



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment
report:

The national trend of school refusal and related matters

APRIL 2024

Overview

The Australian Government (the Government) thanks the Senate Education and Employment References Committee (Committee) for its work on the inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters.

The Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to the inquiry and acknowledges and thanks those individuals who shared their personal experiences and the contribution they have made to this inquiry.

The Government is committed to ensuring that every Australian child enjoys the benefits of education. School refusal is a concern for the mental health and wellbeing impacts on young Australians educational engagement and attendance.

The response to the Committee's recommendations has been coordinated by the Department of Education, in consultation with the following Government agencies:

- Department of Health and Aged Care (DoHAC)
- National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
- Department of Social Services (DSS).

The Government recognises that working with states and territories and the non-government education sector is key to implementing effective and holistic policy improvements that respond to the issue of school refusal. While the Government plays a leadership role in setting and delivering on national priorities in school education, the administration of schools is the constitutional responsibility of state and territory governments. The Government acknowledges work is continuing across all sectors to address school refusal, as noted in the Committee's report. The Government will continue to work in partnership with states and territories to explore potential opportunities to improve school refusal issues, including progressing work through existing national education policy forums and intergovernmental architecture.

Language used

The Australian Government Response reflects the language and terminology used by the Committee. The Government understands that many view the term 'school refusal' as misrepresenting a student's absence from school as a deliberate choice. However, it notes the current lack of consensus around preferred terminology and has chosen to use the term 'school refusal' throughout this report.

The Government also respects that preferred ways of self-describing are highly personal choices for the autistic and wider neurodivergent community. This response will use identity first language to align with the language used by the Committee.

Recommendation 1

As an initial step in the broader school refusal research agenda, the committee recommends that Education Ministers task the Australian Education Research Organisation with research into:

- ***the drivers and prevalence of school refusal in Australia; and***
- ***the use, cost, and effectiveness of school refusal interventions used in Australia and overseas, including flexible approaches to school education.***

This research should inform the Australian Education Research Organisation's advice to Education Ministers on the causes of declining school attendance and evidence-based approaches to support educational outcomes (arising from the 27 February 2023 Education Ministers Meeting). It should also inform future school refusal research projects, as well as the development of national school refusal resources (see Recommendation 2). This research should also inform the establishment of a nationally agreed definition of school refusal (see Recommendation 6).

Agree in principle

The Australian Government recognises the importance of expanding the evidence base of school refusal research and the importance of establishing a strong foundation for which to base and inform future research and initiatives, such as a nationally agreed definition of school refusal.

In February 2023 Education Ministers, through the Education Ministers Meeting (EMM), commissioned the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) to investigate the causes of declining attendance and provide advice to Ministers on evidence-based approaches that support attendance. The Government notes that AERO's research into school attendance has already progressed. AERO's interim report was due to be provided to Education Ministers in late 2023, with the final report due to Education Ministers in the first half of 2024.

The Government will work within the existing EMM architecture to consider subsequent research into school refusal, which may build on AERO's findings in relation to school attendance. Further research activities may include consultation with youth mental health research organisations to share existing work in the school refusal space, or further research commissioned through EMM.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector to develop and promote resources about school refusal, once a nationally agreed definition has been established, for parents, teachers and school leaders.

These resources should be informed by the research undertaken by the Australian Education Research Organisation as part of Recommendation 1.

Noted

The Government acknowledges the responsibility of this recommendation is shared between the Government, state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector. The Government will continue to engage with state and territory governments and the non-government school sector, for example through Education Ministers Meeting, to respond to this recommendation.

The Government will continue to update the Student Wellbeing Hub with new resources on school refusal for parents, teachers and school leaders.

The Government funds the Student Wellbeing Hub, which provides a range of freely available information and resources for educators, students, parents and families to assist to create and maintain a safe and supportive school environment. The Student Wellbeing Hub includes resources on a range of topics, including mental health, physical wellbeing, bullying and cyberbullying, online safety and some existing resources on student attendance and school refusal. The Student Wellbeing Hub, hosted by Education Services Australia (ESA), is available at www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that state and territory governments review their child health and development screening programs to identify opportunities to improve early identification of autism, ADHD, specific learning disorders, and anxiety disorders, in order to provide the classroom support these students might need.

