



**Children and Young People  
with Disability Australia**

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Committee Secretary  
Education and Employment References Committee  
Inquiry into *The national trend of school refusal and related matters*  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**6 December 2022**

Please accept this letter and response to the terms of reference (refer Appendix A) as Children and Young People with Disability Australia's (CYDA) submission to the Education and Employment References Committee's Inquiry into *The national trend of school refusal and related matters* (Inquiry).

Students with disability face multiple barriers and difficulties in accessing education, support for reasonable adjustments and the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers, placing enormous pressure on them. Significantly, the lives of children and young people with disability have been thrown into turmoil throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic period, further exacerbating and increasing the experience of school refusal.

The experience of school refusal is a significant challenge for students, families and schools but there are many areas of the experience that need more research, resources and evidence-based data to support all parties.

CYDA welcomes this Inquiry as an opportunity to examine:

1. how students with disability are supported to ensure attendance and engagement at and with school across the curriculum and social and extra-curricular activities
2. how school refusal exacerbates and/or is driven by existing system inequity
3. how families and schools respond to the experience of school refusal and the impact of ableism and societal beliefs
4. how can existing and future school-based measures of wellbeing and inclusion help address experiences of school refusal

Without targeted and adequate research, data, policy responses, action and intervention, children and young people will continue to feel the social and economic impacts for a lifetime.

Please refer to the attached [Appendix A](#) for more detailed responses to select terms of reference and [Appendix B](#) for further information on CYDA's relevant policy work. If you would like to know more about our submission or CYDA's work, please feel free to contact CYDA's Policy and Research Manager, Dr Liz Hudson on (03) 9417 1025 or [lizhudson@cyda.org.au](mailto:lizhudson@cyda.org.au).

Kind regards,

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## Appendix A CYDA’s response to Inquiry Terms of Reference

The national trend of school refusal or 'School Can't' – as distinct from truancy – that is affecting primary and secondary school aged children, who are unable to attend school regularly or on a consistent basis, with specific reference to:

Terms of reference item	CYDA’s response
<p>a. the increasing number since the COVID-19 pandemic, of young people and their families who are experiencing school refusal;</p>	<p>A joint report authored by UNICEF and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) found that not only have existing inequities for some groups of children and young people been further entrenched throughout COVID-19 disruptions, but without intervention, children and young people will feel the impacts for their lifetime as disadvantages will continue to be widened.<sup>i</sup></p>
<p>b. how school refusal is affecting young people and their families and the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents and carers;</p>	<p>Remarks from the parent of Theo (pseudonym) 6 years old in prep:</p> <p><i>“After nearly a whole school year of trying to discover and address some of the causes of Theo’s anxiety around school, we’ve decided as a family that I will not be able to continue in my part-time job next year. Aside from feeling helpless and distressed for my child, I’m also disappointed for our family that school just doesn’t seem to be a place that can accommodate him. It’s not how I expected our family life to be and the knock-on impacts to our finances and mental health are significant”.</i></p> <p><i>“I’ve mostly gotten ‘I don’t want to talk about it’ when I ask Theo about finding it difficult to go to school each day, but one thing that he does say repeatedly is, ‘I just don’t feel safe’.”</i></p> <p>Remarks from a parent of a now 18-year-old student: <i>“School refusal has greatly impacted my family. My daughter struggled to attend school throughout most of her high school years because of anxiety disorder. She would miss days or weeks of school. The response from staff was to wait until she returned and punish her with lunchtime or after school detention. One teacher told her she could</i></p>

