

RE-ENGAGING STUDENTS IN EDUCATION

ISSUES PAPER



With the review of the National School Reform Agreement underway, the Independent Schools Australia national forum on 7 November 2023 brings together educators, school leaders and key stakeholders from around Australia.

Re-engaging in students in education

Re-engaging in education provides an opportunity for young people to re-imagine their future and set realistic, achievable personal and educational goals. Achieving individual goals improves social and emotional wellbeing and mental health leading to improved outcomes in health, increased self-esteem, confidence and resilience.

Disadvantaged students are taught within mainstream Independent schools as well as specialist settings that include special schools, special assistance schools, boarding schools serving regional and remote families, Majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, including boarding schools, and in schools catering to students from different ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds, including migrant families and students from non-English speaking backgrounds.



The role of special assistance schools

The ISA Special Assistance Schools Forum will hear school principals share creative approaches and initiatives they have used to successfully address student and staff challenges including:

- creating innovative programs and strategies to address school refusal
- personalised learning to improve student outcomes
- supporting student mental health and wellbeing
- creating a safe environment and building trust in student/teacher relationships
- supporting teacher wellbeing and attracting and retaining staff in challenging environments.

Delivering outcomes in these areas, especially when working with disadvantaged students, families, and communities, is challenging for all schools.

Independent schools have the agility and autonomy to innovate and trial new programs and are often early adopters of new technologies and pedagogical approaches. The body of evidence and experience in these schools can be shared across settings and sectors.

More information and downloads

- ISA forum webpage: isa.edu.au/documents/media-release-forum-on-schools-that-re-engage-students
- *Special Assistance Showcase (2023)*: isa.edu.au/documents/special-assistance-schools-showcase
- *Student and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health (2022)*, Dr Kevin Runions and Prof Donna Cross AM: isa.edu.au/documents/report-wellbeing-of-students-and-staff

PANEL DISCUSSION 1 BREAKING BARRIERS: INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO EMPOWERING STUDENTS

CREATING INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS SCHOOL REFUSAL

How can schools improve student attendance and outcomes by thinking outside the box?

The autonomy of Independent schools allows them to be highly responsive to student and family needs; however, providing effective learning for students and support to the teachers and families of disadvantaged groups can be challenging.

School refusal and poor attendance are evident in all education sectors, both primary and secondary-aged students and is often linked to anxiety and/or depression, disengagement from learning, bullying and other challenging social situations. The Covid pandemic has also been a contributing factor to the growing rate of school refusal.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have particular needs when considering school refusal. Connection to Country, support of family, Elders and culture may enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to

re-engage in schools and improve attendance.

School refusal is often associated with mental health conditions. This has placed a strain on schools, families and external health services culminating in longer wait times.

Many students who attend special assistance schools are educationally disadvantaged. This is often due to their social or economic circumstances, and/or poor levels of achievement or school participation. They may;

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

These circumstances may result in trauma, absenteeism, poor mental

health or drug addiction. These challenges impact student learning, requiring extra support to reduce or eliminate these barriers.

Each special assistance school has its own particular focus and creative, innovative programs according to student need such as:

- workplace-focussed schools, offering VET qualifications and work integrated learning opportunities in industries such as agriculture, hospitality or music
- schools that cater for a particular student cohort such as young parents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, or a particular gender
- schools for particular age groups such as senior secondary schools and young adults up to 25 years returning to complete their education.

PERSONALISED LEARNING TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

Why is personalised learning so important and what works?

Most Independent special assistance schools use a student-centred approach that supports individual needs and utilises strengths and interests to foster self-confidence and build positive relationships to re-engage students in education.

Multiple strategies are used to scaffold learning and practical skills development. Combined with individual targeted transition programs to support school re-entry, teachers and specialist staff co-design Individual Learning Plans with students (and families when possible), supporting them to identify learning, social-emotional wellbeing and personal goals and make informed decisions and plans about achievable future pathways.

These plans provide clarity to students, staff, families and carers, identifying when goals are achieved and providing opportunities to celebrate success.

SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

What strategies have made a significant improvement on student mental health and well-being?

Developing positive social-emotional wellbeing and encouraging student agency are key student re-engagement strategies in Independent special assistance schools.

Schools use a range of approaches to support the development of healthy social-emotional wellbeing such as:

Restorative practice: A whole-school teaching and learning approach that encourages supportive and respectful behaviour. Individuals are held accountable for their behaviour and are supported to take steps to repair harm caused to others as a result of their actions. To be successful, restorative practice needs to be supported by conflict resolution and social-emotional programs, combined with ongoing

training for all staff.

The five-point scale: A behaviour regulation strategy used to explicitly teach social and emotional concepts. Students are taught how to map their emotions on a five-point scale, identify actions associated with how they feel at the five different stages and how to respond before a situation spirals out of control. This approach promotes self-management and understanding of one's own emotions through simple self-regulation strategies.

Positive psychology: A strengths-based whole-school psychological approach grounded in wellbeing theory. The PERMA model is an example of this approach, considering school environment, sense of belonging, trust, taking risks, participation, and articulating clear expectations.

PANEL DISCUSSION 2 BUILDING TRUST, BUILDING FUTURES: CREATING A POSITIVE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY

CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND BUILDING TRUST IN STUDENT/TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

How can schools create safe and supportive environments that foster learning?

Independent special assistance schools play an important role in removing barriers to education, providing vulnerable young people with the opportunity to complete school and provide an alternative option to mainstream schooling to re-engage young people in education.

