

Response to Australian Government Department of Education Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Carers Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the [Australian Government Department of Education Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#) (the Review). We wish to highlight several key issues for consideration in the development of a new National School Reform Agreement (NRSA) and would welcome the opportunity to provide further specific information to the Review if needed.

Our response aims to provide the Review Panel with a deeper understanding of the perspectives of Australia's 2.65 million unpaid carers¹ and the education system. As such, this response primarily covers the questions raised in *Chapter 2: Improving student outcomes*, and *Chapter 3: Improving student mental health and wellbeing*, of the [Consultation Paper](#).

Chapter 2: Improving student outcomes

Becoming a carer is often not a choice, and the impacts of caring on carers can be profound, particularly on their own health and wellbeing. The Review consultation paper recognises levels of carer engagement as a potential out-of-school factor that can impact student achievement, however the challenges faced by young carers are not recognised within the paper.

Research from 2018 shows that there are approximately 235,000 'young carers' aged 11-25 years in Australia². Each of these young carers are at risk of disengagement or may have already disengaged from school or education opportunities due to caring responsibilities. Studies in Australia suggest that 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 belonging³.

"There is very little awareness and global understanding of young carers (especially within schools!!), meaning it can be extremely isolating emotionally. It's scary and concerning at times when you take a parent role. It can also be traumatic to see a parent suffer through mental illness, and can feel disappointed when unable to help them." – 2022 Carer Wellbeing Survey respondent.⁴

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 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 [\[accessed online\]](#)

⁴ 2022 Carer Wellbeing Survey, Unpublished data.

Adequate recognition is fundamental in being able to identify and respond appropriately to young carers and thus, Carers Australia strongly recommends that the Panel include young carers as a priority cohort in the next NRSA.

Carers Australia is conscious that terminology can have negative connotations for many people and acknowledge that not everyone's experience is properly captured by terms. We are supportive of efforts to influence respectful and inclusive language about those within at-risk groups such as older people, people living with disability or individuals experiencing or at risk of poverty; however, inclusivity must also extend to language related to carers and caring. As such we choose to respectfully use terms in this response, recognising the diversity of carers, care relationships and those receiving care.

A carer's role is distinctly different from parenting or generalised familial support and as such the policy responses and information needs are different. Although caring roles are most often filled by close family members or friends it is important to acknowledge the distinction between family and parents with carers, as defined in the Commonwealth *Carer Recognition Act (2010)*:

"(1) For the purpose of this Act a carer is an individual who provides personal care, support and assistance to another individual who needs it because that other individual:

(a) has a disability; or

(b) has a medical condition (including a terminal or chronic illness); or

(c) has a mental illness; or

(d) is frail and aged....

...(3) To avoid doubt, an individual is not a carer merely because he or she:

(a) is the spouse, de facto partner, parent, child or other relative of an individual, or is the guardian of an individual; or

(b) lives with an individual who requires care."

The term carer should not be used broadly and without context to describe a paid childcare worker, educator, volunteer, foster carer or a family member or friend who is not a carer. Unclear references to 'carers' can often confuse different groups of people who provide care and the broader community, which can be misleading and undermine policy responses. It is for this reason clear definitions and consistent use of terminology related to 'carers' in the next NRSA and any associated materials is essential.

We believe the exclusion from young carers within the next NRSA risks will perpetuate these students going un-identified and misunderstood throughout the entirety of their education. Carers Australia's response to the [Australian Government Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters](#) in 2023 stressed the need to "Consider issues relating to identification of carers within the education system, and co-design solutions, including support provision at the school -level".

We note the current [Inquiry into the recognition of unpaid carers](#) by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, announced on 14 June 2023. As highlighted in our [media release](#), Carers Australia is pleased to see that the new Inquiry's Terms of Reference are broader than simply a definition of 'who is a carer', and includes developments in the policy landscape at a Commonwealth level since the Carer Recognition Act's original passage in 2010, which include education related reform. We will be highlighting issues with lack of consistent terminology and recognition across portfolios to the Inquiry.

Chapter 5: Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost student outcomes

One of the largest current barriers to addressing issues with student engagement, specifically when it relates to young carers or students with disability, 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 Australian Governments (COAG) first gave its support to the introduction of a national unique student identifier (USI) in 2009.⁵ 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

Transparent reporting of these factors will provide governments, schools and the community the necessary information to ensure methods targeted at improving experiences and engagement of students is appropriately and adequately meeting its objectives.

⁵ Council of Australian Governments, 7 December 2009, [[accessed online](#)]

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
- That 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.

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