



Committee Secretary  
Senate Education and Employment Committees  
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9<sup>th</sup> December 2022

## **Re: Response to the Senate inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters 2023**

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation that has been supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia for over 30 years. Our vision is that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are connected, empowered and influential. We provide specialist support services and programs to empower over 18,000 multicultural young people and their families each year through opportunities for young people to be involved, connect, learn and develop skills, and to collectively strengthen their voice and create positive change. Additionally, CMY delivers training and consultancy, knowledge sharing and advocacy, and is the auspice body for the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN Australia), the national peak body for multicultural youth issues.

CMY is pleased to be able to respond to the Senate's inquiry into the national trend of school refusal. We would particularly like to provide input to the Committee around the need for stronger data, research and evidence relating to the school refusal rates and experiences of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

### **Overview**

For the purposes of this submission, we understand school refusal to occur when a young person is unable to attend school due to emotional upset, worry or anxiety.<sup>1</sup> School refusal can be associated with poor mental health and a variety of anxieties relating to social situations, bullying, academic problems, post Covid-19 readjustment and separation from family. School refusal may begin in small periods of absence, however, without intervention, can result in prolonged absence from schooling and the curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

We understand school refusal conceptually differs from truancy as it is based in anxiety, psychological disorders or other mental health and wellbeing concerns held by the child or young person related to

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Victorian Government (n.d.) 'Victorian Attendance Legislation – Parent FAQs'. Retrieved from: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/parents/health/attendancefaqsparents.docx> ; Raising Children Network (n.d.) 'School refusal: children and teenagers'. Retrieved from <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/school-refusal/school-refusal>

<sup>2</sup> Beyond Blue (n.d.) 'School Refusal'. Retrieved from <https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/school-refusal>



school. Also, according to many definitions, unlike truancy, school refusal is also usually not hidden from families.<sup>3</sup> However, we also acknowledge and recognise in practice there is considerable overlap between truancy and school refusal.<sup>4</sup> The complexity related to accurate and consistent definitions and understandings of school refusal, including how students and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds understand and relate to these concepts, is an important consideration for the Committee.

Australia's youth population is increasingly diverse. Young people born overseas or with one or more parent born overseas make up around half of Australia's youth population and are a diverse cohort with varied needs and experiences.<sup>5</sup> As far as we know, there is very little documented evidence of the rates and nature of school refusal among young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Across CMY's programs we do not systematically capture and report on school refusal or its causes, hence we are unable to quantify or provide direct evidence of the depth and breadth of experiences among the young people we work with. However, what we know from our staff working with young people and families across Victoria is that school refusal among some cohorts of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds is a growing concern and warrants further exploration.

### **Response to TOR (a) the increasing number since the COVID-19 pandemic, of young people and their families who are experiencing school refusal;**

Emerging evidence suggests school refusal is on the rise.<sup>6</sup> Due to their particular experience of a range of intersecting factors, including racism and poorer mental health outcomes, some multicultural young people in Victoria are at a higher risk of school refusal. Understanding the rates and experiences of school refusal among this cohort is essential to developing relevant and appropriate responses tailored to their needs.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds represent an incredibly diverse youth population – unfortunately, data relating to school attendance and educational outcomes often collapses these young people into a homogenous cohort that can obscure relevant individual or group experiences and issues related to school refusal. For example, young people who have migrated to Australia via the skilled migration stream from main English-speaking countries with their family can be combined in a 'newly arrived' or 'migrant' category with young people from humanitarian backgrounds who may have little or no English language or family support, while young people who speak a 'language other than English' at home may include both those from affluent and highly educated families with established networks in Australia and those migrants from new and emerging communities with little economic or social capital here.

