

**Carers**ACT



**CARERS ACT SUBMISSION TO SENATE  
INQUIRY ON SCHOOL REFUSAL**

**DECEMBER 2022**

## About Carers ACT

Carers ACT is the leading body for carers in the ACT. We work to ensure that carers enjoy improved outcomes in health, wellbeing, resilience and financial security. We also work to ensure that caring is acknowledged and recognised as a shared responsibility of family, community and government.

Our purpose is to support, connect and empower carers to maintain their caring role and personal wellbeing. The Carers Recognition Act 2021 recognises the value of carers and the care relationship and defines carers in the following way:

“A person is in a care relationship with another person if the first person (the carer) provides care to the other person for 1 or more of the following reasons:

- (a) the other person has a disability;
- (b) the other person has a mental disorder or mental illness;
- (c) the other person has an ongoing medical condition;
- (d) the other person is aged and frail;
- (e) the other person is a child or young person, and the carer is a kinship carer or a foster carer for the child or young person.”

Carers include family members, friends, relatives, siblings or neighbours.

In the ACT more than 50,000 people provide care. Carers provide an important role in the family and in the broader community, supporting the quality of life of the person they care for. A carer’s role can include help with daily living activities such as housework, transport, health care, shopping and meals, reading and writing, emotional and mental support and personal care.

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## Terms of Reference

On 27 October 2022, the Senate referred the national trend of school refusal and related matters to the Education and Employment References Committee for inquiry on 31 October 2022.

Carer's ACT's response will have particular regard to the following Term of Reference: 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.

## Background

Carers ACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Inquiry on the national trend of school refusal, or 'School Can't', that is affecting primary and secondary school-aged children who are unable to attend school regularly or on a consistent basis. Carers ACT is particularly interested in the outcome of this inquiry because we continue to hear the concerns of parents and carers who have personally experienced school refusal while caring for children and young people living with mental ill health and/or disability, or while caring for children and young people in out-of-home care arrangements.

According to the most recent survey data on the prevalence of mental ill-health in children and young people, 14% of Australian children aged 4–11 had experienced a mental health disorder around 12 months prior to completing the survey (Telethon Kids Institute, 2015). Given that one in five Australians are likely to experience mental illness each year (ABS, 2022), it is reasonable to assume that these numbers have increased significantly and will continue to rise substantially in the coming years. Of Australian children aged 0–14, 7.4% have been reported to have some level of disability (ABS, 2015). Moreover, over 46,000 children between the ages of 0–17 were reported to be in out-of-home care in 2016 (AIHW, 2017). This is important to note as research has found that children in this context are likely to have been exposed to trauma during their early development (Gabbay, et.al, 2004). When read in its totality, these statistics indicate that a large proportion of Australian children require, and will continue to require, support during their schooling to acquire the important life skills and necessary tools to navigate the modern world. In the absence of this support, children are refusing to attend school or participate in activities that do not adequately meet their needs. Likewise, carers and families are often faced with feelings of frustration, disappointment, and stress as they see their children retreat from social interaction and learning opportunities.

This submission has been aided by a notable level of consultations (uncharacteristic for the timeframe and season); all of which are a testament to the sheer magnitude of carers that are affected by school refusal. Throughout our consultations, carers in the ACT have expressed grave concerns about the level of school-based support for children and young people living with disability and mental ill health. Carers have unanimously voiced that this inadequate level of support is the main cause of school refusal behaviour. Likewise, it is evident from these consultations that parents and carers themselves do not receive adequate support when dealing with complex school refusal and are oftentimes left to find and navigate alternative education pathways on their own. These gaps have a significant impact on the lives of children and their parents and carers, whether it be academically, socially, emotionally, or financially. Unfortunately, the most common experience of school refusal among carers is stigma from education and health professionals, as well as the broader community, for 'failing' to send their children to school. Ultimately, Carers ACT strongly believes that school refusal is not a

failure on the part of parents and carers, but rather a symptom of a system that has failed to support them. This submission aims to draw the inquiry committee's attention to the growing number of children who are falling through the gaps, and the numerous parents and family members who are desperately seeking help.

