

INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL REFUSAL SUBMISSION

DATE 9 DECEMBER 2022

1. KEY POINTS

Independent Schools Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Senate inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal as this issue concerns all school sectors. ISA contributes the following key points in relation to this important inquiry:

- School refusal is evident in both primary and secondary-aged students and is often linked to anxiety and/or depression, disengagement from learning, bullying and other challenging social situations.
- School refusal impacts educational outcomes and may affect potential post school study or employment opportunities.
- COVID-19 has been a contributing factor to the growing rate of school refusal, particularly in relation to increased anxiety due to a range of factors such as lockdowns, vaccination mandates, mask wearing, family safety and personal health and wellbeing.
- Supporting students with school refusal, often associated with mental health conditions, has placed a strain on schools, families and external services. This additional burden on mental health services has resulted in longer wait times.
- Learning from home has become popular for some students following COVID-19 lockdowns. Independent schools report that some families now expect schools to provide learning online opportunities for their child experiencing school refusal.
- School refusal can affect parent and carer mental health, wellbeing and employment.
- School re-engagement following school refusal requires strong relationships and specialised support between schools and families.
- Key equity groups such as students with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have particular considerations related to school refusal.

2. ABOUT ISA

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISA represents 1,187 schools and over 667,000 students, accounting for approximately 16 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

ISA's major role is to bring the unique needs and contributions of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. A number of Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious

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values of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Quaker and Seventh Day Adventist schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other factors.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example Lutheran schools. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

3. ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION

ISA prepared this submission in response to the Senate Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal to provide an Independent school sector overview of the impact of school refusal.

ISA consulted with the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) in preparing this submission.

4. INTRODUCTION

Schools aim to provide a safe environment where students can connect and belong, playing an important role in student, staff and community wellbeing. Schools proactively develop strategies and programs to build student resilience and self-efficacy. Despite this, the rate of school refusal as evidenced in a broad range of Independent schools, is on the rise.

Concepts and definitions of school attendance problems (truancy, school refusal, school withdrawal and school exclusion) are used interchangeably. School refusal is generally characterised by a student's emotional upset at the prospect of going to school and is differentiated from other attendance problems such as truancy and school withdrawal. While teachers and school counsellors are sensitive to these differences this can lead to confusion and misunderstanding of student behaviour, risk factors and delay appropriate interventions and support.

What is particularly concerning to the Independent school sector is that when a student refuses to attend school, they miss out on essential learning and social opportunities. There may be several contributing factors why a young person refuses to attend school; experience of bullying, social anxiety, holidays or breaks from school, family disruptions or transitioning to a new school.¹

Independent schools report patterns of school refusal are evident in both primary and secondary students² and this issue is now occurring in younger children than was previously observed.

Some schools report that school refusal is more of an issue for males than females. However, it is not clear whether the range of issues which lead to school refusal affect all students equally regardless of gender, or whether the response to these issues is merely expressed differently.

Research commissioned by Independent Schools Australia highlights that poor student wellbeing affects school attendance, learning and academic outcomes and that students with a mental health condition can lag almost three years behind their peers by early secondary school.³

Independent schools report that students with anxiety and/or depression may display physical symptoms such as an upset stomach, fatigue and/or headaches⁴ adding to non attendance and its consequences.

Regular attendance at school matters. Educators and counsellors in Independent schools consistently report school refusal affects young people and children in four key ways:

- Reduced educational performance.
- Increased rate of school dropout.
- Increased depression and anxiety.
- Greater social isolation.⁵

They further suggest that long-term or chronic school refusal impacts on opportunities for future employment and may have a negative impact on a student's overall social and emotional wellbeing and development.

Independent Schools Australia recommends further research into school refusal issues to enable better understanding to develop targeted strategies

¹ beyondblue, "Help Your Teenager Transition Back to School" (beyondblue), accessed November 1, 2022, <https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/I'm-supporting-others/Children-and-young-people/how-to-help-your-teenager-transition-back-to-on-site-learning>; headspace, "Understanding School Refusal," accessed November 1, 2022, <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/supporting-a-young-person/school-refusal/>.

² Heyne et al., "School Refusal: Epidemiology and Management."

³ Kevin Reunions and Donna Cross, "Student and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health" (Independent Schools Australia, May 2022), <https://isa.edu.au/documents/report-wellbeing-of-students-and-staff/>.

⁴ Australian Government, Learning Potential, "School Refusal," accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.learningpotential.gov.au/articles/school-refusal>.

⁵ Australian Government, Learning Potential.