#### *Recommendations*

- The Committee investigate available data on rates and experiences of school refusal among young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Any data collection or analysis should consider

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<sup>3</sup> Beyond Blue (n.d.) 'School Refusal'; See also, School Refusal Australia (2019), Raising Children Network (n.d.) and Victorian Government (n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> Kearney (2018) cited in School Refusal Australia (2019) 'Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health', p. 5. Retrieved from: [http://rcvmhs.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/School\\_Refusal\\_Australia.pdf](http://rcvmhs.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/School_Refusal_Australia.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Centre for Multicultural Youth (2019) A young and multicultural Victoria - 2016 Census Report. Retrieved from <https://www.cmy.net.au/resource/a-young-and-multicultural-victoria-the-2016-census/>; ABS (2022) 2021 Census, QuickStats, Australia.

<sup>6</sup> Black, S. (2022) "Families can fall apart over this stuff": the children refusing to go to school', *The Guardian*, 26 September 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/sep/26/families-can-fall-apart-over-this-stuff-the-children-refusing-to-go-to-school>



the diversity within this broader student cohort to ensure we understand and respond to varied experiences and needs.

## **Response to TOR (c) the impacts and demands of the increasing case load on service providers and schools to support these students and their families;**

### *Support for parents and families*

A key protective barrier against school refusal is early intervention comprised of a partnership between the school, the young person and parents or families. Parents and families are the most influential factor in the partnership and require information and support to ensure the best outcomes for their young person.<sup>7</sup> Often the parents and families of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds face barriers to engage with schools and support services. This can include linguistic and digital illiteracy as well as cultural barriers.<sup>8</sup>

### *Recommendations*

- Services, with the support of government, ensure information surrounding school refusal is available in simple English, with the option of translation into community languages, to ensure that all parents and families are able to engage in the process of early intervention.
- Schools, with the support of government and services, support parents to better understand and seek support for school refusal by providing tailored information and guidance to parents and families of students from refugee and migrant backgrounds about:
  - the different categories of absenteeism, including school refusal, its early signs and various factors contributing to school refusal.
  - processes in school to address school refusal and supports available for young people and families within and outside of school.
  - school systems for reporting absentee information and support to utilise these.
- Schools and services adopt collaborative processes to resolving school refusal that:
  - include students and their parents and families in the solution making process to ensure solutions are culturally sensitive and informed, and are more likely to be effective and sustainable;
  - and, have young people at the centre. Young people with lived experience of school refusal should be encouraged and supported to contribute to the generation of knowledge and understanding of the issue, and be supported to co-design solutions.

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<sup>7</sup>Yap M, Cardamone-Breen M, Rapee R, Lawrence K, Mackinnon A, Mahtani S, Jorm A (2019) 'Medium-Term Effects of a Tailored Web-Based Parenting Intervention to Reduce Adolescent Risk of Depression and Anxiety: 12-Month Findings From a Randomized Controlled Trial', *J Med Internet Res*, 21(8):e13628. Retrieved from: <https://www.jmir.org/2019/8/e13628/>

<sup>8</sup>Centre for Multicultural Youth (2016) 'Opening the school gate.' Retrieved from : <https://www.cmy.net.au/resource/opening-the-school-gate-engaging-multicultural-families-in-schools/>



### *Support for young people*

We understand that school refusal is closely linked with poor mental health, and would highlight to the Committee that poor mental health is experienced by many young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds differently and disproportionality to their peers. For example, mental health services are underutilised by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds despite this cohort experiencing particular vulnerabilities to mental ill-health.<sup>9</sup> The current mental health system is also not perceived or experienced by many young people as culturally relevant or safe, and is failing to meet them where they are at.

