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# Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters

December 2022

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## Introduction

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) provides this submission to inform the *Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters*.

QCEC is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schooling in Queensland. This submission is provided on behalf of the five Diocesan Catholic school authorities and 17 Religious Institutes and other incorporated bodies which, between them, operate a total of 313 Catholic schools that educate more than 157,000 students in Queensland.

Catholic education in Queensland is committed to the holistic development of each student's academic, spiritual, social, emotional and physical needs. Queensland Catholic schools have a strong commitment to student diversity, inclusion and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Recognising that school refusal is a challenging and increasingly prevalent concern for students across all jurisdictions and sectors, QCEC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to discussions that seek to prioritise the engagement of children and young people in supportive educational experiences that optimise the strengths of every student. The following submission addresses the questions posed by the Inquiry.

## 1. The increasing number since the COVID-19 pandemic, of young people and their families who are experiencing school refusal

### a. Trends

QCEC is aware that school attendance has been declining, albeit at different rates, in all sectors and jurisdictions since 2016. Whilst it is not possible to identify the percentage of absenteeism that is directly attributable to school refusal, reports from Catholic School Authorities are that this represents an increasing concern.

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<sup>1</sup> [20190819-Amended-IP-Position-Statement.pdf \(qcec.catholic.edu.au\)](#)

In line with national trends<sup>2</sup> Queensland Catholic sector attendance data suggests that Years 7 to 10 represent the greatest risk in terms of declining student attendance rates. Similarly, Queensland Catholic sector data is reflective of national concerns that identifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as having lower attendance rates when compared to the non-Indigenous student population.<sup>3</sup> Within the Queensland Catholic sector, attendance is routinely higher for students attending schools in the highest ICSEA bands, compared to students attending schools in the middle and lowest ICSEA bands. However, unlike national data that suggests students attending very remote schools are more at risk of non-attendance when compared with students attending remote schools,<sup>4</sup> the Queensland Catholic sector has higher attendance in very remote communities (comparative to remote communities). This likely reflects that within the Queensland Catholic sector, all very remote schools are Years P-6 and as previously stated, attendance rates tend to decline during secondary years.

*b. Limitations to data sets*

School attendance data is collected by the Australian Government's Department of Education which then provides the data to the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA).<sup>5</sup> School attendance data provides some insights into understanding the prevalence of school refusal, however there are several limiting factors relating to this data set that need to be acknowledged. This includes the fact that school attendance data is specific to full-time students in Year 1 to 10 and does not describe the attendance of senior secondary students (nor students no longer enrolled in school or attending distance education). Advice from Queensland Catholic School Authorities is that attendance data does not differentiate non-attendance arising from school refusal, as distinct from other causes for absenteeism. It is also important to note that school refusal is not singularly measured by absenteeism data, with late attendance/early departures plus time spent at school in non-learning spaces (e.g., sick bay<sup>6</sup>) also of potential concern. For example, ACARA states that 'Any student day where the absence recorded is less than or equal to 2 hours it is to be reported as a whole day attended.'<sup>7</sup>

The lack of available accurate data regarding instances of absenteeism due to school refusal is reflective of the challenges in this space. QCEC suggest that progressing the unique student identifier potentially would enable a more robust picture of student enrolment, attendance and ultimately, assist in identifying those students who may benefit from additional supports. Consideration could also be given to options to improve the accuracy of data around absenteeism due to school refusal, as opposed to absenteeism due to other factors (e.g., illness or medical appointments). This would assist in better understanding the nature of the issue; the challenges experienced by students, their families and schools; and better inform potential strategies to address these challenges.

