



Community Connections

School refusal scoping study

An abridged report of an investigation into options for new responses to students who are often absent from school with their parents' knowledge.

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Community Connections
(auspiced by Community Living Association Inc)*

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Disclaimer

This report prepared by 99 Consulting is based on a project scope to compile the findings about school refusal from a literature review and interviews with families and organisations. The findings and recommendations are based on those inputs and are not necessarily the views of 99 Consulting. It assumes that the views provided by informants are accurate reflections of the issues. The report is intended to stimulate discussion about practice within the Community Connections service.

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Foreword – ‘Some days I want to go back, others I don’t’

contributed by a young person who reflected on their own school attendance experiences

Some days I want to go back others I don’t, some people make it fine in life without school but staying at school is always the best option. Even though not everyone loves school and it can be hard and stressful at times, always try hard and give it your best. Schooling for me was sometimes difficult and frustrating. Some of the work was easy and sometimes it was really hard. It was difficult to cope when the work was hard.

My schooling began in grade eight, I was so excited to start high school the thought of meeting new people was great. I knew the work would be harder than primary school. I found grade eight easy, I flew threw the year enjoying and loving all my new friends. Around came grade nine and the work was a little bit harder than grade eight. I never thought that the work would have become harder so quickly. As an exam or test came up I studied my heart out to make sure I could pass, at the end of the exams I found out I had passed I was very pleased with myself.

Grade ten, I couldn’t wait! Not being a junior student anymore was good, I felt like both my peers and I had more responsibilities and we knew we did. Grade ten was hard for me always fighting with friends, school was frustrating me and then something happened that would change my life forever. It happened outside of school, but the person involved in the incident was another student from school. After that I didn’t feel safe going back to school.

A couple of months later I asked my parents if I could move to another school even though I was still enrolled at my old school. They said no the first time, but I kept begging them; I just couldn’t go back to my old school. My parents finally said yes to letting me move, we rang another school closer to the city and tried to get me enrolled there but they said no because I wasn’t in the catchment area.

I was quite angry and annoyed that they wouldn’t give me a chance, after a while they let me go for an interview and they accepted me. They said I could start the following week. I went on my first day and hated it. The school was too big and there were too many students, I couldn’t find any of my classes. And because I didn’t know anyone it was hard. The second day of school I went to form and then wagged and went home. I did that for the following week and after that I left.

Most people that I know my age don’t attend school because they have full time jobs and are earning money to support themselves. Some other people had really bad times at school e.g. some were bullied and got in trouble a lot.

One of the things that made it hard to go back to school was having a mother who is diagnosed with a medical condition. It made me worry when I couldn’t be home to take care of her. Other things that sometimes stop people from going back to school are loosing freedom to sleep in, being able to see older friends that have already finished school, and having no hassle of having to do homework. Walking to school was another issue for me, some days I just couldn’t be bothered walking to school.

Staying in school is important because, dropping out can mean you miss out on social events like sports carnivals, formals and graduation. But schools not just about fun, it’s about getting an education, studying for an OP and getting higher paying jobs in life.

School can be flexible for you by letting you start a trade or apprenticeship. I have been trying to get an open position in hair dressing, but have had no luck with nearly every local hair salon because they have too many trainees. So I have decided that doing a school-based traineeship is a lot easier. So I am going to make a solid effort at going back to school.

Introduction

Community Connections offers youth and family work services in Nundah on the north side of Brisbane in Queensland under the auspice of the Community Living Association. In 2007 Community Connections decided to use some of its self-generated funds to investigate the issue of school refusal. Community Connections staff had found that working towards re-engagement with school by young people who were refusing to attend was very challenging and warranted further thought in terms of their understanding of the issue and their options for response in the context of the wider service system.

About this abridged report

This report is a summary of Community Connections' full scoping study which included individuals' opinions and observations from their perspectives as young people, parents and workers in government and non-government agencies. These individuals contributed their views on the basis that it would be used to inform the deliberations of Community Connections, but would not be made public in an identifiable form. Community Connections believes it is important to bring the very personal issue of school refusal into the public realm as part of their efforts to develop their intervention strategies. This summary document shares the literature review summary and recommendations without revealing the personal views of interviewees.

Defining school refusal

The Community Connections project brief explained school refusal as occurring *when a child or young person does not want to go to school or actually refuses to go to school and involves a high level of stress and/or anxiety about school attendance. School refusal differs from truancy in that parents know their child is staying home from school over a prolonged period because the prospect of going to school causes them emotional distress.*

In contrast, truancy was described as *when a child or young person is absent from school and pursuing activities outside the home without the parent's knowledge.*

School refusal can take various forms, including:

- complete non-attendance
- partial attendance – for instance arriving at school but leaving early or skipping certain classes
- full attendance, but accompanied by either serious emotional distress or practical disengagement (i.e. being “invisible”, present at school but not really participating or interacting).