5. COVID-19

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

AISs report school refusal is a growing trend and note a link between the number and duration of COVID related lockdowns in the state or territory and an increase in school refusal. Where students were learning from home for several months, there were recurring avoidant behaviours from those previously engaging in school refusal. In addition, there were new school avoidance behaviours for students who had high attendance rates prior to COVID-19 lockdowns.

Some students experienced a sense of disconnect from school due to prolonged absence caused by COVID-19 lockdowns or isolation periods making it harder to return to school. It seems likely that social distancing, as well as school closures, may have had a greater negative effect on adolescents.⁶

For some students, vaccination mandates, mask wearing and health concerns caused additional anxiety.⁷ For students with existing mental health conditions, disruption to routine and increased anxiety appears to have contributed to increased school refusal once students could return to school following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

This was of particular concern for students in their final year of school.⁸ Anecdotally, AISs received many calls from schools seeking advice in supporting Year 11 and 12 students with attendance matters. Some schools reported challenges in navigating a range of complex student needs to achieve final school year requirements.

Prior to COVID-19, students would generally re-engage with school shortly after the implementation of an attendance improvement plan which put in place return to school strategies and expectations. Post COVID-19 lockdowns, progress has typically been slower as some students move gradually towards full-time attendance and others only attend part-time, or not at all.

With an enhanced understanding of school attendance problems, AISs report schools are recognising the importance of early intervention resulting in increased support for students with significant or chronic absenteeism and students with emerging patterns of school refusal. The intensity, complexity and frequency of planning required to support the growing number of students re-engage with school has increased, placing an even greater strain on school resources

Mental health and wellbeing

It has been widely reported, including for students attending Independent schools, that COVID-19 disruptions significantly impacted student wellbeing and increased the client load on support services. Research indicates that forty-six per cent of students are at risk of adverse effects on their social and emotional wellbeing due to home-based, online learning.⁹

⁶ Sophie H. Li et al., "The Impact of COVID-19 on the Lives and Mental Health of Australian Adolescents," *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 31, no. 9 (September 1, 2022): 1465–77, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01790-x>. p.1465

⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission, "Impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Young People Who Contact Kids Helpline," 2020, https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/ahrc_khL_covid-19_2020.pdf. p.23

⁸ N Brown et al., "Learning at Home during COVID-19: Effects on Vulnerable Young Australians" (Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, University of Tasmania, April 2020), https://www.utas.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1324268/Learning-at-home-during-COVID-19-updated.pdf. p.33

⁹ Brown et al.

Educators in Independent schools are also expressing concern that student learning gaps due to school disruption and the impact of lockdowns might not become apparent for some time¹⁰ particularly where school refusal increases and reinforces a young person's concerns and anxieties, making it more difficult to attend school over the long term.

After the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, AISs received a greater number of school requests for supporting students with eating disorders and school attendance related issues. School leaders noted an increase in the complexity of needs of students with poor school attendance, at times involving child protection issues and/or mental health conditions. Similar issues have also been raised by wellbeing leaders and counsellors that are part of AIS network groups.

These patterns are reinforced by the findings of Kids Helpline that reported between January and April 2020, thirty-five per cent of callers were first-time contacts¹¹ and that poor mental health resulting from COVID-19 restrictions was one of the most common matters raised.

Learning from home

A study by the Australian Human Rights Commission found that 20 per cent of young people surveyed raised concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their education.¹² In contrast, some respondents identified a preference for online learning because it had fewer distractions, more opportunity to relax or because they found social interactions at school stressful.¹³ Social anxiety is a likely contributing factor to the increase of school refusal post COVID-19 restrictions.

Independent schools are reporting a slight upturn in the number of families requesting a continuation of learning from home for their child, with some Independent schools actively investigating distance education options for targeted students including those suffering from social anxiety, to ensure students remain fully engaged in school.

Independent Schools Australia recommends continued studies to measure the ongoing impact of COVID-19 restriction measures on school refusal

6. PARENTS AND CARERS

How school refusal is affecting young people and their families and the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents and carers.

Independent school leaders and teachers report parent and carer anxiety typically increases when a child refuses to go to school, potentially placing additional pressure and strain on their employment and ability to maintain their own health and wellbeing. Independent schools report instances where parents' ability to engage in full time work is compromised, particularly for those parents and carers with younger children, who might need to negotiate flexible working arrangements or to work from home, and where additional financial burden is incurred where parents have to take time off work or pay for external health support.

