

Carers Australia response to the Australian Government Senate Select Committee on Education and Employment 'Inquiry into The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters'

22 March 2023

Introduction

Carers Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Australian Government Senate Select Committee (the Committee) on Education and Employment Inquiry into The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters. We appreciate the Committee's decision to re-open submissions to the inquiry as the extended timeframe for consultation has increased the accessibility of engagement.

We support issues identified and raised within the [Carers ACT submission](#). Carers ACT, a member of Carers Australia and the National Carer Network, submitted their response in December 2022 and subsequently appeared before Committee in February 2023 to [provide their evidence](#) with specific reference to the Terms of Reference (ToR):

- b) how school refusal is affecting young people and their families, and
- c) the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents and carers.

Our response thus outlines recommendations and further evidence to supplement Carers ACT's submission, within the specific context for the ToR:

- d) how relevant state, territory and federal departments are working to monitor and address this growing school refusal challenge

Background

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, is an issue that has been experienced by many carers¹ who provide care for children with mental-ill health or disability. According to the 2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) 1 in 10 school students have a disability and these figures do not include those dealing with mental-ill health.²

Further, in 2015 a survey conducted by the Australian Government Department of Health found that 14% of children and adolescents aged 4—17 years experienced mental illness in the 12 months prior to the survey.³ Newer research conducted in 2020-21 by the ABS provide reason to believe that the prevalence of

¹ Carers Australia uses the term 'carer' as defined by the [Commonwealth Carer Recognition Act 2010](#) (the Act), where it should not be used broadly and without context to describe a paid care worker, volunteer, foster carer or a family member or friend who is not a carer. The terms 'informal carer', 'unpaid carer' or 'family and friend carer' are also often used by organisations, government and the community to describe a carer. Carers Australia may use these terms to assist in providing context and to differentiate between other types of care.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC)*, [\[accessed online\]](#)

³ Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care (2015), *The mental health of children and adolescents*, [\[accessed online\]](#)

mental disorders has increased, with 1 in 5 Australian's experiencing mental-ill health.⁴ It is this increasing population of children that many carers are supporting.

The Carers Australia's [2022 Carer Wellbeing Survey](#) found that carers are three times less likely to have high levels of wellbeing compared to the average Australian. Survey findings also revealed that of those who were working or who wanted to be in paid work, 44.8% reported doing less paid work than desired, compared to only 23.1% of Australians more generally.⁵ For some carers of school aged children, the provision of an inclusive school environment may decrease the amount of time needed to provide home care, supervision or learning by a carer due to inappropriate levels of support within the school.

It is important to note that this is not only an issue which impacts on carers of a child or young person with disability or mental ill health, but of all carers who may be in other types of care relationships and also have school age children. That is, a carer impacted by school refusal may be caring for an adult with a mental illness, terminal illness, disability or who is frail aged, and the ability to provide this care may be hampered if required to provide home supervision or learning to any school aged children.

Feedback provided to Carers Australia by the National Carer Network identifies several underlying reasons school refusal is becoming increasingly prevalent. Anxiety attending school, specifically for students with disability, is often a result of a lack of support and inclusivity. Stigma surrounding disability and mental ill health develops from young ages and school environments that do not provide adequate learning support and an inclusive community are at risk of developing hostile environments for these children.

Carers Australia believes it is imperative that the issue of school refusal is not considered or communicated as solely and/or mostly a failure of families and carers to enforce school attendance of children and young people. There must be clear recognition that this is multifactorial and often it is the inability of the current school system to adequately accommodate and support varying needs, and by extension their families and carers when disability and mental ill health are indicated.

The 'choice' to remove a child or children from the classroom is complex – for a carer this reflects the diversity of the carer, the diversity of the caring relationship and the diversity of the child. Quite often this decision is due to the child's needs not being met by the school, and/or to reduce the risk of further harm.

Response to the Terms of Reference

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

Carers Australia believes a coordinated national approach is needed in order to address the issue of school refusal.

There are various methods in which state, territory and federal departments can improve to better work on addressing the growing school refusal challenge, and we have focused in this response on two topic areas

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *2022 National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing* (NSMHW), [\[accessed online\]](#)

⁵ Carers Australia and University of Canberra (2022), *Caring for Others and Yourself: 2022 Carer Wellbeing Survey*, [\[accessed online\]](#). The Carer Wellbeing Survey is a collaboration between Carers Australia and University of Canberra, funded by the Australian Department of Social Services.

that were recognised and questioned⁶ by the Committee during the Canberra hearing in February 2023 - data collection and the burden of responsibility for support provision.

Underpinning both of these is the need to:

- **Recognise that a carer for a child or young person is distinct from ‘parenting’,** and we highlight that the Commonwealth *Carer Recognition Act (2010)* states⁷ *“to avoid doubt, an individual is not a carer merely because he or she is the spouse, de facto partner, parent, child or other relative of an individual, or is the guardian of an individual; or lives with an individual who requires care”*
- **Consider issues relating to identification of carers within the education system, and co-design solutions, including support provision at the school -level**

We also highlight that young carers may have specific issues as they relate to school refusal. There are approximately 235,000 ‘young carers’ aged 11-25 years in Australia⁸ who are at risk of disengagement or who have disengaged from school or education opportunities due to caring responsibilities. Many young carers report a lack of sleep, ongoing stress and mental health issues which affects their ability to go to school, and that their care responsibilities restrict their ability to achieve their potential, socialise with friends, participate in extra-curricular activities, and to build a sense of belonging⁹.