Noted

The Government acknowledges this recommendation falls within the responsibility of state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector and has referred this recommendation to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

The Government is committed to inclusive education and improving educational and mental health outcomes for all students. This is a key policy priority of *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031* (ADS) and the National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020–2030 for health outcomes.

Although child development screening is the responsibility of state and territory governments, the Government funds initiatives to support the assessment and diagnosis of mental health and developmental disorders in children, including but not limited to:

- Actions under the Early Childhood Targeted Action Plan of the ADS, which focuses on children from infancy to school age with disability or developmental concerns, their families, and carers.
- Funding pre-emptive early intervention pilots for infants with early signs of autism to provide strengths-based and family-based supports to young children aged 9–14 months of age and their families. The pilots will be delivered in partnership with selected states and/or territories.
- The National Early Childhood Program for children with disability or developmental concerns, which aims to support young children (aged 0 to 8 years) with newly identified disability or emerging developmental concerns and their parents and carers.
- The National Guidelines funded by DoHAC support states and territories to consider wellbeing in early childhood health checks being led by the National Mental Health Commission.
- Head to Health Kids Hubs funded by DoHAC provide free multidisciplinary assessment and support for children 0–12 years and their families.
- The Department of Education's Positive Partnerships program and Starting School resources hosted on the Student Wellbeing Hub website support school-aged autistic students, and families and teachers of autistic children.
- Be You funded by DoHAC assists educators to promote mental health and wellbeing in the classroom and builds the mental health literacy of educators to identify when children need support and know where to go for assessment and supports.
- DoHAC's National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health upskills professionals to identify, assess and support children at risk of mental health conditions.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector identify opportunities for earlier identification of students at risk of school withdrawal, particularly at key school transition points. This may include—but should not be limited to—analysis of school absence data and the use of screening tools.

The committee encourages state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector to broaden data collection to account for differences in attendance. The committee acknowledges that there is a difference between absences due to truancy, school withdrawal, or school refusal.

Noted

The Government acknowledges this recommendation falls within the responsibility of state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector and has referred this recommendation to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector investigate ways to increase the flexibility of education delivery, including by:

- ***identifying ways to enhance flexibility in mainstream school settings for children going through school refusal;***
- ***facilitating easier access to distance education and home schooling for students experiencing school refusal; and***
- ***facilitating the provision of more alternative and specialist school settings that cater for students experiencing school refusal.***

Noted

The Government acknowledges this recommendation falls within the responsibility of state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector and has referred this recommendation to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that Education Ministers develop a national action plan on school refusal (national action plan), informed by research that has been conducted by the Australian Education Research Organisation (see Recommendation 1). The national action plan should be developed within 12 months and should include:

- a nationally agreed definition and terminology for school refusal;***
- a nationally consistent approach to recording school absences, as well as an agreed approach to public reporting of school refusal absences;***
- a nationally agreed approach to messaging in relation to school attendance, school refusal, and the recording of school absences;***
- a nationally agreed approach to provide support to parents and students going through school refusal by increasing accessibility and awareness of alternative methods of schooling;***
- a national commitment to prioritise implementation of the Unique Student Identifier (USI) and agreement about how the USI will be used to identify students at risk of school refusal, facilitate information sharing about those students, and support research into school refusal;***
- nationally agreed research priorities, as well as an information sharing and dissemination strategy, particularly to reduce stigma and support understanding of school refusal;***
- agreement that a multi-tiered system of support approach be used to guide approaches to, and investments in, school refusal interventions (noting this would be implemented largely at a local level); and***
- agreed roles and responsibilities, an implementation timeline, key performance indicators, and a monitoring and evaluation strategy.***

Development of the national action plan should be a collaborative process involving health and education professionals, service providers, and people with lived experience of school refusal—with a particular focus on neurodivergent young people and those with mental health challenges. The national action plan should also align with existing national strategies, where appropriate, and be informed by the recommendations of this inquiry.

The committee encourages the expert review panel on the National School Reform Agreement to take into consideration the recommendations of this report.

Noted

The Government notes this recommendation. Pending the findings of research conducted by AERO, the Government will refer this matter to EMM for discussion.

The Government shared this report with the Expert Panel to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

The Government recognises the lead role of state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector play in the delivery of education and operation of schools. The Government will explore the feasibility of the development of a national plan through the EMM architecture, within the timeframe expressed by the Committee. A

national action plan that outlines the above requirements would provide clear policy direction for school systems and the wider education system and be complementary to the arrangements between the Government and state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector.

