of the small but important cohort of learners disengaging or detached from education.^{xxx}

There is no national response to disengagement or detachment in schools beyond the broad 90 per cent Year 12 or equivalent completion target. National data collection tends to focus on the outputs of schooling, with jurisdictions measured on improvements in NAPLAN scores or PISA performance. Even when jurisdictions focus on attendance this is at an aggregate level of attendance rate averages and levels, therefore masking students who are chronically absent.

Ad-hoc education provision: Are alternative and flexible schools currently part of the problem or the solution?

There are a range of educational providers that do not predominantly measure themselves by NAPLAN and ATAR benchmarks. Around 900 alternative and flexible learning sites across Australia provide these services and it is estimated that around 70 000 students are enrolled, either separately or concurrently with enrolment in mainstream education systems and schools.^{xxxi}

These flexible or alternative learning options are a loose collective of programs or providers who may be located in mainstream schools, TAFEs, Adult Community Education courses and stand-alone educational programs. They provide predominantly modified education and vocational options for children and young people who have previously detached and/or are disengaging from schooling.

Flexible or alternative learning providers are usually based on a ‘wrap-around’ support model with staff ranging from teachers and educators to youth workers, health specialists and counsellors. They seek to support young people to re-engage in education by assisting them to address the multiplicity of problems that contributed to their disengagement, often including health and housing problems.

While these learning providers have to meet basic government accreditation requirements around the safety of students and premises, depending on the jurisdiction and type of delivery, they are not always subject to the same scrutiny and oversight of outcomes as mainstream schools. They are funded in different arrangements across the country, at times needing to rely on schools to pass over sufficient student-based funding for those who have transferred and applying for philanthropic funds to make up the gap in servicing a high-needs cohort. There is little oversight of the schools ‘burning’ hard to handle students by handballing them to flexible or alternative schools.

The Australian Early Development Census, a triennial census of all children in their first year of school, identifies that children in the lowest socio-economic community are three times as likely to be vulnerable, starting school behind their peers in a key aspect of child development, as the children from the highest socio-economic community. Nearly one in two children in very remote communities are vulnerable compared to one in five in metropolitan cities.

Based upon our estimation of the numbers of currently detached students across the nation and despite the concern relating to the variable quality of alternative education providers, we can reasonably assume that we would have to almost double the capacity of current places in these institutions if we were in any way serious about the goal of re-attaching every person who is currently detached.

In a report prepared for the Queensland Department of Education and Training in 2014 titled, 'Issues of Disengagement from and Re-engagement in Learning', the authors quoted an unnamed CEO of an alternative school as saying: *"You know what, it is so hard carrying the pressure of having to meet the needs of so many kids ... we could have a thousand placements and government schools would kick more kids out, if we were willing to keep up with it. We will never keep up".*^{xxxiii}

Compared to mainstream schools however, there is limited research on, or support for, flexible and alternative learning providers even though they are educating a significant number of our most challenged students. This is because many providers fall outside the mainstream school system and often mainstream schools are just content to move the student on without doing the necessary due diligence in regard to the quality, relevance and personalised 'fit' of the program.^{xxxiii}

The 2014 Queensland DET Disengagement Report authors provide a cautionary note in relation to alternative education providers when they noted, *"However, there was some concern expressed about the type of person running such schools, along with external programs, 'if you haven't got the right person doing that job, they are a waste of space'."*^{xxxiv}

While reviews and oversight of alternative and flexible programs are not systematically managed or documented, there is no doubt that many are providing hope and much needed support for 'lost' or detached young people who would otherwise not be in any educational program at all. Measuring achievements from these programs, however, is difficult as they are dispersed, and the nature of their vulnerable cohort makes it difficult to track outcomes post program completion. Case studies reveal a range of outcomes achieved for students, including retention in education and transition to further education, reduced barriers to engagement such as housing, and improved academic outcomes. They also highlight the complexity of the scenarios and the challenge in securing less quantifiable outcomes such as engagement, motivation and confidence.^{xxxv}

The challenge in demonstrating outcomes makes it difficult for flexible learning providers to secure consistent, ongoing funding for their operations. Their role on the margins of education means they may miss out on the support and resources provided to mainstream schools, including not being a focus in teacher educator preparation despite the obvious need for well trained teachers.