Schools also report parents and carers often feel powerless and struggle to get their child to attend school with some parents and carers unable to take their child to school each day due to work and financial

¹⁰ "Independent Schools and Covid-19: A Story Worth Telling," Independent Schools Victoria, May 31, 2020, <https://is.vic.edu.au/blog/independent-schools-and-covid-19-a-story-worth-telling/>.

¹¹ Australian Human Rights Commission, "Impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Young People Who Contact Kids Helpline." p.8

¹² Australian Human Rights Commission. p.22

¹³ Australian Human Rights Commission. p.10

commitments. This is particularly so for single parents and carers, those who travel for work and those with limited external supports (such as family or friends) to assist with school drop-off.

Independent Schools Australia recommends that more proactive programs for parents and carers to understand and support school refusers to attend would be of benefit

7. SCHOOLS

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

Experience in Independent schools shows very clearly that systematic processes and protocols need to be in place to proactively monitor and identify the early warning signs of school refusal. Alignment across school teams (wellbeing, learning support, counsellors, school executive) is necessary. Early signs of school refusal can be missed. Typically, school refusal starts slowly then progresses quite quickly. It is at this point school staff and other service providers begin to intervene, collaborate and problem solve. However, when students are too disengaged, interventions become quite challenging.

School leaders have shared concerns about staff capacity and depth of training to respond appropriately to the increasing number of students with poor attendance.

Schools work hard to offer wrap-around support, partnering with families and carers and external support services in their attempt to re-engage students in their education.

Independent schools support staff such as counsellors, school chaplains and psychologists as well as external mental health professionals are under additional strain to accommodate the increased number of students experiencing school refusal. They report long waitlists for students to access external professional services, and difficulty in maintaining ongoing contact with mental health providers, making it challenging to determine appropriate next steps.

Independent Schools Australia recommends consideration be given to additional community and school based mental health services for young children and adolescents

8. STATE AND TERRITORY DEPARTMENTS

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

State, territory and federal departments and schools are working to address school refusal issues however, increased collaboration, knowledge and resourcing is necessary if we are to reduce the number of students experiencing school refusal.

Independent schools use a range of strategies and proactive measures to manage school refusal:

- Whole school wellbeing approaches, combined with ongoing communication about the importance of regular school attendance.
- Engage with students, families and carers to encourage school attendance by negotiating attendance plans and supporting implementation strategies for school return.
- Provide learning at home when necessary to maintain education outcomes, working to reduce barriers so students can return to school.

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- Encourage students to engage with professional help such as school or external mental health supports, youth workers or other supports if required.
- Modify school routine such as shorter school days and extended breaks, depending on individual student need.
- Increase in-school support and make appropriate adjustments such as more time with learning assistants, greater use of break out spaces such as sensory rooms, and increased access to staff such as counsellors, wellbeing officers or provide access to external health professionals.
- Reduce anxiety by maintaining a regular routine and advising the student in advance of any changes, such as a substitute teacher.

Schools continue to seek advice and professional learning from AISs to:

- Establish whole school proactive approaches for student engagement and wellbeing.
- Identify students who may benefit from additional support.
- Provide targeted and intensive supports for students when required.
- Understand the early signs, characteristics, reasons and progression of school refusal to and to develop proactive strategies.

Independent Schools Australia recommends an ongoing focus on collaboration between state, territory and federal departments and schools to address school refusal

Independent Special Assistance Schools

Independent special assistance schools play a critical role in supporting students with long term school refusal to re-engage in education, using a range of individualised and flexible strategies to increase attendance rates and reduce barriers to attend school. Many students who attend Independent special assistance schools are educationally disadvantaged and have not experienced success in mainstream schooling. These students are highly vulnerable as they may:

- live in residential care
- have experience of poverty, bullying, homelessness, discrimination or intergenerational unemployment
- be subject to domestic violence.

One Independent special assistance school reported that the provision of online learning during lockdown was highly problematic as many students did not have access to devices or the internet, or parent support to enable online learning. When lockdown measures lifted, it was challenging for some students to re-engage with school, therefore staff increased wrap-around support with a strong team approach to support each student's individual needs.

Independent Schools Australia recommends that there is much to be learnt from Independent special assistance schools in supporting students experiencing school refusal. They are working with some of most highly disengaged students with great success

9. OTHER RELATED MATTERS

Resourcing, school support and equity groups are important considerations when it comes to implementing policy to improve regular school attendance.

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Resourcing

AISs continue to assist schools in the provision of professional learning to understand the early signs, characteristics, reasons and progression of school refusal. The intensity and complexities of student needs and circumstances are increasing and resourcing at both school and sector levels to support school refusal is a significant challenge.