In December 2022, Education Ministers agreed on a model to roll-out the Unique Student Identifier (USI) nationally to all school students. Ministers also agreed that the baseline use of the Schools USI will be to support the transfer of student information when individuals move between schools and systems through the inclusion of the USI in the agreed data set under the Student Data Transfer Protocol once operating, and that no further uses will be considered by Ministers until the initiative is fully implemented and every school student has a national USI.

In line with Closing the Gap Priority Reform 1, work on the national action plan should proceed in partnership with First Nations people and their representative organisations such as consultation with Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG), the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Council (NATSIEC) and SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC) to develop an understanding of the depth of the issue and include First Nations perspectives into strategies. AERO research should ensure consideration of First Nations students' experience of school refusal to help provide evidence to ensure that the National Action Plan is relevant for First Nations students.

Recommendation 7

The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to identify ways to improve awareness and understanding of school refusal—once a nationally agreed definition has been established—within the health sector, with a particular focus on general practice, psychiatry, psychology and other relevant allied health fields.

Once a nationally agreed definition has been established, the committee would welcome the option to embed school refusal training within relevant tertiary education courses, as well as ongoing professional development requirements.

To that end, the committee encourages the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership to work with state and territory regulatory authorities to ensure teacher education and training courses incorporate modules on school refusal, once a nationally agreed definition has been established. This could include modules for ongoing professional development requirements.

Supported in-principle

The Government acknowledges responsibility of this recommendation sits with both the Australian Government and state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector and has referred this recommendation to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

The Government supports this recommendation in-principle, noting the course content of initial teacher education (ITE) programs are set under the nationally agreed *Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures* (Accreditation Standards). ITE programs should prepare ITE students to meet the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, which include standards relating to creating and maintaining supportive and safe learning environments. This approach to ITE accreditation sets national quality standards while allowing higher education providers and schools the flexibility to design and deliver teacher training to meet local needs and circumstances.

The Government will refer proposed amendments of the Accreditation Standards to EMM for discussion, as responsibility for setting priorities for teacher professional learning sits with state and territory teacher regulatory authorities and government and non-government education departments.

The Government, through the DoHAC, is responsible for the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health and works with vocational and tertiary education providers in health and social services to integrate resources around child mental health into their respective curriculums. The National Centre also helps to build capacity of health workforces to support children's mental health and wellbeing, through provision of free, online, evidence-based training, resources and information and has reach across the health sector that can be leveraged and built upon to disseminate training and resources regarding school refusal once developed.

Be You funded by the DoHAC works with tertiary institutions to incorporate mental health and wellbeing resources into their courses to increase mental health literacy amongst pre-service educators.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector review and update current messaging about the importance of school attendance to ensure that it:

- reflects a nuanced view of attendance that does not further alienate families dealing with school refusal; and***
- provides information about how to access support for attendance difficulties such as school refusal; and***
- recognises that for some students, where attendance is not possible, that delivering tailored educational outcomes through an alternative method of schooling is the priority.***

Noted

The Government acknowledges this recommendation falls within the responsibility of state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector and has referred this recommendation to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

The Government through the DoHAC funds the Parenting Education and Support Program, delivered by Triple P International, which includes a marketing and campaigning aspect focused on combating stigma around parents seeking to build parenting strategies to support their child's wellbeing. The Raising Healthy Minds app, delivered by the Raising Children Network, provides parents and carers with mental health literacy information to better equip them to support children's social and emotional wellbeing, as well as strategies for supporting their own self-care and family wellbeing.

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector work together to develop resources to support the use of trauma-informed practices in schools, so they can implement best-practice methods to support students to continue with their education.

Noted

The Government acknowledges this recommendation falls within the responsibility of state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector and has referred this recommendation to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

The Government recognises the importance of trauma-informed practices in schools and acknowledges the use of best-practice methods to support all students, including neurodiverse and First Nations students. The Government will explore opportunities to support state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector to implement best-practice methods.

