

# Australian senate report on “school refusal” whitewashes ruling elite’s responsibility for the crisis in public schools

Erika Zimmer  
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An Australian federal senate committee last month released a report and recommendations following an inquiry into, “The national trend of school refusal and related matters.”

Children consistently failing to attend school has emerged as a national crisis. The exact number is not known, though a 2019 research report found that a “conservative estimate” was that 50,000 children and young people are, at any given time, detached from the school system (see: [“Australian Senate inquiry highlights worsening problem of children “refusing” to attend school”](#)).

The senate inquiry and report were marked by a glaring contradiction between detailed documentation of the devastating impacts on families and communities, and the paucity of the recommendations. Even if the handful of minor reforms proposed by the report are implemented, they will not resolve the social problem of school refusal.

The bipartisan inquiry was chaired by Liberal Party Senator Matt O’Sullivan, deputy chaired by Labor’s Tony Sheldon, an ex-union bureaucrat, with Greens parliamentarians also participating. The 143-page report covered up one of the key causes of school refusal—the disastrous situation in underfunded public schools, which lack the resources needed to address complex mental health needs of their students.

The ten-month inquiry received 170 submissions and held public hearings in Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra. These revealed students feeling distress, frustration, anger, loss of hope and trust, anxiety, depression, shutting down and having suicidal ideation. Multiple instances of self-harm were also reported.

Parents reported marriage breakdowns, job losses, financial pressures and lack of resources. One explained, “I am beyond exhausted and like many other parents in

my community in a similar situation, I am out of ideas. The financial pressures have been extraordinary, the rising cost of living adding to this. I attempted to make a significant change by moving from our regional centre to a city to access better school education/mental/health support but even this has made no difference.”

The inquiry revealed an intolerable social crisis affecting tens of thousands, yet despite acknowledging the problem is “urgent” and receiving input from a wide range of education professionals, parents and school support staff, the 14 recommendations were of a threadbare character.

Several merely recommended that federal and state governments “review” and “investigate” different policies. One, for example, urged that “education authorities and the non-government school sector investigate ways to increase the flexibility of education delivery.” Another suggested that education authorities “review and update current messaging about the importance of school attendance.”

There were a small number of recommendations that, if acted on, potentially involve increased government spending—however, the report made no mention of the Labor government’s spending cuts to both education and healthcare.

Recommendation 14 asked the government to “consider increasing the number of mental health care visits for students experiencing school refusal.” Only one-third of students with mental illness currently receive professional help at school. In many working-class public schools, the proportion is far lower. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has implemented cuts to mental health provisions as part of his government’s pro-business austerity drive (see: [“Australian Labor government slashes access to mental health services”](#)).

Several of the recommendations sought to make teachers and school workers responsible for resolving school refusal.

One suggested that education authorities “identify and implement measures to build the capacity of schools to provide reasonable adjustments for students”—with “reasonable adjustments” being code for schools doing more without any additional staff or resources. The senate committee also declared it would “welcome the option to imbed school refusal training within relevant tertiary education courses as well as ongoing professional development requirements... This could include modules for ongoing professional development requirements.”

In other words, teachers’ workloads, which are already intolerable and are triggering massive teacher shortages, are to be further increased.

Under the guise of obtaining data on the extent of school refusal, the Senate committee recommended, as a “priority,” the implementation of the Unique Student Identifier (USI), a measure which government ministers signed off on last December.

It is not the first time that ruling elites have seized upon a crisis to accelerate a regressive “reform.” The USI is one of a suite of measures called for in the pro-business “Gonski 2.0” model released in 2018. It recommended that each child be given a number, a USI, which will track children’s “learning progressions” over seven key learning areas, instead of the two, maths and literacy, currently monitored under NAPLAN. Teachers would be tasked with updating student data on an online tool every five weeks.

The Senate’s promotion of the USI, a component of an even more intrusive standardised testing model, exposes its recommendation to “increase the flexibility of education delivery” as so much hot air.

None of the Senate committee’s conclusions or recommendations touched on the crisis of the public education system, nor the wider social crisis, which is responsible for the phenomenon of school refusal.

Escalating financial hardship is exacerbating the long standing mental health crisis in Australia. Almost half of the Australian population are estimated to have experienced a mental disorder at some time in their lives, with 21 per cent having experienced a mental disorder in the last 12 months. Due to lack of funding most cases of mental disorders go untreated. This is putting an intolerable burden on the individual and on the family, including children.

At the same time, the massive gulf between funding for

public and private schools is well documented. Trevor Cobbald from *Save Our Schools Australia* estimates that by 2029 under current funding arrangements, public schools will be underfunded by nearly \$74 billion while governments overfund private schools by \$6 billion.

In its submission to the inquiry, the “School Can’t (School Phobia, School Refusal)” group, a national peer support community of parents and carers, reported from a survey of its members that 73 percent had children diagnosed with a disability, mainly autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Another 10 percent were suspected of having a neurodevelopmental disability.

These children require more learning support in the classroom, support that is frequently not able to be provided in public schools. Writing to the Senate committee, 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.”

Numbers of parents told the media they were removing their children from public schools due to the inadequate resources and enrolling them in private schools.

The long-standing goal of the Australian ruling elite has been to promote a shift of students from public to private schools. Funding cuts and the introduction of high stakes testing have been the main drivers of this attack on the right of children to a high-quality education. NAPLAN and the *Myschool* league table, introduced by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments over a decade ago, have opened up a divisive competition between schools for enrolments and pushed a narrowing of the curriculum.

Public schools are being reduced to a residual safety net with student learning ever more restricted to the narrowest measurable subjects in line with business demands for a more “productive” workforce. Massive teacher shortages, the result of intolerable workloads, have resulted in the inadequate specialist support that exists in the public system being cut back because specialist staff have been directed to replace classroom teachers who are leaving the public schools in droves.



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