Based upon our estimation of the numbers of currently detached students across the nation and despite the concern relating to the variable quality of alternative education providers, we can reasonably assume that we would have to almost double the capacity of current places in these institutions if we were in any way serious about the goal of re-attaching every person who is currently detached. This would be a necessary but major commitment and would also require provision in locations where alternative programs are currently not provided.

Lack of ongoing national approach to quality early education particularly for the most disadvantaged

In looking for sustainable policy solutions to eradicate Australia's school detachment problem, a more cost effective and productive focus should be on prevention, in addition to strategic initiatives to re-attach those who have already been lost. As is often said, it is better to have a fence at the top of the cliff rather than ambulances at the bottom. In the case of disengagement and detachment, the strong safety barrier at the top of the cliff is a high quality early childhood education for all.

Despite the wealth of academic, social and wellbeing evidence around the benefits of starting and intervening early, there is no consistent national approach to early education across Australia. Whilst four year old preschool is provided across Australia, albeit through a series of one year agreements with the Australian Government, access to three year old preschool varies considerably across the country. A workforce focused approach means that the children most likely to access early learning are those from higher socio-economic groups with two working parents.

Whilst most children attend four year old preschool, children in low socio-economic areas are more likely to attend lower quality early childhood education services.^{xi} Evidence shows that the benefits of early learning are only realised if children have access to trained teachers.^{xii}

There are significant gaps in achievement and participation between low and higher socio-economic children, and between city children and their rural and regional counterparts in the early years. The Australian Early Development Census, a triennial census of all children in their first year of school, identifies that children in the lowest socio-economic community are three times as likely to be vulnerable, starting school behind their peers in a key aspect of child development, as the children from the highest socio-economic community. Nearly one in two children in very remote communities are vulnerable compared to one in five in metropolitan cities.^{xxxvi}

Overall, one in five children start school behind their peers, and half of these do not finish their education or go on to employment.^{xxxvii} Around 40 000 children per annum have undiagnosed special needs that are not identified, assessed and treated prior to commencing school.^{xxxviii} Children in rural and regional areas, and children in low socio-economic communities, are especially likely to have their needs unrecognised before school.

Access to and the quality of early education varies tremendously across Australia. Children from higher socio-economic communities are more likely to attend preschool, long day care and playgroup, and to have more regular attendance.^{xxxix}

Whilst most children attend four year old preschool, children in low socio-economic areas are more likely to attend lower quality early childhood education services.^{xi} Evidence shows that the benefits of early learning are only realised if children have access to trained teachers.^{xii}

There is an impending workforce shortage as less students are undertaking early childhood teaching qualifications, whilst workforce attrition is high. One in three preschool services could be without a trained teacher in the next four years.^{xiii} This is likely to affect services with less capacity to attract staff including through financial incentives, and this is most likely to occur to services in low socio-economic areas and in rural and regional areas. A reduction in access to quality staff could further increase the gulf in children's outcomes.

There are significant opportunities for a positive impact on our national economy, standard of living, education outcomes, and international competitiveness by preventing detachment and by starting early. The Right@Home study shows the home learning environment can be influenced and children with additional needs identified.^{xiiii} Evidence from the Children's Protection Society's Early Years Education Program (a 24 month, intensive five day a week 3-5 year old early learning for highly vulnerable children) shows significant cognitive, social and emotional gains from participation in the program. The impact on IQ at 24 months participation was such that participants equalled their peers, with large impacts also in resilience and social and emotional development. Although it is too early to see the effects of this program on school participation and outcomes, early indicators suggest that the children involved will start school as ready as their peers whereas their multiple risk factors would ordinarily have set them back.^{xliv}

Conclusion

This Report, *Those That Disappear: The Australian education problem that nobody wants to talk about*, should be a wake-up call for governments right around Australia at the Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local levels to band together with the community to acknowledge and expediently deal with this largely unspoken of problem in our society.

How could this happen in the 'Lucky Country' and not be a national priority you might ask? Well, quite simply up until now, throwing large sums of funding at our most marginalised and invisible young people is not a vote winner in elections.