Using a trauma-informed approach is addressed in one of the two professional-learning modules being developed by Education Services Australia (ESA) to support the Get Ready to Learn online resource in the Autism section of the Student Wellbeing Hub. The second module, called Supporting Emotional Regulation, includes two sub-modules:

- Trauma and emotional dysregulation – What can cause students to express big emotions or experience behavioural challenges? And how do environmental or sensory triggers in the classroom play a role?
- Trauma-informed approach – You can support students who experience severe dysregulation by creating a safe environment, fostering relationships, and improving their emotional self-regulation skills.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector work together to develop and promote stable and ongoing resources to support effective family engagement. This should include the provision of specialist family engagement support staff in schools.

Noted

The Government acknowledges this recommendation falls within the responsibility of state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector and has referred this recommendation to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

Recommendation 9 of the Department of Education's *Next steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* (2021) states 'families and carers are the key partners with teachers in their children's learning and the Expert Panel recommends more resources be created for families and carers to understand what teaching best practice looks like'.¹ Recent parent engagement resources funded by the Government include:

- The Family-School Partnerships Framework was developed to promote and guide partnership building between parent and schools. The Framework includes supporting material, research insights, practical advice and a range of resources including fact sheets and case studies.
- Learning Potential, created in 2015, is a module based online resource developed specifically for parents to help them support their child's learning.
- Part of the Student Wellbeing Hub online modules includes topics for parents such as safety, bullying, interoception and decision making for parents to work with their child and the school to build a happy and safe learning community.
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) published in 2020 *Parent and Family Engagement – an implementation guide for school communities*. This resource provides school communities with practical guidance on better engagement and how to implement successful parent and family engagement practices, focusing on the 'how' rather than just the 'why'.

¹ Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (2021) *Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review*, Canberra: iv.

Recommendation 11

The committee acknowledges that the process of receiving a formal disability diagnosis is expensive and can have extended wait times. To this end, the committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector work together to identify and implement measures to build the capacity of schools to provide reasonable adjustments for students in line with the requirements of the Disability Standards for Education 2005. This could include the provision of additional specialist support staff in schools and/or providing teachers with the opportunity to acquire Universal Design in Learning skills through additional professional development.

Noted

The Government acknowledges the responsibility of this recommendation is shared between the Government, state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector. The Government has referred this to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

The Government acknowledges that all schools in Australia are required under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (the Standards) to provide reasonable adjustments for students with disability to enable access and participation in education, equal to their peers. The definition of disability in section 1.4 of the Standards is broad and covers a past, current, future or imputed disability. Students do not need to have a diagnosed disability to be protected under the Standards.

The Government, through the Department of Education, undertook a review of the Standards in 2020. The review found that students with disability had better experiences when their educators and education providers had a good understanding of the Standards. The Government is working with state and territory and non-government education authorities to implement the review recommendations, including strengthening the knowledge and capability of educators and providers in relation to the requirement of the Standards.

The Government has released resources including case studies and an animated explainer video to help schools better understand their legal and professional obligations to students with disability. They are available at www.nccd.edu.au/dse. New resources are available to provide teachers and school leaders with practical examples of supporting the inclusion of students with disability. The resources, developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) in consultation with disability and education organisations, are available at www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/supporting-students-with-disability.

The Government is investing \$29.1 billion for school recurrent funding in 2024. Of this, an estimated \$3.6 billion will be provided for the student with disability loading. The student with disability loading is based on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). The NCCD provides information about the number of students with disability in schools and the adjustments they receive. The NCCD groups school students with disability by the level of support they need to access and participate in learning. More information about the NCCD is available at www.nccd.edu.au.

Recommendation 12

The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to identify and promote effective models for collaboration between the education and health sectors in relation to school refusal.

Noted

The Government acknowledges the responsibility of this recommendation is shared between the Government, state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector. The Government has referred this to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

The Government will explore and discuss opportunities with state and territory governments to identify and promote effective models for collaboration between the education and health sectors related to school refusal. This may include through existing mechanisms of the EMM and the Health Ministers Meeting.

The importance of collaboration between health and education service providers to support children's mental health and wellbeing is highlighted in the Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Action 2.2d of the Children's Strategy specifically recommends that mental health professionals be required to communicate with educators and other service providers about a child's treatment and support plan, with the family's permission and subject to this being deemed clinically appropriate.

Collaboration between schools and health professionals is important given the links identified in the Committee's Report between school refusal and mental health concerns, and the need to conceptualise school refusal through a mental health lens. There is work to be done to determine how this collaboration would operate in practice. However, at a high level, the potential benefits of collaboration between the education and health sectors run both ways: educators and learning communities can refer children who are beginning to experience attendance difficulties or who are exhibiting signs of poor mental health to health providers for support; and health providers can notify educators when they identify mental health challenges in children and young people that may require additional classroom support to prevent or reduce school refusal.

