REACHOUT

Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment

Inquiry into School Refusal

Submission by ReachOut Australia

About ReachOut

At [ReachOut](#) we are guided by a clear, simple ambition: Helping young people feel better.

Helping them to feel:

- better in the moments when they most need help
- better about who they are and their place in the world.

And to be:

- better able to cope with the challenges they are facing today
- better set up and equipped to manage when life doesn't go as planned.

Anonymous and confidential, ReachOut is a safe place where young people can openly express themselves, get a deeper understanding and perspective on what's happening in their lives, connect with people who will provide judgement-free support, and build the resilience to manage their challenges now and in the future.

One hundred per cent online and designed specifically for – and with – young people, ReachOut lets young people connect on their terms at any time from anywhere. From one-to-one support from experienced peer workers, to online communities, as well as tips, stories and resources, ReachOut offers a wide range of support options that allow young people to engage in the ways they want to, when they want to.

ReachOut Parents and ReachOut Schools provide valuable information, resources and advice to help parents, carers and educators better understand the young people in their lives and to play an active role in their wellbeing.

What is (and isn't) school refusal

School refusal stems from a teen's emotional distress and anxiety about school or another life event. It may present in students as distress before the child attends school (requests to stay home, delaying or refusing to get ready) through to reporting health complaints, skipping classes, leaving school or repeated absenteeism. In some cases it can also manifest in distressing physical symptoms with parents reporting that their children may refuse to eat or vomit, sit in the car shaking or experience panic attacks at the thought of attending school.

Affected students might be worried about keeping up with their school work, interacting with others, friendship issues, loneliness, dealing with teachers, playing sports or being away from their family. School refusal can also be driven by a trigger event such as a family break up or a death, or a mental health issue that may or may not be directly related to their schooling.

A 2017 NSW report identified the key risk factors for school refusal as mental health experiences, including anxiety (social, performance and general), depression, OCD and PTSD (Greenberg, Webster & Stojanovska, 2017). For young people with autism spectrum disorder or ADHD, McClemont et al. (2021) identified that school refusal was commonly related to experiences of bullying.

Lazarus's (2006) cognitive appraisal model of stress and coping outlines why some young people use avoidance as their coping strategy, while others employ more constructive behaviour, such as problem-solving or emotion-regulation coping strategies. According to this model, young people appraise their situation, informed by perceptions of themselves, their support structures and broader environment, resulting in emotions and behaviour. When their situation is deemed to be beyond their capacity to cope, school and life situations may become stressors, especially if they do not believe in their own abilities to cope. Refusal to attend school might be the only remaining coping strategy.

It is important, therefore, to be clear that school refusal is different from general 'wagging' or truancy (defined as unauthorised absence without permission or parent/carer knowledge or consent) and should not be treated as such (Malcolm et al., 2003; Sheppard, 2007).

School refusal is an issue that appears to be increasing in prevalence. In 2019, national estimates were that at least 50,000 children and young people are detached from organised schooling at any given time (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019). Separately, over the last two years ReachOut has noticed a significant increase in parents and carers seeking support for school refusal.

ReachOut understands that there are limited and varied structures to help young people return to school. We welcome this inquiry, as we believe more needs to be done to increase understanding of school refusal, of the reasons why young people refuse school, and of what families, schools, communities and policy makers can do to better support students to feel safe, welcome and supported to learn at school. We hope that this inquiry will lead to better recognition that school refusal is a legitimate issue, validate the experience of affected families and help reduce stigma.

ReachOut's service experience of school refusal

While school refusal isn't a new issue, ReachOut has observed a considerable increase in demand for support from parents and carers for school refusal since May 2020. It is clear that the pandemic, home schooling

and the return to in-person schooling has had a significant impact. Studies have highlighted that there should be concern about socially anxious children returning to school settings, as many of them demonstrated improvement while schools were closed and they studied from home (Morrissette, 2021).

ReachOut's youth Online Community has seen an increase in posts within its school space since 2020. While young people don't necessarily conceptualise school refusal, they do talk to this behaviour in relation to issues such as bullying and friendships, external pressure, mental health and discrimination.