Within schools caring is often not recognised and/or not responded to appropriately, and **all actions to assess and support children and young people related to school refusal broadly must consider the specific requirements for the young carer as an individual, and within their caring role.**

Data Collection

One of the largest current barriers to addressing this is the current system for recording and reporting the attendance and performance of Australian primary and secondary school students. The importance of a national system has long been recognised by government; the Council of Australia Governments (COAG) first gave its support to the introduction of a national unique student identifier (USI) in 2009.¹⁰ In principle, the USI would provide a mechanism for student data collection and expand the current system that is used Australia -wide for tertiary students.

Carers Australia supports recommendations of a national USI for primary and secondary school students, however, this must be accompanied by expanded national reporting regulations. Efforts to address issues with support resourcing and availability can only be successful with regular and transparent reporting of all factors that may lead to school refusal. These factors may include:

- Reason for absence from school
- Enrolment
- Early leave
- Accommodations and support available (projected and actual)
- Resources provided to facilitate support (projected and actual)
- Student population demographics

⁶ Evidence to Senate Education and Employment References Committee, Parliament of Australia, Canberra, 22/2/23 [[accessed online](#)]

⁷ Op.Cit (1)

⁸ Op.Cit (2) SDAC

⁹ Moore T et al (2019). ‘No space in my brain to learn: Young carers and their engagement with education: an analysis of applications to the Carers Australia bursary program 2017-2018’. University of South Australia for Carers Australia [[accessed online](#)]

¹⁰ Council of Australian Governments, 7 December 2009, [[accessed online](#)]

Transparent reporting of these factors will provide governments, schools and the community the necessary information to improve school experiences for primary and secondary school children.

Support Provision

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2023 highlights the importance of increasing accessibility and inclusion within school environments for people with disability.¹¹ Under the [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#) schools must make reasonable adjustments to provide access for student with disability to the same schooling opportunities, yet there is a wide spread lack of resourcing in accommodating diverse needs.

Work is also underway to develop a National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy as part of the mental health reform agenda¹². This follows the Productivity Commissions Inquiry into mental health which concluded in 2020, and we draw attention to recommendation 5 of the Final Report¹³ – 'focus on children's wellbeing across the Education and health systems'.

The variety and extent of accommodations needed will vary from student to student, yet the first hurdle many carers face is accessing information around requesting support. Experiences vary largely by state and region; however, carers have cited to the National Carer Network as the main reasons they remove a child from school while they 'figure it all out' as:

- lack of information,
- inconsistencies with information provided via organisations, government departments, school websites and school staff, or
- inadequate resourcing within schools.

Addressing this requires various levels of intervention and cross portfolio consideration. In addition to increased funding and resourcing, schools must promote collaborative discussions with carers and families when exploring adjustments for diverse needs. Sadly, we are often told of instances where there is an increasing reliance on carers and parents in 'dealing with' complex needs, and the ability to 'offload' responsibility of a child with disability. We draw attention to the fact that this denies the person their rights as recognised by the United Nations [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability](#) (CRPD).

Conclusion

The Australian Government Department of Education need to expand reporting requirements for schools on availability of adjustments for children with diverse needs, and performance and engagement of children who access these adjustments, as well as their parents and carers. There should also be increased funding for research that investigates flexible learning arrangements and education reform that can increase the inclusivity of Australia's education system.

Adjacent to this, we note the work occurring to prioritise access to flexible and inclusive work places for carers and parents, and recommend the Committee considers this within the context of carers impacted on by school refusal. We also highlight that identification of carers, recognition of what 'caring' is a distinct from parenting, and an awareness of the Carer Gateway as a referral option are important considerations, which will ultimately provide more support for children and young people with disability and mental ill health and potentially their school experience.

¹¹ Australian Government Department of Social Services (2021), *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-23*, [\[accessed online\]](#)

¹² National Mental Health Commission, 'National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy' [\[accessed online\]](#)

¹³ Productivity Commission, *Mental Health Inquiry Report* (2020) [\[accessed online\]](#)

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About Carers Australia

Carers Australia is the national peak body representing the diversity of the 2.65 million Australians who provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends with a disability, chronic condition, mental illness or disorder, drug or alcohol problem, terminal illness, or who are frail aged.

In collaboration with our members, the peak carer organisations in each state and territory, we collectively form the National Carer Network and are an established infrastructure that represent the views of carers at the national level.

Our vision is an Australia that values and supports all carers, where all carers should have the same rights, choices, and opportunities as other Australians to enjoy optimum health, social and economic wellbeing and participate in family, social and community life, employment, and education.

This includes carers:

- Who have their own care needs
- Who are in multiple care relationships
- Who have employment and/or education commitments
- Aged under 25 years (young carers)
- Aged over 65 years, including 'grandparent carers'
- From culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI+)
- Who are living in rural and remote Australia, and
- Who are no longer in a caring role (former carers).

Carers Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities as the traditional custodians of the land we work on and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. As an inclusive organisation we celebrate people of all backgrounds, genders, sexualities, cultures, bodies, and abilities.