Be You and the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health collaborate in relation to their respective work upskilling education, health and social services workforces. Additionally, the National Workforce Centre, delivered by Emerging Minds is developing a workforce package aimed at supporting partnerships between parents, educators and health professionals to be able to connect and communicate around children's mental health.

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to explore funding sources for an independent peer support network for families and schools going through school refusal to receive resources and support. This could include improving resources for parents, including a 'one-stop shop' for information about school refusal and the support options available to students and families.

The committee recognises the current situation where there is no nationally recognised school refusal advocacy and support group for parents. To this end, the committee encourages the Australian Government to consider the importance of such support groups for parents.

Noted

The Government acknowledges the responsibility of this recommendation is shared between the Government, state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector. The Government has referred this to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.

The Government acknowledges the importance of the lived experience of students, families and school communities in relation to school refusal. The Government also acknowledges the impact on parents and carers of families who experience school refusal, including the mental and physical health and wellbeing, financial and employment impacts. The Government recognises the importance of support groups for parents, particularly in relation to a complex and often misunderstood issue such as school refusal.

The Government will explore opportunities with state and territory governments to provide funding for independent peer support for families and schools experiencing school refusal.

Recommendation 14

The committee recommends that the Australian Government investigate increasing the number of subsidised mental health care visits for students experiencing school refusal.

Noted

The Government acknowledges this the importance of this recommendation and notes that support is available for all people with a diagnosed mental disorder under the Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative, funded by the DoHAC. Medicare rebates are available for up to 10 individual and 10 group mental health services per calendar year. More information on the Better Access initiative and eligibility requirements is available at www.health.gov.au/our-work/better-access-initiative#who-can-access-better-access-rebates.

People who have used all their Better Access services for the calendar year and need additional support may be eligible for other government funded services. The Government funds a range of free or low-cost services for people with or at risk of mental illness. These include regional services commissioned by Australia's 31 Primary Health Networks, a national network of Head to Health Adult Mental Health Centres. People can find contact details for their local PHN by visiting: www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/phn/your-local-phn.

Further, through the 2023–24 Budget, the Government is investing \$586.9 million in the mental health and suicide prevention system. This investment will lay the groundwork to make real, structural changes in response to the Better Access evaluation. It includes \$91.3 million to address critical shortages in the psychology workforce and \$17.8 million to upskill the broader health workforce in mental health. Improving the availability of the workforce will help ensure there is equity in service delivery, enabling longer-term reform.

Australian Greens Senators' Additional Comments

Recommendation 15

Students, and parents as their advocates, are best placed to speak to and guide their own experiences. For this reason, a national school refusal strategy should be guided by and responsive to, the lived experiences of kids going through school refusal.

Recommendation 16

It is clear that for many students going through school refusal, the persistent inflexibility of the education system is highly problematic. To enable these students to achieve the best possible education outcomes, education systems and institutions need to be supported to fully embrace inclusive education principles and be open and willing to adapt for them. The federal government should take leadership in embedding this flexibility into the public school system.

Recommendation 17

In order for schools and teachers to accommodate and meet the needs of students refusing to go to school, funding needs to reflect the challenges of school refusal. School refusal should be made a priority equity cohort in the National School Reform Agreement. This could be done by accounting for absences within the Schooling Resource Standard loadings, with more support offered to teachers and students that require focused support.

Recommendation 18

Given the exclusion of education from the National Disability Insurance Scheme, state governments cannot vacate the field for neurodivergent students, who are disproportionately affected by school refusal. State governments should review the policy support they provide neurodivergent children to receive a quality and inclusive education and ensure it is funded adequately given the absence of National Disability Insurance Scheme support.

Recommendation 19

In light of the immediate need for support for the thousands of students, parents, and carers experiencing school refusal, the already existing but entirely voluntary advocacy group, School Can't Australia, should be provided funding as a priority until Recommendation 13 of the committee's report is implemented.

Noted

The Government's position on the Australian Greens' Senators Additional Comments has been addressed in the response in Recommendations 3, 5, 6, 11 and 13.

The Government notes Recommendation 18 falls within the responsibility of state and territory governments and the Government has referred the report to state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector for consideration.