Students enrolling in an Independent special assistance school have usually experienced long-term disengagement from education. Fostering trust between staff and students, creating safe environments, building healthy relationships and providing specialised support can assist students to re-engage in learning and determine future pathways for further study or employment.

Independent special assistance schools create safe, supportive and flexible environments with a focus on a sense of belonging and wrap-around care which goes well beyond what a mainstream school provides. This requires creative thinking and unique strategies or programs to ensure that student needs are met. A safe environment is critical to student wellbeing as it includes cultural, psychological and physical factors and is an essential prerequisite for student learning.

Staff at Independent special assistance schools are extremely passionate about taking every step they can to ensure their students have the capacity to attend school. They may provide basic needs such as breakfast and lunch, transport to school, suitable clothes, health care, allow students to wash their clothes at school or provide take-home meals. If there is an obstacle to a student attending school and concentrating on their learning, staff will make every attempt to remove the barrier or lessen the impact.

SUPPORTING TEACHER WELLBEING AND ATTRACTING AND RETAINING STAFF IN CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENTS

What initiatives have worked to attract and retain staff in difficult to staff schools and how have these initiatives supported teacher wellbeing?

Special assistance schools typically require skilled, trained and highly committed staff as well as customised facilities and partnerships with community and support services – securing and successfully maintaining this specialist environment can be a constant challenge.

Independent special assistance school leaders support their staff by providing debriefing, counselling and/or staff wellbeing programs with ongoing professional development in whole-school approaches so that every staff member is set up for success.

School leaders also understand the importance of staff collaboration, so that educators and support staff can use a wrap-around approach to support students. Due to the complexity and demands of working in an Independent special assistance school, many school leaders prioritise a range of flexible timetables to ensure staff have time to work together.

Many staff work in an Independent special assistance school because it aligns with their own social, educational and personal values. They take this responsibility seriously as they may be the only stable adult figure in a student's life and have an opportunity to truly make a difference and give young people a second chance at changing their own narrative.

Schools in regional areas report difficulty in attracting staff with the level of experience they require and the ability to work in positive ways with young people with at times challenging behaviours and a range of complex needs.

Specialist staff add value to the work of teachers and educational leaders and the learning and wellbeing of students. Together, educators and specialist staff create a strong wrap-around team to support each student. Specialist staff may include youth workers, learning assistants, social workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, vocational educators, school chaplains and/or wellbeing officers.



ABOUT INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

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 (AIS).

Independent schools are a key part of the education landscape in Australia. Alongside government and Catholic schools, they contribute to Australian society and the learning and wellbeing of Australian children in an increasingly complex environment.

Independent schools are diverse in size, location and ethos, and serve a wide range of students and communities. Independent schools enrol students who face a range of historical, cultural geographic and systemic barriers to accessing and education and reaching their learning potential.

Independent schools serve some of the most educationally disadvantaged and at-risk students in the community, and many Independent schools have been formed by their communities to meet specific learning and other needs.

Independent schools represent a significant number of families and strong growth in enrolments demonstrates great confidence in the sector.

- 688,638 students attend an Independent school – that is one in six Australian school students and more than one in five secondary students.
- Independent school enrolments have grown by 23 per cent, or approximately 120,000 students, in the last ten years – the highest growth rate of any school sector.
- In 2022, Independent school enrolments increased by 3.2 per cent (21,380 students).
- An overwhelming 82 per cent of Independent school parents said their school had adjusted well to the challenges presented by the pandemic.

The Independent school sector serves families at all income levels.

- Almost half of Independent schools charge fees of \$5,000 or less.
- Only 10 per cent of Independent schools charge fees above \$20,000.
- Growth in the Independent sector is greatest in low-fee schools.

The Independent sector educates an estimated 143,500 students with disability.

- This number has grown substantially over the past decade and at four times the rate of overall enrolment growth.
- A large proportion of Independent special assistance schools reported that either most or all of the young people enrolled at their school have a disability funded under the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD).

Growth of Independent special assistance schools

- There has been significant national growth in Independent special assistance school enrolments between 2014 and 2022 following the implementation of the SRS funding model.
- The new funding model assisted in the establishment of new schools and campuses to meet the need for alternate schooling options to re-engage some students in education.
- In 2022, the Independent school sector had 96 special assistance schools (7.9 per cent of all Independent schools), catering for 13,100 students (1.9 per cent of all Independent school students).
- The number of special assistance schools in the Independent school sector doubled between 2014 and 2022, highlighting the need for these schools. In contrast, mainstream Independent schools, increased by 8 per cent over the same eight-year period.
- Growth in student enrolments in Independent special assistance schools over the past eight years between 2014 and 2022 was an extraordinary 291 per cent (9,747 students), compared to an 18per cent growth in mainstream Independent schools. These growth rates indicate the great need for Independent special assistance schools to provide these young people with an opportunity to continue their education.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Independent schools

- In 2022, there were 17,752 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in 983 Independent schools, or 81 per cent of Independent schools in Australia. Enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Independent schools have grown at an average annual rate of almost six per cent per year over the last two decades.
- In 2022 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.
- The Independent school sector is the largest provider of boarding in Australia, operating almost 75 per cent of all Australian boarding schools. Independent boarding school enrolments include 15 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and almost three-quarters of all boarding students are from rural locations.
- Independent boarding schools often experience Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolling with below-year level academic achievement. Support for these students is extensive and these schools need highly skilled staff and intensive personalised learning for their students to have any opportunity to close the achievement gap.