



WACSSO

Partnering with P&Cs to
advance public education

WACSSO SUBMISSION

*The national trend of
school refusal and
related matters*

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgement of Country

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations pays respect to First Nations and Traditional Custodians throughout Australia, recognising their connection to land, waters and sky.

We acknowledge parents, families, Elders and communities as sharers of culture and knowledge; and recognise the value this learning holds for children and young people.

Acknowledging Parents

WACSSO acknowledges parents* as the first educators in their child's life. We celebrate and honour the diversity of families and recognise the vital role they play in supporting children and young people throughout their learning journeys.

* WACSSO recognises the term "parent" to also include a child's primary carer.

Who is WACSSO

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school students in Western Australia. For over 100 years, WACSSO has provided services and representation at State and National levels to more than 660 Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs). WACSSO is primarily a volunteer organisation made up of a President and State Councillors (representatives) from geographically based electorates. As such, the Organisation has a wide representative reach across the state. WACSSO uses our strong networks with parents, carers and stakeholders in public education to inform our advocacy efforts.

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Introduction

Poor student behaviour has often led the discourse around absenteeism. The terminology of school refusal is relatively new to parents and teachers and is an issue that has received little attention or explanation. Therefore, when a child refuses to attend school, people often think this is a parenting problem.

The term 'school refusal' refers to students experiencing intense emotional suffering that results in having difficulty attending school or leaving home. Consequently, students may miss all or part of the day and remain at home with parental consent. Sometimes students do not go to school for extended periods of time.

School refusal differs from truancy because it is not a deliberate situation. Current research suggests that it should be understood as a school phobia and that it would be more accurate to say a student can't, not won't, go to school. Often the child wants to be able to go to school, but they simply can't due to experiencing a range of problems that can be identified as a threat by their nervous system, to which they respond with a shutdown, fight or flight response. This is a stress-based behaviour that can affect students of any age, and responding to it requires identifying the cause of the child's distress and expert support.

School refusal is often categorised as a parenting problem. This narrative is unfair and uninformed and does not take into account the lived experience of families whose child is struggling to go to school. Parents report feeling embarrassed and judged that they are unable to "make" their child attend school. Parents often really feel they have failed. Additionally, they become frustrated due to the lack of understanding and support with the first response from schools seemingly arbitrary in nature.

This submission speaks to the experiences of Western Australian parents of children and young people who have struggled with school refusal. WACSSO thanks them for sharing their experiences.

A. The increasing number of young people and families experiencing school refusal since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic

WACSSO State Councillors live and volunteer in electorates across Western Australia. This grassroots connection to public school P&Cs ensures effective representation and authentic reporting of the issues experienced by WA parents and school communities. Concerningly, WACSSO affiliates continue to report rising anxiety and wellbeing concerns in children and young people. Anxiety and its impacts are becoming increasingly familiar to parents, and among the observed results are increasing numbers of young people refusing school. Schools, Education Departments, and governments often use the term disengaged as a generic word for students challenged by their school experience (1). It is difficult to be precise about the number of students who have been experiencing school refusal, but according to a report published by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in November 2019, research shows that there may be over 50,000 unaccounted detached students across Australia. There is also growing anecdotal evidence, reported through many media outlets, that the number of students disengaging from school has only increased since the onset of the pandemic. A more precise breakdown of why students disengage from school is required to enable schools, families and educational policy to start to develop appropriate mitigation strategies.

Although the experiences of WA students and their families varied during the COVID-19 pandemic, WACSSO affiliates reported significant impacts on their everyday life. COVID-19 also provides a strong example of the widening socioeconomic divide of resources available to different families and in different communities. This divide directly impacts children's and young people's resilience and ability to cope. WACSSO acknowledges the leadership demonstrated by the Western Australian Government with initiatives such as access to laptops, the COVID education helpline, a comprehensive information directory on health and wellbeing topics for parents, and a significant library of online educational resources to assist parents when their children were learning at home.

As mentioned, it has been reported that since the pandemic has increased the number of students who have completely disengaged (unenrolled) from school. (2). An increase in the number of unenrolled students leads to an increase in the need for remote learning options. Remote learning is not the total solution, however as it requires specific skills and resources. WACSSO understands that some students found remote education works because they no longer have the pressure of socialising in the classroom, while others found the lack of socialisation distressing. Additionally, due to the rapid nature in which students and families were forced to implement remote learning many students found the transition confronting and difficult. Subsequently their confidence as learners and ability to cope were negatively impacted. All these scenarios perceived or real have potentially affected their return to school. These outcomes point to the conclusion that, while remote learning is a welcome option for some students, it does not solve the underlying issue of school disengagement and therefore cannot be put forward as the only alternative.

