Policy Brief: Policy Pathways to Address School Refusal and Disengagement

Report to: The Hon. Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education, Department of Education
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Recommendations

That the Minister:
- Establish a National Student Re-Engagement and Wellbeing Framework, coordinating state and territory initiatives under clear and unified attendance, mental-health and belonging targets.
- Fund wrap-around re-engagement programs in order to aid students disengaging from, or at risk of disengaging from school
- Commission a longitudinal evaluation using both quantitative data and qualitative case studies to measure the framework's outcomes.

Executive summary

Australia faces a crisis of both school disengagement and refusal, with school attendance rates remaining well below pre-COVID-19 levels, explained in large part by the growing numbers of students experiencing anxiety, mental health issues, and reduced trust in schools (CYDA, 2022, p. 2-3) driving rates of early school leavers to reach 20.1 percent in 2024 (Productivity Commission, 2025), with each student who leaves school early posing a lifetime fiscal and social costs of nearly $1 million (Lamb & Huo, 2019).

And, whilst the government has tried to combat this growing crisis with various initiatives, from the Be You partnership with Headspace to a range of state tutoring and wellbeing programs (Victorian Government, 2022), they are state-based and thus create fragmentation between students from differing states and territories in terms of levels of support and therefore achievement, being incongruous with the national scale of the curriculum.

For this reason, a coherent national framework is required to unite wellbeing, pedagogy and accountability, thus ensuring that our country's educational recovery becomes a united national mission as opposed to a patchwork of state responses.

Issue Background

Context

The abrupt closure of classrooms at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent transition to online learning both exposed pre-existing and created new inequalities between students (Grewenig et al., 2021), building upon the already growing rates of disengagement in schools (ACARA, 2024).

This replacement of the classroom environment with an uncertain and fragmented online learning environment (Seymour et al., 2020, p. 244) hindered the sense of connectedness between students and their support networks which the school environment offers (Seymour et al., 2020, p. 244) instead building upon increasing rates of anxiety toward attending school present in young people (CYDA, 2022, p. 2–3).

Furthermore, given that Australia experienced one of the longest periods of school closure in the world, with students learning remotely for up to 36 weeks between 2020 and 2021 (AERO, 2023, p. c), these feelings of anxiety and dread toward school were climaxed (CYDA, 2022, p. 2–3). This correlatively contributed to the growing number of students refusing school, with the absence rate of students in schools increasing to 12.9 percent of scheduled classes in 2024, up from 8.7 percent pre-pandemic in 2018, and increasing every year since COVID-19 (ACARA, 2024).

Causes

Socioeconomic Inequality and Structural Disadvantage

Socioeconomic disadvantage serves as one of the most powerful predictors for disengagement in schooling. Both absenteeism and early leaving are disproportionately high in low-income communities where poverty, housing instability, and family stress erode educational continuity (Deakin University, 2021, pp. 10–12). This disadvantage was maximised for students in outer-regional areas where attendance rates are 3.1% lower than those in higher-income inner city postcodes (ACARA, 2024), given the limited access to transport, digital devices, and local youth services (Seymour et al., 2020, p. 244) to students in these postcodes, ultimately contributing to the barriers which they face to education.

Mental Health, Trauma, and Disability

The ongoing mental health crisis which confronts young people (Department of Health, 2023) has become a major driver of school avoidance and refusal (Victorian Government, 2022, p. 1), with around 5 percent of students meeting the clinical criteria for school refusal (Sewell, 2008), and mental health issues being a key contributor of this refusal (Clark, 2022).

Amongst these students, those with an existing disability or who are neurodivergent are disproportionately represented, regularly experiencing greater anxiety than other students toward schooling (CYDA, 2022, p. 2–3).

Likewise, this anxiety toward school disproportionately affects students affected by trauma, who oftentimes perceive schools as an unsafe or unpredictable learning environment, thus leading to further school avoidance and social withdrawal (Cahill et al., 2020, p. 13), underscoring the necessity of trauma-informed and inclusive school practices as central pillars of educational policy.

COVID-19 and its Role as the Exacerbating Factor for Disengagement

The lockdowns sparked by COVID-19 served to deepen these pre-existing structural inequalities embedded in the education system, particularly given that Australian students faced one of the longest school closures in the world (AERO, 2023, p. c).

Given the requirement for adequate internet and computer access in order for children to continue learning remotely, low-income families were unable to access schooling during COVID-19, intensifying systemic inequality (Seymour et al., 2020, p. 244). Alongside this, students with disabilities or neurodivergence ceased receiving the personalised support which they were funded to receive during the course of COVID-19 lockdowns (Association for Children with a Disability, 2020), thus increasing the barriers for children in need of support to obtain their education, resulting in lasting educational effects following their return to school post-COVID-19 (CYDA, 2022, p. 1).

And, despite the presence of policy responses to children returning to school following COVID-19 lockdowns, the quantification of their success prioritised reopening metrics over the recovery of students, focusing on the resumption of attendance rather than the restoration of wellbeing. This quantification bias has created a lack of ongoing government intervention post-COVID-19 (Australian Parents Council, 2022, p. 3), meaning that despite the re-opening of classrooms across the country, student anxiety and teacher burnout have continued (Cahill et al., 2020, p. 13, p. 23), thus demonstrating the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 school closures.

Impact

Impact of School Disengagement on Student Welfare, Mental Health and Future Prospects

Disengagement in school inflicts compounding harm on young people's wellbeing, identity formation, and future prospects (Cahill et al., 2020, p. 10).