## Summary of Recommendations

- The Australian Government prioritises flexible work arrangements for parents and carers by reviewing sections of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), in particular section 65. This submission supports the eight suggestions made in the interim report of the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care, which was published in October 2022.
- Implement a uniform method of data collection on school refusal that is similar across all Australian education departments and schools in order to better understand the problems, share, and distribute resources according to need.
- Create and offer regular professional development to all school wellbeing teams, including school nurses, school counsellors, and school psychologists. This will assist in the recognition and referral of students who are refusing to attend school, allowing them to intervene before strategies are implemented that could exacerbate poor mental health.
- Consider the development of in-school support policies at the national level, taking into account the complexity of variables influencing school refusal. This includes providing the child, their parents and carers, and their educational personnel with rapid and comprehensive mental health service support.
- Provide research funding in order to investigate flexible learning environments across Australia and inform the country's mainstream educational systems. This work must be completed in collaboration with traditional classrooms, parents and carers, students, and flexible learning spaces.
- Fund and conduct research on school refusal behaviour in children with co-occurring disorders and neurodiversity. This research should be conducted in constant communication with parents and carers of children who are having trouble attending school.
- Encourage parent and carer awareness and skills to help in the early diagnosis of mental health disorders and to connect with trained clinical support. This includes providing parents and carers with continuing mental health literacy training within each school community.
- Extend funding and implementation of a national level program with a similar model to the Victorian Navigator Program, including primary and secondary school students across Australia. This program should be co-designed with parents and carers who have or are experiencing school refusal.
- Support the implementation of the priority actions prescribed by the National Mental Health Commission's 'Draft Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy', noting particularly s 2.7 relating to education and training settings.

## Impact on employment and financial security of parents and carers

School refusal has been shown to have a significant impact on employment and financial security for parents and carers. Australian carers experience considerably poorer employment outcomes, with a 52.2% employment to population ratio compared with 75.9% for people without caring responsibilities (Carers Australia, 2022). Of the carers that were interviewed during our consultation, a majority of them had to leave their employment to care for their child. When a child is experiencing school refusal, it can be difficult for the parent or carer to continue working as usual, as they may need to take time off abruptly and frequently to address the child's needs and find ways to encourage their child to go back to education.

It is not uncommon for parents and carers to take extended periods of leave from work, or even resign from their jobs to accommodate their child's needs. This can lead to loss of income, long-term financial instability, as well as the stress and strain of trying to make ends meet. The 2022 Carers Australia 'Caring Costs Us' survey found that on average, the superannuation balance at age 67 of a parent or family member who becomes a primary carer for a child is reduced by about \$17,700 for every year that they are a carer. Similarly, their lifetime earnings are reduced by \$39,600 for every year they are a primary carer. Research indicates that children experiencing school refusal are likely to stay in care beyond their schooling years (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003), making the aforementioned financial scenario a very real possibility for many carers. Financial pressures are particularly heightened for foster and kinship carers, a majority of whom were found in a 2018 survey conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies to be living on an annual gross household income of less than \$60,000. Carers ACT urges the Inquiry committee to consider the sheer enormity of impact caring has on the lives of carers and hopes workplace changes are made to reflect the important contributions carers make to the Australian economy and the community more broadly.

### *Recommendation*

- The Australian Government prioritises flexible work arrangements for parents and carers by reviewing sections of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), in particular section 65. This submission supports the eight suggestions made in the interim report of the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care, which was published in October 2022.

## Current Issues

### Limited resources and training in schools

In our consultations, a number of carers have expressed disappointment in the way in which schools have supported children with diverse needs, such as those with disabilities, behavioural challenges, or mental health concerns. Carers have stated that this lack of support has led to a range of negative consequences for these children, including school refusal.

We acknowledge that a lack of resources is a significant barrier for schools to support students with diverse needs. Many schools simply do not have the funding or staffing to provide the specialised services and support that these children need. As a result, students may not receive the accommodations and support they need to



succeed in the classroom, leading to frustration and a lack of engagement. However, our consultations with carers revealed that children who were enrolled in specialised or private schools, or who could afford specialised interventions (such as social workers and allied health professionals) were more likely to return to their schooling. Unfortunately, not all families and carers are able to afford such interventions and those that do are often subjected to long wait times.