There can be no greater priority for our society than the health, care, education, nurturing, development and opportunity of every young person, no matter how unfortunate their circumstances. It is beyond time for governments, education departments and schools in all sectors to work collaboratively and, for once, on a unique bipartisan endeavour.

The loss of educational opportunities through disengagement and eventual detachment for the significant but unknown number of school aged students at any given time across Australia is a national calamity. This issue requires the declaration of a national emergency, in line with the same level of urgency as we would display if there was a season of raging bushing fires, or floods, cyclones or a major earthquake. This should be everybody's business. We need key stakeholders sitting around the tables in the 'War Rooms' like those Crisis Response Centres that exist in every State and Territory.

How could this happen in the 'Lucky Country' and not be a national priority you might ask? Well, quite simply up until now, throwing large sums of funding at our most marginalised and invisible young people is not a vote winner in elections.

In short, we need to prioritise the identification, care and educational success of every young person and to do that, we need to know where they are and to

have schools that are able to address their barriers to learning and life. Instead of spending countless dollars over the lifetime of detached students through government services such as juvenile justice, health, welfare, housing, unemployment payments and a host of other allied service costs, we must intervene earlier to focus on the necessary support and educational adjustments that can meet the complex needs of our most marginalised and disadvantaged.

We think of lack of access to a school education as being a problem of developing countries not one occurring right here in our own back-yard. Unfortunately, the solutions will take years to effectively embed and the results (if we were to be successful) would not immediately add to high performance standards that we currently measure. It is therefore easier not to talk about this national disgrace, not to put safeguards in place to identify the names, faces and stories of the compulsory aged students we have lost track of or 'burned' and to not focus the public on the failure of education systems to cater for the incredibly diverse needs of our wide spectrum of young people.

We owe it to our young people to get this right by not leaving anyone behind. It should go without saying that every child matters.