The scale of increase that ReachOut has observed is demonstrated by the fact that views of our key school refusal resource more than doubled this year (40,428 Australian users viewed this resource 50,775 times) compared to last year (14,798 Australian users viewed the resource 18,914 times).
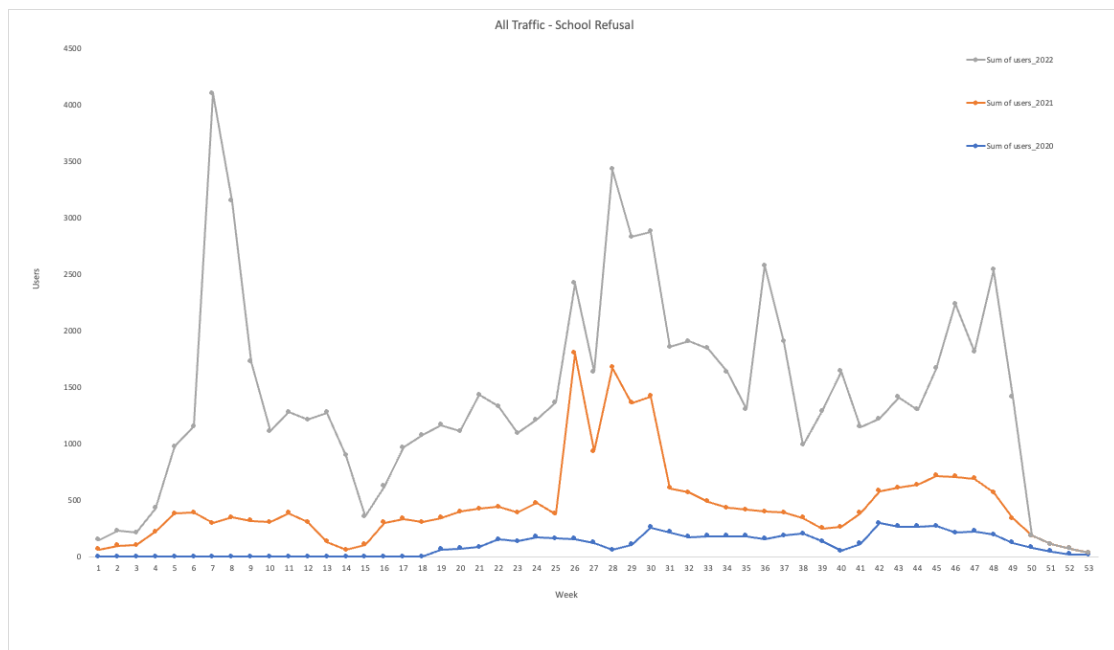

Chart: Weekly visitation to ReachOut key school refusal resource 2020-22.

Education issues and school refusal have been among the most discussed issues within ReachOut's Parents Forum this year. The top 5 most accessed information pieces in that forum this year reflect that the most talked about contextual concerns related to school refusal. These include: bullying and cyberbullying, teen ill-mental health, self-harm and suicidal thoughts in teens, teens and sexuality, and teens refusing to agree to formal mental health support.

Similarly, evaluation from our one-on-one Parents Coaching service showed that school disengagement and refusal was among the most common issues identified by parents as a reason they thought their child needed help.

Within the coaching service, the complexity varies in presentations from long-term school refusal to early signs of school refusal. In this program, school refusal is present across all age groups for teens, from 12 to 18 years of age.

Our coaches report that school refusal usually presents with mental health concerns for the teen – most often, anxiety (diagnosed or undiagnosed). Some families feel they have a handle on how they are responding to school refusal, but most feel unsupported and unsure of what to do.

Parents and carers often report to our coaches that they see a clear link to the COVID-19 pandemic, often citing that it has led to a decline in their

teen's mental health and that lockdowns, which meant extended time away from school, have made it more challenging for teens to transition back to the school environment. This appears to be particularly the case for teens who were already struggling with attendance and engagement at school.