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated many of the factors that contribute to ill-mental health of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, including experiences of racism.<sup>10</sup> Mental health is not only affected by socioeconomic, psychological and biological factors, but also by environmental factors such as discrimination and exclusion.<sup>11</sup> Extensive research highlights a strong relationship between racism and negative health and wellbeing outcomes for young people, including depression, anxiety or psychological distress.<sup>12</sup> A positive sense of self, cultural identity and belonging increases resilience, whereas alienation or marginalisation increases the risk of mental illness.<sup>13</sup>

As the issue of school refusal is multilayered it can require professional mental health intervention. In certain situations, intervention from a professional psychologist or psychiatrist is critical. While necessary, availability and access to mental health services is limited due to the long waiting periods. For migrant and refugee young people this can further exacerbate pre-existing barriers in accessing mental health services.<sup>14</sup>

We must be proactively supporting the mental wellbeing of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and addressing social determinants that contribute to mental ill-health, including racism.

### *Recommendations*

- Services are available to students, and their parents and families, at an earlier stage of disengagement. Currently, Victorian support services engage with young people and families at 70 percent of disengagement from school.<sup>15</sup> Evidence however shows that that support should be introduced earlier at regular 10 percent absenteeism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Centre for Multicultural Youth (2020) 'Responding Together : Multicultural young people and their mental health' Retrieved from : <https://www.cmy.net.au/resource/responding-together/>

<sup>10</sup> Biddle, N, Gray, M & Yung Lo, J (2020), The experience of Asian-Australians during the COVID-19 pandemic: Discrimination and wellbeing, Australian National University. Available from [https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/11/The\\_experience\\_of\\_Asian-Australians\\_during\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic.pdf](https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/11/The_experience_of_Asian-Australians_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> World Health Organization. (n.d.). Social exclusion. Available from: [https://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/themes/social\\_exclusion/en/](https://www.who.int/social_determinants/themes/social_exclusion/en/)

<sup>12</sup> VicHealth. (2014). *Racism and its links to the health of children and young people*, Carlton: VicHealth.

<sup>13</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2010) cited in CMY (2014), *Mind Matters: The Mental health and Wellbeing of Young People from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds*, Carlton, Centre for Multicultural Youth.

<sup>14</sup> For more on this see, CMY (2019) Submission to the Royal Commission into Mental Health in Victoria. <http://rcvmhs.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/CMY.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> See Navigator Program information at <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/navigator-program/policy>

<sup>16</sup> Daniel B. Johnsen , Johanne J. Lomholt, David Heyne, Pia Jeppesen, Morten B. Jensen, Wendy K. Silverman, Mikael Thastum (2022) 'Sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of youths and parents seeking psychological treatment for school attendance problems', Plos ONE (Jan. 2022). Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261449>



- Schools adopt whole-of-school approaches to improving cultural responsiveness of mental health and wellbeing support in schools, such as:
  - Working and learning partnerships between youth mental health providers, multicultural youth workers, refugee mental health specialists and education welfare staff to better meet the needs of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
  - Supporting multicultural youth worker outreach within schools and referrals to culturally appropriate mental health supports outside of school. (We recognise that this is dependent on the availability of such supports and believe this can be address by increased funding for multicultural youth worker roles in mainstream mental health services and multicultural-specific youth mental health workers in multicultural youth focused organisations.)
- Schools adopt whole-of-school approaches to combat racism with tailored approaches for primary and secondary schools.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to these recommendations, we would also encourage the Committee to engage young people and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and those working with them, in the inquiry process to learn directly from their experiences and inform recommendations to government.

Finally, the Committee may wish to refer to our recent submissions and policy papers in the areas of mental health, racism and COVID-19 impacts to further understand the issues and concerns we have raised in relation to school refusal. These include:

- [CMY submission to the Royal Commission into Mental Health in Victoria](#)
- [CMY policy paper with Orygen: Responding together - Multicultural young people and their mental health](#)
- [CMY report: Hidden cost – Young multicultural Victorians and COVID-19](#)
- [CMY report: COVID-19 Insights –Key issues and recommendations from CMY’s work with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria](#)

Should you require further information or clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,

Carmel Guerra OAM  
Chief Executive Officer

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<sup>17</sup> Centre for Multicultural Youth ‘Schools standing up to racism’ Retrieved from : <https://www.cmy.net.au/schools-standing-up-to-racism/>