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<sup>2</sup> [Student attendance \(acara.edu.au\)](https://www.acara.edu.au/student-attendance)

<sup>3</sup> See Ibid

<sup>4</sup> [School student engagement and performance - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/school-student-engagement-and-performance)

<sup>5</sup> [Help · SchoolsHub Portal \(education.gov.au\)](https://www.education.gov.au/help-schoolshub-portal)

<sup>6</sup> See [Understanding school refusal | headspace](#)

<sup>7</sup> [national-standards-for-student-attendance-reporting---third-edition.pdf \(acara.edu.au\)](https://www.acara.edu.au/national-standards-for-student-attendance-reporting---third-edition.pdf)

*Recommendation 1: That work continue on the Unique Student Identifier to better support data relating to the status of a student's enrolment.*

## **2. How school refusal is affecting young people and their families and the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents<sup>8</sup> and carers**

The term 'school refusal' refers to a broad array of non-attendance that can arise due to a range of causes. In most instances, it will be accompanied by a level of distress for the student and their family, as well as potential impacts upon the young person's functioning. Whilst this submission acknowledges that the employment and financial security of the parent will influence and be influenced by the impacts of school refusal, this submission is focused on responses that are informed by the circumstances of most relevance to schools.

### *a. Reasons for refusal*

Students may seek to avoid school for a range of reasons. These include concerns specific to the school environment which include inability (or perceived inability) to adequately access the curriculum, anxiety specific to academic achievement, disengagement from learning, disconnection from school and peers, feeling unsafe within the school on account of gender or sexuality, conflict and bullying and other reasons. Avoidance may also result from factors external to the school including insecure housing, addiction (illicit and legal substances, gaming) and interactions with the criminal justice system. Some students do not seek to avoid school as much as they seek to remain at home. Examples include attempting to 'protect' family members from domestic violence, accompanying a non-English speaking family member to appointments, caring for a parent or performing caring roles when childcare is financially inaccessible.

School refusal is not a mental illness however, it is referenced in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5<sup>th</sup>) edition as arising from social anxiety<sup>9</sup> or being a potential consequence of gender dysphoria.<sup>10</sup> It is acknowledged that many students who present with school refusal also experience mental illness,<sup>11</sup> with anxiety being a common co-occurrence. In addition to these concerns, some students may avoid school due to the changes that have occurred since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a desire to minimise exposure to COVID-19, increased access to and a preference to engage with remote learning options<sup>12</sup> and more parents able to supervise at-home learning due to changes in their own working arrangements. For these reasons and those listed above, QCEC recommends consideration be given to supporting schools provide a greater range and availability of learning options. In particular, schools might consider increased access to blended learning opportunities such that students may benefit from the pastoral supports and accountability that accompanies face-to-face attendance whilst also supporting student and family choice with regards to remote curriculum delivery. In a smaller number of instances there is likely to be demand for the provision of remote schooling options, however, these

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<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this submission, the term 'parent' is inclusive of a parent, carer or guardian.

<sup>9</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.), p.194.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p.455.

<sup>11</sup> [School refusal - Be You](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Queensland homeschooling registrations increase by 69 per cent - ABC News](#)

should be coupled with appropriate pastoral care supports and accountabilities for schools, students and families who provide and access these options.

*Recommendation 2: That consideration be given to enabling greater access to hybrid and remote schooling options, along with adequate pastoral supports and systems that ensure accountability on behalf of both schools and students/families.*

*b. Impact on young people*

Students who experience school refusal often experience distress at the thought of attending school. This is particularly the case for those students who struggle to separate from a parent. QCEC acknowledges that this is a challenging and at times, traumatic experience for some students and their families and acknowledges the work of Catholic School Authorities and other education providers seeking to provide supportive interventions in this space.

Students and parents experiencing school refusal can also experience varying degrees of shame which can lead to a break down in the rapport with the school. A lack of trust can develop between the school and family, which in turn can contribute to the student being enrolled in a sequence of multiple schools. In more challenging instances, frequent movement between schools and school systems can result in the child being 'enrolled' in school however, it does not guarantee that the student is engaged and attending school. Thus, a pattern develops in which the student remains enrolled until attention is focused upon the lack of attendance or engagement, prompting the family to make an alternative enrolment. Repetition of this cycle risks a student being disengaged from school for lengthy periods, potentially years, whilst not raising any of the usual alarms that arise when a student has persistent non-attendance.