How school refusal affects young people, and the impact of COVID-19

School refusal is the way other issues, including mental health issues, may present, rather than being a diagnosable condition or behavioural issue in itself.

School refusal does, however, result in its own impacts in addition to any others related specifically to underlying conditions. The implications for young people can include falling behind in school work and difficulties when it comes to friendships. In some of the most serious cases, there can also be legal or financial implications for parents, which may further exacerbate issues the young person is dealing with. ReachOut is aware of parents who have had to reduce their work hours or to stop working, which has had a significant impact on these parents' finances and wellbeing.

ReachOut believes that the increasing prevalence of school refusal is driven to a significant extent by the COVID-19 pandemic, associated lockdowns and the subsequent return to in-person schooling. In many jurisdictions, lockdowns saw young people undertaking schooling from home for extended periods. For many students (and parents), this was a new experience for which they may have felt unprepared.

At a time of significant general uncertainty, this change to schooling added additional pressures and new challenges. For some, the new learning environment saw them retreat socially, while others responded well when isolation offered a reprieve from the anxiety they already experienced attending school in person.

Coming out of lockdowns and returning to in-person schooling, some young people became anxious about the potential health impacts or about being in large groups. Many of those who enjoyed the remote-learning experience struggled to adjust when reverting back to traditional schooling. For others, friendships may have shifted and changed with online learning, creating new difficulties. Mission Australia (2022) identified that young people wanted additional support for transitioning back to face-to-face learning and more help in recovering from the impacts of lockdowns and remote learning.

While we are unable to draw direct conclusions, it is interesting to note that the states most impacted by lockdowns have since seen the biggest increase in parents and carers accessing ReachOut's key school refusal information resource.

State	Increase in user visitation, 2021–2022 (%)
NSW	127%
VIC	114%
QLD	62%
WA	52%
SA	63%
TAS	66%

How school refusal affects parents and carers

School refusal is an incredibly challenging and confronting issue for parents and carers to face – often with very limited support or guidance.

ReachOut has found that parents and carers often feel unsure about how to act in the best interests of their teen and how to provide them with effective support. Often this presents as a dilemma for parents and carers: should they be more forceful in making their teen attend school, or should they be more empathetic and allow them to remain home? Many parents also experience stigma with school refusal sometimes not being recognised as a legitimate issue or wrongfully seen as a failure of parenting.

It's a difficult scenario to navigate for parents and carers who are, understandably, worried about their teen's future and the impact that school refusal may have on them in the longer term. Many worry that their teen won't get the education – and, subsequently, the job – that they might have hoped for. This leads to worries that their teen may not reach their full potential and live the life they desire. There can also be a sense of loss for parents and carers around the future they envisioned for their teen and the reality of what is happening in their lives.

For many families with teenagers, communication can be a challenge at the best of times. School refusal can add further communication challenges and may even lead to a breakdown in the relationship between teens and their parents and carers. In many cases, there can be high levels of conflict around the issue, particularly where parents and carers feel that they have to enforce school attendance.

This relationship breakdown and increased conflict can lead to parents and carers feeling disempowered, while the teenager often feels misunderstood, which itself can have further negative impacts.

ReachOut is aware that some parents have had to quit their jobs or take extended leave to be at home with their teens, particularly if the teen's mental health has declined to the point where they are experiencing suicidal ideation and/or self-harming. This can place immense pressure on the family home and the family's finances, causing further stress.

How ReachOut provides support

ReachOut provides a range of evidence-informed, co-designed information and resources for young people that help them to understand what they are going through, and encourages them to take actions that will support their wellbeing, including self-help and accessing additional professional support as required. We take a strengths-based approach that aims to validate and empower young people.

Young people don't think of their experience as 'school refusal'. They frame their experience in a variety of ways, often with reference to underlying causes or feelings such as feeling stressed, anxious or lonely. As such, ReachOut's resources for young people speak to these issues, rather than to 'school refusal'.

ReachOut also provides peer support options for young people through our Online Community and our new one-to-one peer support model, PeerChat. Peer support allows young people to express what they are going through, to understand that they are not alone, to gain validation, and to learn from the similar experiences of others.

