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Parents' Voice in Government School Education

9 December, 2022

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT REFERENCES COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL REFUSAL

Dear Senators,

Parents Victoria (PV) is a state wide democratic organisation representing parents of students in Victorian government schools. PV welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee Inquiry into school refusal.

PV is also a State Affiliate of the **Australian Council of State School Organisations** (ACSSO). ACSSO being the national voice of parents and children in Australia's public schools and their school communities, we also support their submission into this inquiry.

PV would like to take this inquiry opportunity to outline how we view school refusal through a parent's lens from a Victorian perspective.

School refusal is relational

The Problem & Solutions

> The child does not wish to enter the trench warfare that is purely relational in the school. The relationships the children have to form or encounter can just be too much for them.

> The learning side of things is not the real challenge it is the lack of "social security" which denies them the proclivity to enter the school environment. The relationship matrix that is the school, frightens them and they feel out of control.

> Families likewise struggle with this trench warfare for they try to set strategies to encourage their child but find that they in the end; in trying to maintain a care relationship with their child, are compromised and feel without direction. These families can feel shame and as parents they "hide" by establishing explanations that deflect away from shame and blame.

> Schools are not equipped with people to deal with these challenging cases and therefore are unable to really assist the child so behaving, or the family.

> Special training is needed - and much care as the school works with the parents in the first place - and then with the child. This is quite an investment and is critical.

> Sometimes the psychologists are not helpful for they are looking for weaknesses in upbringing and thus find themselves on the shame/blame path. Parents find this off putting and unhelpful.

> Each circumstance requires care and different attention. This takes time and patience and "active and constructive listening" before beginning to, with the parent and the child, set a process jointly and then erode the refusal. Often steps are made and then lost in this process so the process has to be resilient and manage the failures constructively without harming any of the stakeholders.

> There are too many do-gooders who have the answers for schools and parents, but who have not worked with real circumstances families are facing.

> It is easy to advise at arms-length however actually working with these circumstance-driven individuals and families requires establishing a quality relationship, trusting all, having faith in one another, forgiving one another, not harming anyone, injecting hope - as a key ingredient - for it eventually provides the child with a sense of control (and the family).

> Everyone needs to understand that the overall intention is the care for the child.

> Understanding the five elements of a quality relationship, being forever referred to and attended to by all parties. Refer to our recent work with **Relationship based Education (RbE)**. https://www.parentsvictoria.asn.au/issues_category/relationship-based-education/

> The overall aim is to help and to give a sense of relational security and relational confidence which then allows the school-refusing student to be more courageous and to step more confidently into the relational unknowns they all face when they attend school.

PV acknowledges every school refusal case is unique, it must be treated differently and with care. The above is an attempt to give an outline to what can work in all cases but remembering that such does need to be nuanced to each case.

It is not uncommon for schools to enforce part time attendance or suspend primary school aged students for complex behaviours. Those families impacted constantly question how can this be acceptable when schools and the government advocate it's not OK to be away and how absenteeism impacts on learning?

PV would like to express our deep concerns that student bullying in schools has a direct correlation with poor student attendance. This can often lead to school refusal if the bullying is not addressed quickly and child feels unsafe.

Finally, PV would like to take this opportunity to suggest a further solution as a form of prevention measure – **Family Engagement Officers**. This added human resource would enable teachers to know and engage families more effectively. It would reduce the demands on teacher workload and potentially address the challenges teachers are raising with their employer to prevent them leaving the profession. <https://www.parentsvictoria.asn.au/issues/family-engagement-officers-in-schools/>

PV looks forward to hearing about the findings from this inquiry and more importantly the solutions that result from it.

Sincerely, **Gail McHardy, Chief Executive Officer**