Endnotes

- ⁱ ACARA, National Report on Schooling 2017 accessed 12 September 2019 at <https://acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-20170de312404c94637ead88ff0003e0139.pdf?sfvrsn=0>
- ⁱⁱ UNESCO Institute for statistics accessed 19 September 2019 at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ UNESCO Institute for statistics accessed 19 September 2019 at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>
- ^{iv} Yothu Yindi Foundation (2019)
- ^v Victorian Ombudsman (2017) Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions, accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/getattachment/57d918ec-fee0-48e0-a55e-87d0262d3c27>
- ^{vi} Department of Education South Australia (2018), Behaviour Management Statistics, accessed 10 July at <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/behaviour-management-2018.docx>
- ^{vii} New South Wales Department of Education and Training, Suspensions and Expulsions 2017 accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://data.cese.nsw.gov.au/data/dataset/c0a90a6f-2509-45c5-ba77-cf5b00350043/resource/35ccedef-261f-432f-ada8-8d5e1b9838eb/download/2017-suspensions-and-expulsions-aa.pdf>
- ^{viii} Queensland State School (2019), School Disciplinary Absences by region, 2014-18, accessed at <https://qed.qld.gov.au/det-publications/reports/earlyyears/Documents/sda-by-region.pdf>
- ^{ix} Hemphill, S. A., Toumbourou, J. W., Smith, R., Kendall, G. E., Rowland, B., Freiberg, K., & Williams, J. W. (2010). Are Rates of School Suspension Higher in Socially Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods? An Australian Study. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 21(1), 12-18.
- ^x Victorian Ombudsman (2017) Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions, accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/getattachment/57d918ec-fee0-48e0-a55e-87d0262d3c27>
- ^{xi} Armstrong, D. (2018) Addressing the wicked problem of behaviour in schools, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22:9, 997-1013, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2017.1413732
- ^{xii} Victorian Ombudsman (2017) Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions, accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/getattachment/57d918ec-fee0-48e0-a55e-87d0262d3c27>
- ^{xiii} Victorian Ombudsman (2017) Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions, accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/getattachment/57d918ec-fee0-48e0-a55e-87d0262d3c27>
- ^{xiv} Victoria University (2015) Education at the Heart of the Children's Court – Evaluation of the Education Justice Initiative, pages 11-13.
- ^{xv} Audas R. & Willms J. (2001) Engagement and dropping out of school: A life-course perspective. Hull, Quebec: Applied Research Branch, Strategic Policy, Human Resources Development Canada.
- ^{xvi} Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2019 accessed at <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/child-care-education-and-training/school-education/>;
- ^{xvii} Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2019 accessed at <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/child-care-education-and-training/school-education/>;
- ^{xviii} Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2019 accessed at <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/child-care-education-and-training/school-education/>;
- ^{xix} Hancock, K. J., Mitrou, F., Taylor, C. L., & Zubrick, S. R. (2018). The diverse risk profiles of persistently absent students: implications for attendance policies in Australia. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 23(1-2), 53-69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1433536>
- ^{xx} 2018 Mission Australia Youth Survey accessed 10 June at <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey/823-mission-australia-youth-survey-report-2018/file>
- ^{xxi} Lamb, S. & Dulfer, N. Predicting disengagement and its effects: What evidence is there on the extent to which disengagement can be predicted at younger ages? (8-12) A Literature review prepared for the Victorian Department of Human Services and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008) accessed from <http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/2799/1/Disengagement%20Topic%203.pdf>
- ^{xxii} Lamb, S. and Huo, S. Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education. Mitchell Institute report No. 02/2017. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. Available from: www.mitchellinstitute.org.au
- ^{xxiii} Lamb, S. and Huo, S. Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education. Mitchell Institute report No. 02/2017. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. Available from: www.mitchellinstitute.org.au
- ^{xxiv} <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/the-heckman-curve/>
- ^{xxv} PWC, A Smarter Investment for A Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school, accessed 19 September 2019 at https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO_ANALYSIS_Full_Report.pdf
- ^{xxvi} PWC, A Smarter Investment for A Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school, accessed 19 September 2019 at https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO_ANALYSIS_Full_Report.pdf
- ^{xxvii} Dandolo Partners (2014) Evaluation of the National Partnership of Youth Attainment and Transitions, A report for the Department of Education accessed 20 June 2019 at <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/national-partnership-youth-attainment-and-transitions-second-interim-evaluation-report>
- ^{xxviii} Navigator Snapshot accessed 21 July 2019 at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/NavigatorEvaluationSnapshotJune2018.docx>
- ^{xxix} Council of Australian Governments Report on Performance 2016 accessed 21 July 2019 at https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/report_coag_2016.docx
- ^{xxx} National School Reform Agreement, Accessed 21 July 2019 at <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/51606>
- ^{xxxi} Te Riele, K. (2014). Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible learning programs in Australia. Final report. Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning
- ^{xxxii} Mills, M., McGregor, G., Martin, B., Tomaszewski, W., and Waters, R. (2014) Issues of Disengagement from and Re-engagement in Learning: A Report Prepared for DETE, Queensland Department of Education and Training 30 Mary St. Brisbane, p.86
- ^{xxxiii} <http://dusseldorp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Victoria-Institut-1-7-MB.pdf>
- ^{xxxiv} Mills, M., McGregor, G., Martin, B., Tomaszewski, W., and Waters, R. (2014) Issues of Disengagement from and Re-engagement in Learning: A Report Prepared for DETE, Queensland Department of Education and Training 30 Mary St. Brisbane, p.86
- ^{xxxv} Te Riele, K., Wilson, K., Wallace, V. et al. (2017) Outcomes from Flexible Learning Options for disenfranchised youth: what counts?, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21:2, 117-130, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2016.1168878
- ^{xxxvi} Australian Early Development Census 2018 National Report accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://www.aecd.gov.au/resources/detail/2018-aecd-national-report>
- ^{xxxvii} Lamb, S., Jackson, J., Walstab, A. & Huo, S. (2015), *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.
- ^{xxxviii} O'Connell, M. A chance to even the odds, Pursuit, accessed 21 July at <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/a-chance-to-even-the-odds>
- ^{xxxix} Australian Early Development Census 2018 National Report accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://www.aecd.gov.au/resources/detail/2018-aecd-national-report>
- ^{xl} Cloney, D., Cleveland, G., Hattie, J. & Tayler, C. (2016) Variations in the Availability and Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care by Socioeconomic Status of Neighborhoods, *Early Education and Development*, 27:3, 384-401, DOI: 10.1080/10409289.2015.1076674 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10409289.2015.1076674>
- ^{xli} Warren, D. and Haisken-DeNew, J. P. (2013) The Causal Impact of Pre-school Participation and Teacher Qualifications on Year 3 NAPLAN Cognitive Tests, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research
- ^{xlii} O'Connell, M. (2019) One third of all preschools centres could be without a trained teacher if we do nothing, *The Conversation*, Accessed 21 July 2019 at <https://theconversation.com/one-third-of-all-preschool-centres-could-be-without-a-trained-teacher-in-four-years-if-we-do-nothing-120099>
- ^{xliiii} Goldfeld S, Price A, Bryson H, et al 'right@home': a randomised controlled trial of sustained nurse home visiting from pregnancy to child age 2 years, versus usual care, to improve parent care, parent responsibility and the home learning environment at 2 years *BMJ Open* 2017;7:e013307. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-013307
- ^{xliiv} Changing the Life Trajectories of Australia's Most Vulnerable Children Report No. 4 24 months in the Early Years Education Program: Assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers accessed 10 September at https://fhe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/3085770/EYERP-Report-4-web.pdf

