

The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters



Submission to the Senate Inquiry by
the Home Education Network

Going to school is an expectation that society puts on children and parents. Most children cope with this expectation, but some cannot.

‘School refusal’ (School Can’t) is a common precursor to families choosing to home educate their children. This often comes after years of parents and children persisting in coming up with strategies to mitigate the anxiety and stressors that have led to School Can’t, and/or attempting to reintegrate children back into a school setting (mainstream as well as alternative settings).

About 60% of home educated children who have been removed from mainstream education have exhibited emotional distress related to school attendance (Slater et al., 2022).

Terms of Reference Item (b): Effect of School Can’t on young people and their families, and impacts on employment and financial security

Causes of School Can’t are varied, and include physical and mental health issues (including anxiety), disability and behavioural issues (Watterston & O’Connell, 2019). Children with disabilities are over-represented in the School Can’t cohort (Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Naylor et al., 1994). The implications for possible discrimination in the right to access quality education against children with disabilities is clear.

Home education can provide access to that quality education for children who cannot go to school, but this comes at a high financial cost. Over 85% of Australian home educated children receive no funding to assist with education costs (Slater et al., 2022). The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) payment is hard to obtain, and does not cover the education costs for many children (Slater et al., 2022).

In addition to the extra costs that must be covered by families, the majority suffer an additional loss of income, in most cases well over \$30,000 per annum, and in at least one third of families in excess of \$50,000 (Slater et al., 2022). The financial stress on many home educating families is real.

Children with disabilities are over-represented in the Australian home education community (Slater et al., 2022). The lack of financial support and loss of income therefore

disproportionately impact a vulnerable group of children and their families, who are trying to mitigate the effects of School Can't and provide their children with a quality education that the mainstream education system is unable to provide.

Terms of Reference Item (e): Any other related matters

Children who become disengaged from mainstream education and become part of the "School Can't" cohort are at risk of becoming detached from education altogether (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019). Given that we do not have enough alternative schools/settings to pick up detached school aged young people when they detach from school (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019), home education could be recommended as a viable alternative, and as a way to re-engage young people in learning, education, and the wider community. Unfortunately, there is not enough knowledge in the mainstream education system about what home education is, and what it isn't. This often means that it is not suggested as a valid option for families to explore.

Home education is currently not considered, recommended nor supported by mainstream as an option. We have countless examples within the home education community of children who have been disengaged and detached from education, who have thrived when they have settled into home education. Some of these children have remained in home education long term, and others have reintegrated back into the mainstream education system after some time in the home education community.

Home education allows children to rediscover their love of learning, to find what works for them and how they want to direct their own learning. Autonomy is a wonderful, empowering experience. They can pursue their interests, in a calm, relaxed environment, make connections with other families in the home education community, and interact at a level that suits them. This leads to positive outcomes (O'Hagan et al., 2021), and their education trajectory can return to a path that leads to a fulfilling, productive and engaged life (Gray & Riley, 2015).

Conclusions

- Children with disabilities are over-represented in the School Can't cohort
- There is inadequate provision and availability of alternative schools/settings to provide for young people who have detached from mainstream education
- Home education can improve outcomes for young people who are disengaged or detached from mainstream education
- Home education should be recommended and supported as a viable alternative for children in the School Can't cohort
- Home education comes at a financial cost for families, as well as having implications for loss of income
- Broader financial support should be considered for home educating families

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