The driving force behind students willingness to attend school is the belief of each student that their present effort shapes future success, impacting their present motivation, decisions, and behaviour (Burns et al., 2021, p. 109). And, when anxiety or a feeling of hopelessness dominate a student's daily life, this willingness weakens (Burns et al., 2021, p. 119), producing a recursive cycle of disengagement and diminished wellbeing, which can manifest into chronic refusal.

This erosion of engagement with school has the potential to profoundly constrain the developmental trajectory of young people. Students who disengage from school frequently lose continuity in learning, leading to the potential early leaving of school, which results in quantitively worse outcomes and an overall lower quality of life (Lamb & Huo, 2019).

The Economic Consequences of Disengagement from School

In addition to the impacts created by disengagement from school on the welfare and the education of students, it presents an economic liability to the country. On average, each early school leaver forfeits nearly $1 million in lifetime earnings, whilst imposing a $615,000 cost to the Government in additional welfare, health, and justice needs, potentially contributing to billions of dollars in lost productivity and intergenerational dependency over time (Lamb & Huo, 2019).

This is due to youth who are disengaged from school being significantly more likely to enter the justice system (Lamb & Huo, 2019), with disengagement being an early predictor of criminality, substance misuse, unemployment, poverty and being on income support (Moore & McArthur, 2014), thus demonstrating the way in which school detachment can have long term consequences to both those who disengage with schooling and society as a whole.

Current Policy

Although there are pre-existing policies which aim to address disengagement, they are often fragmented across jurisdictions and limited in success. Whilst the Australian Government does offer pastoral care for students, through the National Student Wellbeing Program (Department of Education, 2023b), and various state governments provide their own post-COVID-19 aid initiatives, such as Victoria's Tutor Learning Initiative (Victorian Government, 2022, p .5), as well as New South Wales's Wellbeing Framework for Schools (NSW Department of Education, 2024), these programs have in large part failed to quantitatively stem the increasing trend of school disengagement (ACARA, 2024). Alongside this, their state-by-state framework and delivery, and lack of success measures, sees aid toward students be delivered in a fragmented manner, rather than a cohesive unified and poignant solution to the ongoing challenges to learning posed by COVID-19 (Australian Parents Council, 2022, p. 3).

Proposed Policy Options

Creation of a National Student Re-Engagement and Wellbeing Framework

Given that programs such as the National Student Wellbeing Program (2021), as well as state initiatives such as Victoria's Tutor Learning Initiative have operated in isolated silos, the absence of an integrated national framework demonstrates a critical policy gap. Therefore, one unified framework, targeting all students, will alleviate this by providing cohesion in place of the current disjointed approach which only targets some students in some states.

Therefore, this submission proposes that the Minister for Education direct the Department to establish a new unified framework toward post-COVID-19 re-engagement at the next Education Ministers Meeting (Department of Education, 2023a) with a goal to unify attendance, wellbeing, and engagement metrics under a single reporting architecture, and to co-ordinate a national approach toward the alleviation of disengagement from school.

Creation of National Wrap-Around Re-Engagement Programs

Students experiencing multiple risk factors for disengagement, whether it be family stress, poverty, or mental-health issues, benefit most from holistic "wrap-around" models which integrate schools with social services (Seymour et al., 2020, p. 249). And yet, despite this, wrap-around services are only found in Victoria and Queensland, such as Victoria's Team Around the Learner program (Victorian Government, 2024), thus creating a fragmented approach between states' provision of wellbeing programs.

This submission therefore proposes that the Minister establishes a national wrap-around model of care for schools in addressing students who are disengaging from school, similar to Victoria's Team Around the Learner program (Victorian Government, 2024), alongside increased funding to both schools and related

social services in order to support the delivery of this new model, and establish bilateral relationships between schools and social services.

<u>Building Upon Evaluation Models of Programs Targeted Toward Disengagement</u>

Existing evaluations of programs to improve student wellbeing are narrow in perspective, focussing on the solution of one aspect of student disengagement, rather than their ability to address the broader, systemic factors which contribute to disengagement (Molla, 2024, p. 11).

Therefore, to best understand the efficacy of state and federal responses to students who disengage from school, the Government should instead implement mechanisms to evaluate both current programs, as well as the success of these proposed programs, in their ability to address the primary causes of school refusal, as well as its encompassing factors, using both quantitative data and qualitative case studies to do so.

This would not only accord with the recommendations provided by the 2023 OECD report into Australia's education system, broadening the evidence base across the education system to better capture a holistic vision of student wellbeing (p. 31), but would aid in ensuring that the Government's policy responses address the systemic factors behind school disengagement.

Ethical Considerations, Public Opinion and Second Order Consequences

<u>Ethical Considerations</u>

Policies which target disadvantaged students can face the ethical risk of unintentionally stigmatising those from low-income, Indigenous, or neurodivergent backgrounds (Chatzitheochari & Butler-Rees, 2022).

To mitigate this, the implementation of these policies must consider inclusion and cultural safety and should be co-designed with affected communities to avoid both reinforcing existing inequities amongst students, and 'othering' students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Chatzitheochari & Butler-Rees, 2022).

Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of the data which this policy wishes to be gathered, through its evaluation mechanism, the Government must ensure it accords with its obligations under the Privacy Act 1988 (Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, 2025).

<u>Public Opinion & Political Risk</u>

Whilst this policy will likely receive generally positive reception from the public, who support increased funding for children disengaging with school post-COVID-19 (Tuohy & Heffernan, 2023), this policy faces a risk of potential backlash from teachers as well as the Australian Education Union (AEU), who may perceive this reform to have a second order consequence of increasing their already heavy workload (Dunn, 2025).

Therefore, to mitigate any second order consequences of these new policies, and the political risk which they carry, the Minister should ensure that these new policy initiatives are funded adequately, and that the existing teaching workforce is increased to support their delivery.

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