Students who miss school regularly, generally experience a range of negative outcomes. Reduced attendance impacts students academically and socially.<sup>13</sup> It is less frequently acknowledged that repeated absences also result in reduced exposure to pastoral care and personal development opportunities, extra-curricular pursuits and community forming events such as camps or carnivals. Due to the role of the school in facilitating opportunities for social connectedness and support, school represents a protective factor for most students.<sup>14</sup> Schools employ staff from a range of professional backgrounds and all staff are required to undertake mandatory annual child protection training. As such, the school environment offers attending students' consistent interactions with trusted and caring adults who have the skill set to monitor for any risks of harm. The importance of this is heightened for a smaller proportion of students who experience a range of risk factors that make them more vulnerable to abuse or neglect. Catholic School Authorities report that unfortunately, these at-risk students are often the same students who are over-represented within the school refusal population.

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<sup>13</sup> [attendance-matters.pdf \(aitsl.edu.au\)](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/attendance-matters.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [Risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect | Australian Institute of Family Studies \(aifs.gov.au\)](#); [Risk and Protective Factors | Child Abuse and Neglect | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC](#)

c. *Impact upon family*

Family experience of school refusal will be influenced by a range of factors including family composition, resourcing and vulnerabilities.

Recognising that responses to school refusal will usually involve engaging with the student's parent/s, it is important to recognise the potential for family structures and dynamics to influence the quality and quantity of engagement. Starting with the composition of the family (i.e., number of adults and siblings, age and developmental stage of siblings), it is acknowledged that a single parent with few social supports is more likely to face significant demands upon their time comparative to a two-parent family, or a parent with extended family support. The experience of a parent supporting a child with school refusal can be stressful and exhausting. This is especially so in instances whereby a parent cares for a child with special needs, young children and/or multiple children with challenging behaviours. In the case of two parent families, there will often be varying degrees of uniformity between parents with respect to how they respond to school refusal. Significant differences between parents with respect to approaches and attitudes towards school refusal, can result in conflict, especially as the issue becomes more engrained. Where the conflict includes domestic and family violence, it can be especially challenging for the young person to feel they can leave the family home to attend school for lengthy periods, thereby re-enforcing the school refusal behaviour.

It is important to be cognisant of the different human and social capital families can draw up on when trying to support a young person who is refusing to attend school. Parents with access to greater financial resources are more likely to have capacity to pay the gap fees associated with medical or allied health services, thus increasing the range of supports available to their child and themselves. In terms of accessing such supports, parents who have a degree of flexibility with regards to their employment or source of income are more likely to be able to schedule the time required – often during business hours – to attend school or medical/allied health appointments. Parents with flexible work arrangements are also more likely to have the ability to ensure that their child is supervised during what would otherwise be a school day. The importance of flexibility in the workplace is particularly relevant for those families in which all caregivers are committed on a full-time basis to working outside of the home. Similarly, capacity to access the school and relevant supports is influenced by ease of access to transport, whether that be a private travel or robust public transport network.

Some parents experience challenges that impact their capacity to support their child's attendance at school. These challenges include the impact of significant parental mental illness or chronic substance abuse as both have the potential to limit the parent's insight into the severity of the child's school refusal. Some parents may unfortunately experience a significant grief and loss response to the absence of their child, that reduces their capacity to hold in mind competing priorities for a period of time, for example the desire for the child to be "safe with them" versus attending school. Another example includes the impact of intergenerational unemployment on school attendance.<sup>15</sup> Whilst the potential impact of this will vary within families, Catholic School Authorities report that families experiencing intergenerational unemployment are more likely to report reduced capacity and/or confidence to support their child with academic challenges, provide access to resources such

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<sup>15</sup> [Australia's children, Attendance at primary school - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australia's-children-attendance-at-primary-school)

as books and electronic devices, and in some instances, there are a range of views regarding the importance of education. In response, many schools attempt to support families with referrals and access to relevant supports.