Reference list

- ACARA, National Report on Schooling 2017 accessed 12 September 2019 at <https://acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-20170de312404c94637ead88ff00003e0139.pdf?sfvrsn=0>
- Armstrong, D. (2018) Addressing the wicked problem of behaviour in schools, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22:9, 997-1013, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2017.1413732
- Audas R. & Willms J. (2001) Engagement and dropping out of school: A life-course perspective. Hull, Quebec: Applied Research Branch, Strategic Policy, Human Resources Development Canada.
- Australian Government, Australian Early Development Census 2018 National Report accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2018-aedc-national-report>
- Cloney, D., Cleveland, G., Hattie, J. & Tayler, C. (2016) Variations in the Availability and Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care by Socioeconomic Status of Neighborhoods, *Early Education and Development*, 27:3, 384-401, DOI: 10.1080/10409289.2015.1076674 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10409289.2015.1076674>
- Council of Australian Governments Report on Performance 2016 accessed 21 July 2019 at https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/report_coag_2016.docx
- Dandolo Partners (2014) Evaluation of the National Partnership of Youth Attainment and Transitions, A report for the Department of Education accessed 20 June 2019 at <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/national-partnership-youth-attainment-and-transitions-second-interim-evaluation-report>
- Department of Education South Australia (2018), Behaviour Management Statistics, accessed 10 July at <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/behaviour-management-2018.docx>
- Goldfeld S, Price A, Bryson H, et al 'right@home': a randomised controlled trial of sustained nurse home visiting from pregnancy to child age 2 years, versus usual care, to improve parent care, parent responsibility and the home learning environment at 2 years *BMJ Open* 2017;7:e013307. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-013307
- Hancock, K. J., Mitrou, F., Taylor, C. L., & Zubrick, S. R. (2018). The diverse risk profiles of persistently absent students: implications for attendance policies in Australia. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 23(1-2), 53-69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1433536>
- Heckman, J. The Heckman Equation accessed 19 September 2019 at <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/the-heckman-curve/>
- Hemphill, S. A., Toumbourou, J. W., Smith, R., Kendall, G. E., Rowland, B., Freiberg, K., & Williams, J. W. (2010). Are Rates of School Suspension Higher in Socially Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods? An Australian Study. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 21(1), 12-18.
- Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S (2015), *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.
- Lamb, S. & Dulfer, N. Predicting disengagement and its effects: What evidence is there on the extent to which disengagement can be predicted at younger ages? (8-12) A Literature review prepared for the Victorian Department of Human Services and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008) accessed from <http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/2799/1/Disengagement%20Topic%203.pdf>
- Lamb, S. and Huo, S (2017). Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education. Mitchell Institute report No. 02/2017. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. Available from: www.mitchellinstitute.org.au
- Melbourne Institute, Changing the Life Trajectories of Australia's Most Vulnerable Children Report No. 4 24 months in the Early Years Education Program: Assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers accessed 10 September at https://fbc.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/3085770/EYERP-Report-4-web.pdf
- Mills, M., McGregor, G., Martin, B., Tomaszewski, W., and Waters, R. (2014) Issues of Disengagement from and Re-engagement in Learning: A Report Prepared for DETE, Queensland Department of Education and Training 30 Mary St. Brisbane
- Mission Australia, 2018 Mission Australia Youth Survey accessed 10 June at <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey/823-mission-australia-youth-survey-report-2018/file>
- National School Reform Agreement, Accessed 21 July 2019 at <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/51606>
- Navigator Snapshot accessed 21 July 2019 at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/NavigatorEvaluationSnapshotJune2018.docx>
- New South Wales Department of Education and Training, Suspensions and Expulsions 2017 accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://data.cese.nsw.gov.au/data/dataset/c0a90a6f-2509-45c5-ba77-cf5b00350043/resource/35ccdef-261f-432f-ada8-8d5e1b9838eb/download/2017-suspensions-and-expulsions-aa.pdf>
- O'Connell, M. (2019) One third of all preschools centres could be without a trained teacher if we do nothing, *The Conversation*, Accessed 21 July 2019 at <https://theconversation.com/one-third-of-all-preschool-centres-could-be-without-a-trained-teacher-in-four-years-if-we-do-nothing-120099>
- O'Connell, M. A chance to even the odds, *Pursuit*, accessed 21 July at <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/a-chance-to-even-the-odds>
- Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2019 accessed at <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/child-care-education-and-training/school-education/>
- PWC, A Smarter Investment for A Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school, accessed 19 September 2019 at https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO_ANALYSIS_Full_Report.pdf
- Queensland State School (2019), School Disciplinary Absences by region, 2014-18, accessed at <https://qed.qld.gov.au/det-publications/reports/earlyyears/Documents/sda-by-region.pdf>
- Te Riele, K. (2014). Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible learning programs in Australia. Final report. Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning accessed 10 September 2019 at <http://dusseldorp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Victoria-Institute-1-7-MB.pdf>
- Te Riele, K., Wilson, K. Wallace, V. et al. (2017) Outcomes from Flexible Learning Options for disenfranchised youth: what counts?, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21:2, 117-130, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2016.1168878
- UNESCO Institute for statistics accessed 10 July 2019 at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>
- Victoria University (2015) Education at the Heart of the Children's Court – Evaluation of the Education Justice Initiative, pages 11-13.
- Victorian Ombudsman (2017) Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions, accessed 20 July 2019 at <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/getattachment/57d918ec-fee0-48e0-a55e-87d0262d3c27>
- Warren, D. and Haisken-DeNew, J. P. (2013) The Causal Impact of Pre-school Participation and Teacher Qualifications on Year 3 NAPLAN Cognitive Tests, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research
- Yothu Yindi Foundation (2019)