Terms of reference item	CYDA's response
	<p><i>entertain herself in class because she was too behind to catch her up with the curriculum. Both approaches intensified her anxiety.</i></p> <p><i>For myself, school refusal has taken its toll physically, emotionally and financially. Many hours have been spent away from my casual job to advocate for my daughter at her school. As a single parent my family rely on my income. The emotional strain of fighting the school to accommodate my daughter has meant that I suffer more frequent and severe migraines.</i></p> <p><i>The stress on my son saw him with bouts of frustration, mood swings and feelings of sadness. There were times he felt isolated from his friends and school staff, who he felt failed to support his sister.</i></p> <p><i>My daughter is now 18 and has spent more of her high school years at home rather than attending school. This has meant she has missed out on learning academic and social skills, attending numerous school social events, socialising and forming relationships with her peers. She continues to struggle with anxiety and currently does not have any friends.”</i></p>
<p>c. the impacts and demands of the increasing case load on service providers and schools to support these students and their families;</p>	<p>Schools and their staff need support and investment to facilitate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• time for planning</li> <li>• time for working directly with students and families</li> <li>• resources and development to explore the difference between attendance and engagement and how a focus on engagement can lift attendance, experience and outcomes</li> <li>• simplified way of briefing and supporting relief staff</li> <li>• consistency in use of data and documentation</li> </ul>
<p>d. how relevant state, territory and federal departments are working to</p>	<p>CYDA believes it is critical to collect, share and act upon data that differentiates between types of</p>

Terms of reference item	CYDA's response
<p>monitor and address this growing school refusal challenge; and</p>	<p>absence and exclusion to tailor appropriate and workable policy responses. The data should be able to be differentiated so that the experiences of students with disability can be compared against their non-disabled peers. Other data such as culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and First Nations identification should also be collected in order to ensure policy responses are culturally appropriate and safe. CYDA recommends the following data must be collected</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• gatekeeping – enrolment exclusion</li> <li>• reduced hours or part time enrolment as instigated by the school</li> <li>• micro-exclusions for activities or excursions</li> <li>• student disciplinary absences – suspension, expulsion whether driven by behaviour due to lack of adjustments for disability or other</li> <li>• school refusal or school CANT</li> <li>• absences due to COVID-19 risk to student and/or household member</li> <li>• absences due to illness, family or home circumstances, truancy, and other</li> </ul>
<p>e. any other related matters.</p>	<p>CYDA acknowledges that as at the time of writing (November, 2022), transition for 2023 is now the focus for schools, students and families – bringing new schools, new teachers, new classroom peers, and new subjects. An individual student's experience of school refusal may well be impacted and renewed. CYDA optimistically hopes that this Inquiry can invite constructive and supportive input so that students can be supported to engage in their education.</p>

## Appendix B Further information and resources

### CYDA's COVID-19 work:

1. [Response](#) to the Disability Royal Commission's Omicron issues paper
2. Co-signatories on the Disability sector Omicron [statement of concern](#)
3. [Concern](#) about the DRC not making recommendations following the neglect of students with disability during the COVID pandemic
4. [Report](#) "How did COVID-19 impact post-school transitions for young people with disability and how can these be better supported?"
5. [Report](#) "Locked out: Vaccination discrimination for children and young people with disability"
6. Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, [CYDA Submission](#)
7. [Submission](#) to the Disability Royal Commission: Emergency Planning and Response during COVID-19
8. [Report](#) "Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19"
9. CYDA former CEO, Mary Sayers Disability Royal Commission [witness statement](#)
10. [Report](#) "More than isolated: The experience of children and young people with disability and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic"
11. Co-signatories on [Open letter](#) to National Cabinet Immediate Actions Required for Australians with Disability in Response to Coronavirus (COVID19)

### CYDA's work on education (relevant to the Inquiry)

12. Submission to the Disability Royal Commission, Education of children and young people with disability, [Submission 1](#)
13. [Driving change: A roadmap for achieving inclusive education in Australia](#)
14. Parliament of Victoria, Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, Inquiry into the response to COVID-19, [CYDA Submission](#)
15. Victorian consultation on lessons from remote learning, [CYDA Submission](#)
16. Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, education in remote and complex environments, [CYDA Submission](#) (2) and [CYDA Submission](#) (1)
17. Disability Royal Commission - [Response](#) to Restrictive Practices issues paper
18. [Response](#) to the National Strategy to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse Final Development Consultation Paper
19. [Position Paper](#) on Segregation
20. Drive inclusion and equity for children and young people with disability: 2021-22 [Pre-Budget submission](#)
21. NDS & NDIS Outcomes Framework Introductory Paper, [CYDA Submission](#)

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<sup>i</sup> Harris, D., Seriamlu, S. Dakin, P. & Sollis, K. (2021). *Kids at the Crossroads: Evidence and Policy to Mitigate the Effects of COVID-19*. ARACY. Available at [Kids-at-The-Crossroads-UNICEF-Australia-ARACY.pdf](#)