The vast majority of parents are invested in their child attending school and will invest significant resources in supporting their child to do so, despite the many challenges outlined above. Although it is the developmental task of the adolescent to individuate from their parent, in the instance of school refusal, this autonomy of decision making by the young person can present in extreme forms. It is worth noting two commonly reported scenarios that appear to reduce a parent's capacity to influence the young person's decision making. These include that the student experiencing school refusal may also have a mental illness. Catholic School Authorities advise that reports of self-harm and suicidal ideation amongst students of primary age are increasing. Some parents report they would like more support to understand how to respond to a student experiencing distress. Often parents report that they avoid directing their child to attend school for fear of further exacerbating a depressed mood or behavioural expression of distress. The reality of publicly funded child and adolescent mental health services is such that a student with established school refusal behaviours may not be eligible for treatment if their mental illness was not assessed to meet criteria for intake into the mental health service. A second scenario refers to the impact that gaming or other online behaviours have on some student's engagement and attendance at school.<sup>16</sup> The World Health Organisation has identified gaming disorder as an addictive behaviour.<sup>17</sup> For some students, gaming represents an alternative activity to engage with during a school day. Problematic gaming has been linked to adverse sleep patterns.<sup>18</sup> Poor sleep patterns have the capacity to result in partial or whole days of missed schooling. As such, the extent of gaming and other online behaviours is increasingly being seen as contributing to school refusal.

### **3. The impacts and demands of the increasing case load on service providers and schools to support these students and their families**

Schools are acutely aware of the importance of providing support to students and families experiencing school refusal. Recent years has seen an increased demand by students and families for support from medical, allied health and specifically, mental health services. The following outlines how schools provide support both within the school itself and when working with external agencies.

#### *a. School responses*

School refusal is "Multifacted, complex and difficult to treat."<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, schools provide a range of proactive approaches that seek to encourage student engagement. These include high quality education focused on growth and development of the student, strong partnerships with families and community,<sup>20</sup> access to a differentiated curriculum (where appropriate), wellbeing and

<sup>16</sup> [Problem gaming leading to aggression, school refusal and self-harm | SchoolTV](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Addictive behaviours: Gaming disorder \(who.int\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> Kristensen JH, Pallesen S, King DL, Hysing M, & Erevik EK. (2021). Problematic gaming and sleep: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Front Psychiatry*, 12. doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2021.675237. PMID: 34163386; PMCID: PMC8216490.

<sup>19</sup> Ek., H & Eriksson., R. (2013). Psychological factors behind truancy, school phobia, and school refusal: A literature study. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, 35(3), 228-248. DOI: 10.1080/07317107.2013.818899

<sup>20</sup> [Choosing a School – QCEC](#)

pastoral care programs. In addition, schools seek to provide sensitive and timely responses to reports of bullying, as well as established and accessible conflict resolution processes.

Within schools there are a number of different role holders involved in supporting students who experience school refusal. Interventions might include supporting a student to transition from the car into school, monitoring of attendance, developing return to school plans, liaising with external health professionals, differentiating curriculum and provision of additional and specific supports to students seeking and/or receiving mental health services. QCEC has previously provided feedback on the increasing case load and complexity being experienced by school counsellors, psychologists or guidance officers.<sup>21</sup> Challenges include reports of more students presenting with mental illness and dual diagnosis, reduced access to external support systems, as well as recruitment of qualified wellbeing staff.