Carers have also suggested that the schools they have interacted with struggle to support children with diverse needs due to a lack of awareness or understanding of trauma-informed, inclusive practice on the part of teachers and other staff. Many educators may not be trained on how to effectively support children with learning disabilities or behavioural challenges stemming from mental ill-health or trauma; thus, leading to a lack of effective interventions and accommodations. Havik, Bru and Ertesvag (2013) noted that effective emotional, instructional and organisational teacher support can reduce the likelihood of school refusal with co-occurring diagnoses like autism and anxiety. Concerns have been raised over the years that most school staff, even in the most specialised schools, have come to rely on parents and carers to 'deal with' complex behaviours that they feel are beyond their own staff's capabilities. Carers have felt that schools find it easier to relinquish their responsibilities when behaviours and caring demands become challenging or time consuming. With increasing staff shortages due to the pandemic, such occurrences have become more commonplace. It is therefore crucial that schools receive the resources and training they need to better serve these students and their parents and carers.

### *Recommendations*

- Implement a uniform method of data collection on school refusal that is similar across all Australian education departments and schools to better understand the problems, share, and distribute resources according to need.
- Create and offer regular professional development to all school wellbeing teams, including school nurses, school counsellors, and school psychologists. This will assist in the recognition and referral of students who are refusing to attend school, allowing them to intervene before strategies are implemented that could exacerbate poor mental health.

### **Inflexible learning environments**

Rigid and inflexible nature of traditional education systems can make it difficult for students with diverse needs to thrive. Several researchers claim that the school environment plays a significant role in school non-attendance (e.g. Fortin et al. 2006; Lauchlan 2003). At school, students face academic, social and emotional challenges and demands. Some students may find these demands overwhelming and consider avoidance the easiest or possibly the only way of dealing with them (Kearney, Cook, and Chapman 2007). A study by Kearney and Beasley (1994) showed that psychologists reported half of the children they treated for school refusal stayed at home to avoid situations involving the combination of academic and social challenges. These included giving speeches, interacting socially with others in connection with schoolwork and social comparisons in connection with athletic performance (Gutiérrez-Maldonado et al. 2009).

As such, students who struggle with executive functioning skills and experience difficulty with the traditional classroom structure due to neurodiversity or mental illness may benefit from more flexible and individualised approaches to learning. Some carers did however state that by placing their children in specialised education

'units' their children were made to feel different and more isolated from their peers - thus resulting in school refusal. It is therefore important to maintain parent/carer-school cooperation when addressing school refusal behaviours (Lyon and Cotler, 2007). Good communication between parents/carers and teachers will help education staff better understand the student and how the learning environment should be adapted to their unique needs.

### *Recommendations*

- Consider the development of in-school support policies at the national level, taking into account the complexity of variables influencing school refusal. This includes providing the child, their parents and carers, and their educational personnel with rapid and comprehensive mental health service support.
- Provide research funding in order to investigate flexible learning environments across Australia and inform the country's mainstream educational systems. This work must be completed in collaboration with traditional classrooms, parents and carers, students, and flexible learning spaces

### **Lack of carer/family member supports**

Finding ways to address the reasons behind why a child does not go back to school is one of the primary challenges faced by parents and carers. The child may be experiencing deteriorating mental illness, learning difficulties due to a disability, behaviour changes due to trauma, or bullying. Addressing these challenges requires considerable time, effort and resources and would require the parent or carer to collaborate with educators, mental health specialists and other health professionals to come up with strategies to encourage their child to consider returning to education. This can be difficult in circumstances where wait times for mental health specialists and health professionals are long and arduous. During the wait time, the psychosocial wellbeing of the child is likely to further deteriorate, adding further stress on the carer.