B. How school refusal has been affecting young people and their families and the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents and carers

School refusal, especially when it occurs over an extended period, can have a significant impact on parents' ability to work. The financial stress this places families under is further exacerbated when there are existing economic constraints, or when it is a single-parent family.

Considering that school refusal is a stress-based behaviour, identifying and then reducing the stressor is critical. Sometimes parents believe their only option is home-school their child for a period before trying schooling again. Not all families are in a financial position to do this, and home-schooling presents its own challenges, particularly if combined with an underlying diagnosis and for children with diagnosed or undiagnosed disabilities. Children living with disability who attract funding in school settings, may not necessarily attract the same financial support for education resourcing when home-schooled. This places an additional financial burden on families, especially where tutors or education assistant support are required to be employed privately.

Unfortunately, very often, an imbalance between the mental health care system and disability funding is observed, because the latter is not flexible enough to meet the needs of people who have children with school attendance difficulties. Some funding is available under the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme, designated for parents and carers of children who cannot attend a local state school. (3) Nevertheless, very few families are eligible for the Distance Education Allowance, and the maximum amount is around \$4,428 a year. Some parents are eligible for carers' allowance if Services Australia has diagnosed their child. However, unless the child has a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), Services Australia will not fund school-related assistance.

C. The impacts and demands of the increasing caseload on health service providers and schools to support students affected by school refusal and their families

While many schools were able to pivot to provide take-home resources to assist with remote learning during COVID, the increasing caseload and lack of resources in the health sector have had a massive impact on families. Families report having difficulty getting qualified mental health support for their children with huge waiting lists. When they finally see a specialist, they feel that very few professionals acknowledge the issue. Some have reported that “only through a really exceptional GP they got through the maze.” (1) For teachers and school support staff, helping families and children through difficult periods without adequate resources and a diagnosis becomes very challenging and ultimately negatively impacts the child. Chronic stress, which surrounds students affected by school refusal, can lead to further mental health problems. In order to help them disentangle themselves from this ordeal, the students and their families should be able to count on welfare officers and psychologists to address the reasons for disengagement through wellbeing programs.

WACSSO supports efforts to increase the number of specialised professionals who can diagnose, treat and support children as they navigate complex mental health concerns. Additional support and resources in this sector would also provide much-needed benefits for schools, who may be struggling to accommodate undiagnosed children, or children who, unable to see a professional, are not able to access suitable treatment options. These factors are putting undue stress on parents, students and school staff and likely contributing to school refusal.

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

While the national government is addressing the issue via this Senate inquiry, and State governments are implementing some initiatives, there is still much that can be done. In WA, resources are available online to support parents whose children are exhibiting signs of school refusal (4) however, crucial issues remain, and WACSSO recommends:

- Further research is needed into understanding the nature of school refusal. This should be focused on both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic contexts. Leading out of the research, WACSSO would hope that schools would have the information they need to adopt collaborative, proactive solutions and intervention models that could help parents navigate through these delicate moments.
- Accurate data on school refusals (rather than it being captured under the broader category of "Illness and medical appointments." (4) An initiative on the national level is required so that all States and Territories can change the way students' absences are recorded to track school refusal better, meaning this will no longer remain an invisible problem.
- Real action should be taken to resolve the overloaded health department and demand for therapists in the private sector. Furthermore, specific training and research is recommended to support healthcare professionals understand the issues surrounding school refusal. Professional development programs should be developed focusing on understanding school refusal from a stress framework. For this, it should be supported by neuroscience in a holistic approach centred on student well-being.
- The absenteeism data available on the Commissioner for Children and Young People website is pre-Covid data. It is recommended that this study be repeated and that it includes school refusal as a separate category of absenteeism to be explored.

Conclusion

It is critical that schools guard against school refusal leading to disengagement from learning, social withdrawal, and reduced mental health and wellbeing. The ongoing negative impacts of disengagement on young people and families are concerning and must be addressed. School refusal requires more than care and attention; it requires resourcing and expert practice to support students, their families and schools to appropriately address the underlying issues and improve education outcomes for children and young people. Ultimately, to address this issue WACSSO recommends collective effort from both the education and health sectors, informed by dedicated research.

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