*b. External service providers*

Catholic School Authorities have a range of responses and strategies that they utilise when supporting students demonstrating school refusal. This includes liaison with systems external to the immediate school itself. It is noted that 'Improving attendance requires a deep appreciation of the complex and myriad factors that influence student, family and community engagement.'<sup>22</sup> In instances of established presentations of school refusal, schools may see benefit in allocating a student a 'case manager' or member of staff who serves as the primary contact for attendance and engagement with the school curriculum. However, it needs to be acknowledged that this is resource intensive and staff may not be equipped to manage the many complex cases. In such instances staff may be responsible for engaging external service providers in case conference style meetings, thus the school often carries the burden of identifying the items of concern, seeking consent, organising the meeting and seeking expertise in matters external to school but ultimately directly impacting attendance and student learning. It is acknowledged that access to medical and mental health services often involves significant wait lists<sup>23</sup> and that some providers do not have ability or willingness to liaise with schools.

*Recommendation 3: That schools be adequately resourced to employ (or engage) staff who are skilled in understanding external support services and systems and working with parents.*

**4. How relevant state, territory and federal departments are working to monitor and address this growing school refusal challenge**

*a. Systemic responses*

At present there is no capacity to capture the progress of a student through multiple schools, systems or indeed, track when they have ceased attending school. As outlined above, a unique student identifier may assist with alerting School Authorities when a young person is no longer enrolled or attending school and act as a prompt to follow up and provide the necessary supports to assist the

<sup>21</sup> [20220204-Submission-Inquiry-into-the-Opportunities-to-Improve-Mental-Health-Outcomes-for-Queenslanders.pdf \(qcec.catholic.edu.au\)](#)

<sup>22</sup> [attendance-matters.pdf \(aitsl.edu.au\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> [20220204-Submission-Inquiry-into-the-Opportunities-to-Improve-Mental-Health-Outcomes-for-Queenslanders.pdf \(qcec.catholic.edu.au\)](#)



young person's wellbeing and re-engagement with learning. Furthermore, it is noted that in instances in which students cease to attend any school, it appears there is rarely any intervention from child safety (or Queensland Police Service).

*Recommendation 4: The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child requires primary education to be compulsory and available for all children, as such the intra-agency challenges associated with school refusal needs to be acknowledged and relevant government departments adequately resourced to respond in instances in which parents are unable or unwilling to make reasonable efforts to secure attendance of primary school aged students.*

School refusal cannot be considered a matter for the education system to address in isolation from other systems. In many instances there is a need for liaison between schools and medical/allied health professionals. The interface between the General Practitioner (GP) and the school is critically important. Many students who experience school refusal also present with physical complaints.<sup>24</sup> Students who are unable to attend school due to distressing physical symptoms may be more likely to seek support from a GP for the apparent physical ailment which can then in turn, provide an avenue to address the real reason behind the school refusal. A strengthening of the relationship and sharing of important information between the GP, the school and the family, would provide greater guidance to parents, assist in establishing expectations for students and assist schools to accommodate the student's needs during their absence and expected return. However, this approach is challenged by current wait times to see a GP and the gap fees that limit accessibility<sup>25</sup> especially when considering the nature of repeat appointments for this group of students experiencing school refusal. Furthermore, GPs are not currently funded to provide this level of consultation to schools.

*Recommendation 5: That consideration be given to establishing a Medicare item number to fund telephone consultation between medical practitioners and schools to support students experiencing school refusal (and other conditions impacting on their attendance).*

*Recommendation 6: That federal funding be provided to enable the placement of GP services in schools.*

## Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. This inquiry is most welcome as it considers the experiences and needs of those students who, by the very nature of the concern, are often out-of-sight and risk being out-of-mind. Should you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission, please contact Dr Shannon O'Gorman, Education Officer

**Dr Lee-Anne Perry AM**

Executive Director

<sup>24</sup> Havik, T., Bru, E., & Ertesvåg, S.K. (2015). Assessing reasons for school non-attendance. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 59 (3), 316–336. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2014.904424>

<sup>25</sup> [A new Medicare: Strengthening general practice \(grattan.edu.au\)](http://grattan.edu.au)