

22 March 2023

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters

Dear Committee Secretary,

UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee inquiry into the *National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters*.

School refusal is a growing problem in Australia. It is a challenge which concerns the child's right to an education (Article 28 of the CRC) which develops a child's personality and talents to the full (Article 29 of the CRC). School refusal is also symptom of the underlying struggles that children and young people in Australia are facing with mental health, financial insecurity and poverty, homelessness, abuse and violence, in a general environment beset by overlapping crises – cost-of-living, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

School refusal rates have increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic, partly due to the disruption of school closures, and partly due to the general impacts of lockdowns on the health and wellbeing of children and young people. In Victoria, where lockdowns were longest, school refusal rates are estimated to have increased by 50% between 2018 and 2021.ⁱ Research by UNICEF Australia and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People (ARACY) found that nearly half of Australian children and young people risked adverse education outcomes upon being physically disconnected from school, whereas disadvantaged students, including First Nations students were four times less likely to have internet at home, and therefore more likely to be completely disengaged from learning.ⁱⁱ The reopening of schools across Australia after prolonged lockdowns has been beneficial for children and young people, but has triggered anxiety and distress for some, preventing return to the classroom.

In this post-pandemic context, it is vital that governments make available targeted investments to engage and support students to return and remain in school.

UNICEF Australia supports the Federal Government's investments in school-based mental health supports announced in the October 2022 Federal Budget. Providing sustainable access to mental health professionals, to wellbeing and resilience-building programs, and to diverse, tailored recreational activities in schools improves students' mental health outcomes and their overall experiences of school. If co-designed with expert child-focussed mental health providers and children themselves to address the phenomenon of school refusal, these programs can also support the early identification, intervention, and support of students at-risk of or struggling with refusal.

The responsibility of psychosocial intervention and care for children experiencing or at risk of school refusal should not sit exclusively within the school system. It is important for governments to make targeted investments in local allied health, psychosocial, youth services, and parental guardians, including through specialised training in

understanding and addressing school refusal. These investments should be prioritised in geographical areas experiencing higher levels of pre-existing disadvantage, and where school attendance rates are markedly lower.ⁱⁱⁱ It is also important for any national or state and territory-level plan to address school refusal to take an explicitly and holistically intersectional approach. This involves understanding and addressing the compounding barriers to school attendance that affect children with disability, children with chronic illness, children from First Nations and CALD communities, children affected by parental incarceration or in out-of-home care, and children with caring responsibilities. Such responses require significant consultation and innovative multi-sector and/or place-based partnerships, and access to flexible and sustainable funding.

In the long-run, implementing the world-leading *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* will go a long way towards improving mental health outcomes for children at the population level. The Strategy has identified ways to respond to long-standing system-wide issues that have plagued the mental health system for years, cutting across family and community, the service system and workforce, the importance of education settings, and ensuring our decisions are guided by evidence and evaluation.

Warm regards,

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UNICEF Australia

ⁱ Christine Grove and Alexandra Marinucci, "You can't fix school refusal with 'tough love' but these steps might help," *The Conversation*, 6 February 2023 (accessed: 20 March 2023), <[You can't fix school refusal with 'tough love' but these steps might help \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/you-cant-fix-school-refusal-with-tough-love-but-these-steps-might-help)>

ⁱⁱ UNICEF Australia and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), "An Urgent Call to Refocus Australia's Pathway out of the COVID-19 Pandemic to the Needs of Children and Young People," 2021, Page 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data from the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW), for example, shows that school attendance rates decrease as remoteness increase, with attendance considerable lower in very remote areas as compared to major cities. See for example, Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW), "Australia's Children: Attendance at Primary School," AIHW, 25 February 2022 (accessed: 20 March 2023), <[Australia's children, Attendance at primary school - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-young-people/attendance-at-primary-school)>