For parents and carers dealing with school refusal, it can be hard to know where to begin. ReachOut has a range of support resources, including

information for parents and carers on how to help a teen who doesn't want to go to school and how to motivate your teenager for school. We also have a wide range of information and resources aimed at improving connection and communication between parents and teenagers.

Our Parents and Carers Forum is also a great place for parents and carers to share their experience and find out what has worked for others.

Many parents and carers have also found our Parents and Carers Coaching service to be particularly effective in helping them to work through this issue and try new strategies. The one-on-one coaching program uses a coaching framework that is client-led and future-focused, with the view that the parent/carer is the expert in their teen's life. This approach helps parents to set goals (with the support of coaches) that they feel they have the capacity to work towards.

The program provides a safe space for parents and carers to share their concerns or worries and to explore challenges around parenting school refusal. Parents and carers often feel validated by this alone. They are provided with psycho-education and supported to consider their teen's perspective, which can lead to a greater understanding of the impact of mental health and adolescent development on teen school refusal.

Many parents and carers take the opportunity to shift their focus from enforcing school attendance to considering how to support their teen with their mental health. This can lead to improved connection and communication, which allows opportunity for the parent and teen to problem solve collaboratively around the teen's mental health and to address the issues underpinning school refusal.

Importantly, parents and carers are supported to consider what is within their control versus what is outside of their control. Coaches also support parents and carers to explore practical ideas, such as additional professional and informal (friends/family) support that is required, how to communicate with the school to put a plan in place and to advocate for the teen's needs, how to explore alternative education options, and how to keep their teen safe. Parents are also supported to consider their own self-care and wellbeing, which is often overlooked but vitally important.

School refusal is an issue that has been an increasingly common topic raised in coaching sessions. As such, we have instituted regular group supervision for our coaches around this issue. This allows our team to explore common presentations around school refusal and common challenges when supporting parents and carers with this concern. This helps us to develop specialised knowledge and skills to support parents with this issue in our program.

ReachOut's tips for parents

Across our services we have some key tips and advice for parents and carers:

1. Have open conversations to try to get to the bottom of why your teen doesn't want to be at school. Try to be as non-judgemental as possible – even if you don't think the barrier is a big deal, it may be for your teen – and help them to understand that they are not in trouble and that you just want to help.
2. Work on some ways to motivate your teen – for example, 'shift the conversation' off the pressures of school and getting good marks. Instead, centre conversations around the positives they link to school.
3. Research alternative pathways with your teen – for example, an apprenticeship or other learning options.
4. Let the school know what is happening, and work with school staff and your teen towards solutions – for example, give your teen

information in advance about what they will be doing that day at school and work out solutions for particular activities that might be making them anxious.

5. Seek support from your GP, a mental health professional or a support service such as ReachOut – including the ReachOut Parents Coaching service.

Is more support needed?

Many parents and carers tell us that they feel isolated when dealing with this issue. This is actually quite a common way for parents of teens in high school to feel. Parents are usually quite connected with their child's school community through the primary school years, but that relationship often changes when their child gets to secondary school.

As noted above, a 2019 report estimated that at least 50,000 children and young people are detached from organised schooling at any given time. However, national support or structures to help young people return to schooling is limited (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019).

There is some support available to parents, including through some schools, specialist programs and ReachOut. ReachOut's support for parents and carers includes information, forums where they can share what's going on with others who might have been there too, and a one-on-one coaching service.

We understand that support for this issue may vary between schools. Given the scale of the challenge and the widespread impact that school refusal can have on students and families, it is important that more is done to ensure that parents understand what support currently exists, and that consistent best-practice approaches are developed for schools to implement.

This is why this inquiry is so important. Policy makers need to hear from people with lived-experience of school refusal, its impacts and to share lessons about what works to address it.

It is vital that when examining what additional support is needed to help students return to schooling that we find holistic solutions that address the complex, systemic issues underlying students' school refusal. If we are to create lasting, positive change, we have to look for what we all can do as a community to reduce the prevalence of school refusal and to ensure that all students feel safe, welcome and supported to learn at school.

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