Ongoing and additional funding through the National School Chaplaincy Program and Student Wellbeing Boost has been welcomed by the Independent school sector to continue support for students experiencing school refusal, however there is increasing and ongoing demand for critical specialised assistance.

AIS Support

One example of AIS support to Independent schools is AISNSW's document, *Guide to School Attendance Requirements and Attendance Improvement Planning*. This document focuses on attendance requirements and planning processes, providing sample templates for schools to adapt and use. [Attendance Requirements and Improvement Planning.pdf \(aisnsw.edu.au\)](https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/attendance-requirements-and-improvement-planning.pdf)

AISNSW have engaged Associate Professor Lisa McKay Brown (Assistant Dean of Diversity and Inclusion from the University of Melbourne) to work with AISNSW Consultants who provide support to schools in school refusal matters. Lisa is highly regarded in this area and describes four 'types' of school attendance problems – truancy, school withdrawal, school refusal and exclusion and will present at AISNSW school professional learning workshops on attendance planning.

Equity groups

Re-engagement with school after significant absence is difficult for many students and can be particularly challenging for vulnerable students.¹⁴ Students from equity groups may exhibit a range of school refusal behaviours and require individualised re-engagement strategies.

Students with disability

In 2021, 18.9 per cent of enrolments at Independent schools were students with disability. There were 45 Independent special schools enrolling 3,284 students with disability and 93 Independent special assistance schools providing education for 11,361 students who have not experienced success in mainstream schooling; many of these are students with disability.

The impact of COVID-19 may be more pronounced for students with disability due to a range of factors causing increased anxiety about returning to school. School attendance problems may be exacerbated or masked due to social and/or developmental circumstances for some students with disability.

Anecdotally, AISs note that school refusal is particularly of concern for some students with social emotional disability and neurodivergent disorders and conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder as they may experience elevated anxiety levels about returning to school. However, school refusal can be evidenced across all disability categories and adjustment levels.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment in the Independent sector is diverse. In 2021, 2.5 per cent of enrolments in the Independent sector were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (16,662

¹⁴ Brown et al., "Learning at Home during COVID-19: Effects on Vulnerable Young Australians." p.52

students). There were 40 Independent schools with majority enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with 2,882 of enrolments in these schools being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have particular needs when considering school refusal. Inter-generational trauma could be a factor in school refusal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁵ Connection to Country, support of family, Elders and culture may enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to re-engage in schools and promote attendance.¹⁶

10. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Recommendations

- Independent Schools Australia recommends further research into school refusal issues to enable better understanding to develop targeted strategies.
- Independent Schools Australia recommends continued studies to measure the ongoing impact of COVID-19 restriction measures on school refusal.
- Independent Schools Australia recommends that more proactive programs for parents and carers to understand and support school refusers to attend would be of benefit.
- Independent Schools Australia recommends consideration be given to additional community and school based mental health services for young children and adolescents
- Independent Schools Australia recommends an ongoing focus on collaboration between state, territory and federal departments and schools to address school refusal
- Independent Schools Australia recommends that there is much to be learnt from Independent special assistance schools in supporting students experiencing school refusal. They are working with some of most highly disengaged students with great success.

Conclusion

School refusal is a key issue for all school sectors. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on school refusal following lockdowns, isolation and health measures. Returning to school after prolonged absence has been challenging for some students.

Students may experience school refusal for a range of reasons, directly impacting their mental health and wellbeing. School refusal can affect parents and carers employment relationships and conditions if they have to accommodate their child at home.

Independent schools promote regular school attendance and support families and carers to re-engage students back in school. Collaborative planning between parents and carers, students and their school is essential for success in young people returning to school.

¹⁵ Emily Shultz and Angelina Smith, *Be You In Focus Webinar Transcript Understanding School Refusal*, Transcript, 2022, <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/sessions-and-events/understanding-school-refusal>.

¹⁶ Shultz and Smith.

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While teachers are trained professionals, they are not mental health experts and school refusal places additional burden on school staff. Seeking timely support from external services is problematic with long wait times.

Disengagement from school and defining school refusal are important considerations to understand the full scope of the issue. Resourcing schools to provide assistance and support needed by students is an ongoing concern for the Independent sector. Strategies to work with students from equity groups is also an area of work undertaken by schools.

Sound policy and ongoing resourcing to support schools across all sectors to respond to the challenge of school refusal is a matter of national priority.

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