

School Can't Australia

Response to the recommendations of the Senate inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters

SCA's community of parents and carers extends thanks to The Senate: Education and Employment References Committee for its efforts in conducting an inquiry into school can't and producing a report for Parliament. Following the release of the report many parents and carers of school can't children have spoken about how the report has made them feel seen and heard for the first time. They have shared in our group how positive this has been for them.

SCA supports the recommendations in the report and is willing and eager to collaborate and share our lived experience knowledge. We are happy to assist in developing shared understandings about school attendance difficulties. We welcome research that is informed by lived experience knowledge. 'Nothing about us without us' will lead to better mutual understanding and solutions to the problems our community faces.

SCA welcomes recognition of the valuable national parent peer-support service we provide both online and face-to-face. Demand for our service has grown considerably and we are in desperate need of funding so that we can continue to provide crucial support to parents and carers. It is important to note that whilst SCA is recognised as the largest and most valuable national support service for families experiencing school can't, it is wholly run by unpaid volunteers who themselves are juggling the demands of having a child experiencing school can't. Funding for SCA will enable us to:

- Continue supporting students experiencing school can't by providing direct support and understanding to their parents and carers.
- Reduce wait times (currently over 3 months) for parents to receive peer support.
- Establish and maintain a website, enabling the information, knowledge and resources we have collated in our Facebook group to be made publicly accessible. A website would also help us communicate the lived experience knowledge we have co-created since 2014, further building understanding in the community.
- Employ and train lived-experience peer support workers to moderate our online group and host face-to-face support groups. It is important that these workers have Mental Health First Aid Certification and are supported with adequate supervision to safeguard their own well-being while serving our community.
- Expand our face-to-face support groups throughout capital cities and regional areas.
- Afford insurance to safeguard volunteers and any paid staff and the valuable work they do.
- Continue providing a service that is free or low cost. An often overlooked but devastating impact of school can't is that many parents experience a substantial loss of income and loss of career progression, while they support their school can't child.

SCA welcomes:

- Research into the effectiveness of interventions to support students experiencing school can't. We strongly recommend this research be conducted in consultation with the students, parents

and carers who have lived experience. We also strongly recommend that this research include consultation with neurodivergent individuals (SCSurvey22 indicated that 73% of the students we support are neurodivergent).

- Development of resources about school can't. We strongly advise that these be developed in consultation with SCA.
- A review of child health and development screening programs with the aim of facilitating early identification of autism, ADHD and specific learning disorders. Delays in diagnoses contribute to increased student stress.
- Action to help identify students at risk of school attendance difficulties. SCA recommends that to assist with this, consideration be given to the use of tools that identify student stressors (including school-based stressors), school climate surveys, and staff wellbeing measures. In addition to research investigating protective and risk factors influencing transition experiences, especially of neurodivergent students.
- The broadening of data collection at schools to account for differences in attendance. Parents should not have to select "Truancy" or "Parent Choice" when their child is experiencing school can't. We cannot make sense of the scale of this experience or the effectiveness of any intervention or changes if we have inadequate data collection.
- Increased flexibility in education delivery. We recommend more work be done to legitimise homeschooling as a valid option and that consideration be given to financial support for homeschool parents who have had to take on the role of educators. Recognising that for many, homeschooling is an option of last resort when all other avenues offered by the Department of Education have been exhausted.
- The recommendation to improve awareness and understanding of school can't within the health sector. Our families have consistently told us that front-line support services frequently fail to understand and meet their needs. We stand ready to help build the capacity of services supporting students, parents and carers. SCA has spoken at three conferences this year. We look forward to assisting in the creation of professional development resources for multiple stakeholders including: parents and carers, teachers, allied health clinicians, paediatricians, general practitioners, and psychiatrists.
- The recommendation that messaging regarding attendance be urgently updated. Current messaging promotes attendance over well-being and contributes to feelings of parental failure and shame.
- The development and use of trauma-informed practices in schools. To facilitate transition from understanding **school can't as a stress response and not a misbehaviour**, and to support students experiencing school can't it is essential to have a neurobiological understanding of the autonomic nervous system and the stress response. It is our experience that Positive Behaviour Support is an ineffective and potentially harmful approach when used to manage school can't.
- Consultation in relation to what effective family engagement looks like and the provision of specialist family engagement support staff in schools (recommendation 10). We believe it would be important that these staff be trained in trauma-informed practice, and Dr Ross Greene's Collaborative Proactive Solutions model.
- The recommendation that all teachers receive professional development in the Universal Design for Learning framework.

School Can't Australia looks forward to partnering with Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) and contributing lived experience knowledge to assist AERO in conducting informed research on school can't to develop a National Action Plan on School Can't.

SCA encourages the identification and promotion of effective models for collaboration between the education, health AND **disability** sectors (R 12).

SCA is disappointed that there is only one recommendation in the report which will potentially reduce the financial burden parents experience in supporting their school can't children. Recommendation 14 to increase the number of subsidised mental health care visits for those experiencing school can't is welcome. SCA feels that it would be appropriate to assist with:

- Reducing the cost of assessments to identify potential underlying disabilities in students over the age of 7. These assessments play an important role in identifying stressors which might have contributed to school can't. Currently, students under the age of seven can access assessments through Early Intervention via NDIS.
- Childcare costs for a child unable to attend school so that parents can work if their child is home (vital for single parents).
- Increasing the number of sessions a carer can use to discuss support of their school can't child's mental health whilst using the child's Mental Health Care Plan. Currently only two sessions out of 10 can be used by a carer to discuss their child's care. This is essential if the child is too unwell to engage with the clinician.

SCA calls for an urgent increase in the number of outreach services that can provide telehealth or home visits for mental health care.

SCA calls for urgent research to identify school-based stressors especially as experienced by students with a disability.

SCA calls for Departments of Education across the country to immediately STOP sending letters threatening legal action to parents and carers who have students experiencing school can't. This is inappropriate and causes severe distress and mental anguish to both parents/carers and their children. These letters presume that the parent is being neglectful and the child is wilfully refusing to go to school. Nothing could be further from the truth!

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