Note re: Bureau of Statistics figures on students not reported as being in school.

There are a couple places where children are being reported if not in school:

The Not Stated categories are for people who declined to provide that information on their form. People may decline to report for their children for a range of reasons:

- » They may not recognise a category to report in (e.g. no category for home schooling)
- » They may be doing the form as quickly as they can or they may have privacy concerns about the question.
- » Their children may not be attending school and they may not wish to acknowledge that.

Some children are also listed as attending an other educational institution (though this is not the way the form is designed or intended). Of these children:

- » Some may be attending a childcare centre.
- » Some may be attending a preschool/school (some school years are called different things in different school systems that may confuse people).
- » Some may be home schooled, attending school-of-the-air, or another schooling arrangement.



THOSE WHO DISAPPEAR



Contact us

Melbourne Graduate School of Education

 education.unimelb.edu.au

Connect with us

 [mgseunimelb](https://www.facebook.com/mgseunimelb)

 [EduMelb](https://twitter.com/EduMelb)

 [EducationMelbourne](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)

234 Queensberry Street
Kwong Lee Dow Building
The University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010 Australia

ISBN: 978-0-646-81193-2

Republish this article

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives 3.0 Australia (CC BY-ND 3.0 AU), so you can republish this article for free, online or in print.

All republished articles must be attributed in the following way: This article Those Who Disappear: The Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about was first published by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Authors Dr Jim Watterston & Megan O'Connell.

Disclaimer

The University endeavours to ensure that information contained in this publication is current and correct at the time of printing.

CRICOS Provider Code: 00116K

Printed on paper from responsible sources.



Melbourne
Graduate School
of Education