

Australian Senate inquiry highlights worsening problem of children “refusing” to attend school

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The Australian federal Senate has for several months held an inquiry, “The national trend of school refusal and related matters,” with the findings to be published later this month. Submissions and testimonies provided to the inquiry have shed light on yet another serious problem that has emerged within the crisis-stricken public education system—the inability or unwillingness of large numbers of children to regularly attend school.

The exact scale of school avoidance is unknown, as no national standardised data is kept. One 2019 report, “Those Who Disappear: the Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about,” authored by University of Melbourne researchers, found: “Conservative estimates are that at least 50,000 children and young people of school age have detached from any educational program or institution, across the country at any given time.”

Other statistics suggest this number may just be the tip of an emerging iceberg.

Megan Gilmour, the chief executive of the Missing School organisation, which works to raising awareness of the educational issues facing children who miss school because of critical or chronic illness, spoke to the Senate inquiry panel. She cited another study that estimated that 1.2 million students across the country—that is, a quarter of the estimated 4 million children enrolled in Australian schools—“may be in a well-being, medical or disability crisis serious enough to affect their attendance and educational outcomes.”

A 2017 study by the Grattan Institute reported that a staggering 40 percent of Australian students were disengaged from learning and falling two years behind their peers.

Submissions to the Senate inquiry pointed to the complex and diverse reasons for school avoidance, such as bullying, safety, and experience with disabilities and mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Importantly, testimonies also raised the impacts of an increasingly narrow school

curriculum and the pressure to attain high academic scores.

A parent Facebook group, “School Can’t,” founded in 2012, changed its name from “School Refusal Australia” because the term refusal implied kids were simply being obstinate. “But it goes a lot deeper than that,” Louise Rogers, an administrator of the group, explained. “Children are experiencing distress and they don’t know what to do with it.”

Professor Kitty te Riele from the Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Education commented, “It’s essential that schools operate in ways that fit kids rather than expecting kids to fit in with them. Specialist schools can provide a possible solution but cost and location are prohibitive for most families.”

While school avoidance occurs across all socio-economic groups, the public system is the least able to meet the needs of its students. The submission from the Australian Secondary Principals Association stated, “government schools are not funded at a level which matches the mental, social and well-being needs of their students.”

The decades-long cutbacks to funding government schools are bipartisan Labor and Liberal Party policy. Between 2009 and 2018, total income to private schools rose by 16.9 per cent but by just 2.1 per cent for public schools. The preferential funding for private schools has continued with the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Its latest budget cut real spending for public schools while continuing the resource advantage for private and Catholic schools.

Other submissions to the Senate inquiry pointed out that only one-third of children with mental illness receive professional help at school. Only 4 percent of primary schools in Australia’s most populous state, New South Wales, have a school counsellor on site daily. Only half of all children aged 4-11 years who have a mental illness receive any form of treatment. Nationally, one counsellor is funded per 800 to 900 students.

Chronic underfunding in government schools has led to a rise in private school enrolments and concentrations of disadvantage in the public system. Of all public school enrolments, 46 percent of students are classed as either disadvantaged, low socioeconomic background, indigenous, disabled or living in a remote area. The equivalent proportion in private schools is just 20 percent.

Inquiry submissions noted the inflexibility and narrowness of the curriculum. The introduction of the high-stakes National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests in 2009 by the previous Labor government has led to public schools becoming testing factories, increasing stress levels for students, parents and teachers alike.

Dianne Giblin, CEO of the Australian Council of State Schools Organisation told the Senate, “Some of our kids, particularly our ASD and autistic kids are very creative... very artistic and very musical... (but) we tend to worry about their literacy and numeracy.”

Professor Jim Watterston, co-author of the “Those Who Disappear: The Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about,” pointed to the disincentives for schools to accept high needs students. He noted that they “often become collateral damage in the quest for higher academic performance and enhanced reputation.” Watterston cited one school that had attempted to re-engage students but had its government funding reduced because the school’s literacy and numeracy test results were not reaching requirements.

Several submissions and testimonies noted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple studies have detailed the rise in mental health issues among young people since 2020.

Missing School’s Megan Gilmour told the Senate about the experience of one child: “Owen is a student in year 9 with ASD and anxiety who, after COVID, was too anxious to go to school, missing over a year. His self-esteem plummeted, his anxiety from missing classes grew; and he stopped eating enough, lost muscle tone and eventually could no longer leave home at all. Owen is now non-verbal.”

Powerful sections of the ruling elite have sought to exploit the youth mental health crisis to rail against lockdowns and other necessary public health restrictions. The real issue is that big business and finance capital want to ensure no further measures that impinge on the generation of profit—temporary school closures have been denounced by corporate and media figures because they necessarily involved the removal of children’s parents from their workplaces. Last year, the “Shergold Review.” which was promoted by the press, insisted that schools must remain open in any future pandemic.

The issue is not simply lockdowns, as is asserted by the establishment. Instead, it is the impact of a pandemic, for

which the governments had not prepared, on top of the systematic defunding of public education and healthcare over decades. To the extent that issues emerged with online learning, it was yet another symptom of this assault on public education, together with the consequences of rampant social inequality.

The political establishment’s expressed concern for young people’s wellbeing amounts to nothing but hot air. Nowhere is any consideration made of the terrible mental health consequences that would have accompanied unchecked COVID infections in 2020, including through countless children being orphaned as a consequence of pre-vaccine mass infection. Likewise there has been no consideration of how proper public resourcing for online psychological services and related supports could have minimised the challenges experienced by young people during lockdown periods.

It can be safely anticipated that when the Senate report on school refusal is published on June 21, the Labor, Liberal and Green parliamentarians on the panel will not include any investigation of the crisis of the public education system nor properly address the shortfall of psychologists and other support services. The ruling elite is responsible for the disaster in the public education system that has fuelled the phenomenon of “school can’t,” and it will not implement measures leading to its solution.

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