During our consultations it became apparent that there was also insufficient support for the child's parents or carers. When a child does not attend school, the caring responsibility shifts to their parents and carers. This can be challenging and stressful for carers as they simultaneously try to find ways to support their child and encourage the child to return to education whilst also managing other responsibilities. Numerous carers have pointed out that they were left in the dark as to where to go for help once school refusal behaviours become apparent. Most parents and carers have to navigate school refusal themselves, searching for and initiating referrals for alternative education pathways without the assistance of the school system. One carer noted that it took numerous unsuccessful attempts at school return before hearing about an interstate distance education setting that ultimately worked for their child through a fellow carer in a similar situation.

Other examples of successful school return programs raised by carers during our consultations include:

- PCYC's 6-month program for young people at risk of offending; the model includes transport from the child's place of residence to engage in a mixture of academic and emotional education activities.
- The Galilee School in the ACT; designed specifically to support vulnerable, disengaged teenagers who may be experiencing domestic violence, drugs, poverty, homelessness or other complex life challenges.
- Other specialised intervention programmes that offer each child and their parents/carers with their own case manager or support worker to help find and engage with required support. Such programs

include those offered by Marymead in the ACT and Navigator, funded by the Victorian state government.

Nonetheless, occurrence of and access to such specialised programs are limited at best. The 2022 audit report of the Navigator Program found that although the program was able to produce several positive outcomes for extremely disengaged students, it would be more successful if schools provided students at risk of disengagement with earlier intervention and school-based supports. These findings mirror the concerns of carers who have expressed dissatisfaction in the pathways of support (or lack thereof) provided by schools during early stages of disengagement.

Ultimately, caring for a child experiencing school refusal can be a demanding and stressful experience for parents and carers. It is important that they receive support and resources to help them through this challenging time, including access to mental health services and support from educators and other professionals.

### *Recommendations*

- Fund and conduct research on school refusal behaviour in children with co-occurring disorders and neurodiversity. This research should be conducted in constant communication with parents and carers of children who are having trouble attending school.
- Encourage parent and carer awareness and skills to help in the early diagnosis of mental health disorders and to connect with trained clinical support. This includes providing parents and carers with continuing mental health literacy training within each school community.
- Extend funding and implementation of a national level program with a similar model to the Victorian Navigator Program, including primary and secondary school students across Australia. This program should be co-designed with parents and carers who have or are experiencing school refusal.

### **Stigma**

During our consultations with the carers, one key point that was raised was in regard to the stigma that surrounds the parent or carers perceived inability to offer an education for their children. Carers pointed out that members of the community would frequently criticise them for not sending their child to school, and that they would be regarded as a 'failure' as a parent/carer because of this decision. In addition to scrutiny from the broader community, many parents and carers report also being faced with threats of legal consequences from their department of education. The threat of repercussions adds further stress on carers. Foster and kinship carers have the additional stress of being answerable to the care and protection system.

It was also raised by carers that there is a misconception that the difficulties that a child is experiencing is due to a lack of 'willpower' or 'discipline.' This leads to the suggestion that the child simply needs to 'tough it out' and go to school, regardless of the challenges they are facing. A lack of understanding around the complexities of school refusal can further stigmatise the parents and carers, making it difficult for them to get the support and resources they need. These judgments can be deeply hurtful and damaging, further isolating parents and carers during a time of crisis.

Carers ACT strongly believes that the government should engage in the implementation of strategies to ensure that children experiencing mental illnesses and/or disabilities are provided with adequate resources to reduce



school refusal and, in turn, reduce the stigma that parents and carers experience when their children refuse to seek education.

#### *Recommendation*

- Support the implementation of the priority actions prescribed by the National Mental Health Commission's 'Draft Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy', noting particularly s 2.7 relating to education and training settings.

## **Conclusion**

Carers ACT thanks the Senate Inquiry committee for the opportunity to provide a submission on the impact of school refusal, or 'School Can't' on carers and family members. Our submission highlights the consequences that flow on from inadequate supports for both the child and their parents and carers experiencing school refusal. Parents and carers are often left in financially, socially, and emotionally vulnerable situations with little to no guidance on how to deal with the highly stigmatised phenomenon of school refusal. Carers ACT urges the Senate Inquiry Committee to consider and implement the recommendations provided in this submission, as we believe that supporting parents and carers will in turn support the unique young individuals they care for and address the national trend of school refusal.

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