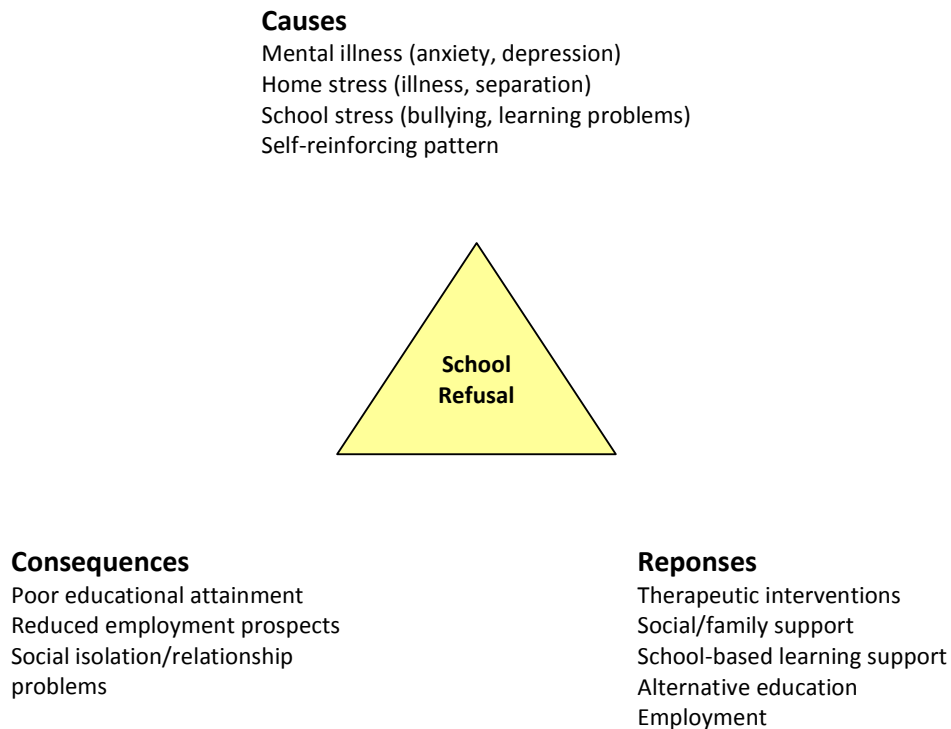
What the literature says

The project included a literature review, which identified two key streams in the literature on school refusal:

- a psychological/psychiatric stream, which sees school refusal as a problem of behaviour and psycho-social process, and responds through cognitive and behavioural therapy, family intervention and collaboration with the school on student welfare
- an educational stream, which sees non-attendance at school as a problem of school management with multiple causes, and seeks to respond with a mix of better management, disciplinary and punitive processes, improved curriculum and educational practice, and measures promoting student welfare.

The literature is very sparse on what young people who refuse school think about all this, and what they find helpful in their situation.

The findings of this literature review are summarised briefly in the following diagram.



Most sources suggest that school refusal often starts in late primary or early high school, and is frequently associated with transition points such as the transition from primary to high school or a change of schools brought on by a family move.

Extent of school refusal

Estimates of the extent of school refusal vary widely:

- estimates in the literature range from 1% of all children to 28%
- schools interviewed for this study tended to estimate numbers at the lower end, with figures reported at between .4% and 2.2%
- a Youth Engagement Strategy looking at chronic student absence behaviour in four secondary schools in the Logan-Albert Beaudesert District of Education Queensland found about 15% of students aged 11 to 15 were refusing to attend school.

To some extent these widely divergent estimates may be driven by different understandings of what school refusal is, and different understandings of when it becomes a problem – one writer suggests that all children refuse school at some time in their life, and this is only a problem if it persists over time.

Causes, characteristics and consequences

Both the literature on school refusal and the interviews conducted with schools, agencies and families, identified a number of elements that are regularly associated with school refusal. All of these elements will not be present for all young people who refuse school, but are commonly part of the picture.

- *Anxiety* was almost universally reported as a key element, whether it be anxiety focused on school situations, separation anxiety related to parents, or a generalised social anxiety
- *Parental anxiety* was frequently reported as accompanying and reinforcing anxiety in the young person
- *Complex family problems* were reported by many agencies, including the majority of the cases reviewed by Community Connections staff, with young people facing family issues including violence, serious illness, parental separation and the devolution of caring responsibilities to the young person
- *Bullying* was frequently reported by young people and their families as well as by agencies, and they often reported that this was not dealt with effectively by the school
- *Learning difficulties* were frequently reported, and these were often exacerbated by irregular attendance.

Many reported that the pattern of school refusal tends to be self-reinforcing – the longer a young person stays away from school, the harder it becomes to return as their anxiety increases, their learning difficulties become more entrenched and they feel more isolated from their peers. At the same time, young people often experience benefits from staying at home, including attention from parents, ability to sleep in, unlimited access to computers etc.

Most of the literature and the experience of practitioners indicate that there are a number of negative consequences of leaving school refusal unaddressed. These are:

- ongoing poor educational attainment, resulting in a narrowing of employment and life opportunities
 - exacerbation of the anxiety which may have led to the school refusal in the first place, often leading to higher risk of mental illness in adulthood
 - reduced social connections and networks, and reduced ability to relate to others in adult life.
- The table below presents a fuller summary of the issues reported in the course of this study.

Issues for young people	Issues for family
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. anxiety 2. social phobia 3. depression 4. panic attacks 5. fear of failure 6. mental illness 7. surviving sexual assault 8. being bullied at school 9. poor anger management 10. previous glandular fever or chronic fatigue with long absences 11. high or low achievers – not so often average 12. undiagnosed learning difficulties 13. autism spectrum disorders 14. low IQ or learning difficulties combined with fewer strategies for coping with difficult situations and less enjoyment of school 15. poor social skills 16. few or no friends, isolated 17. a friend who collaborates in anti-school behaviours and attitudes 18. pessimistic world view 19. absence of trust, faith or hope in the school 20. low resilience, self-esteem and sense of identity. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. family in crisis 2. domestic violence 3. anxious parents 4. mentally ill parent including anxiety disorders 5. chronically or terminally ill parent 6. siblings with similar problems 7. separated/divorced/estranged parents 8. children ‘flipped’ between the parents 9. multiple problems such as parents gambling, alcoholism, domestic violence, illiteracy, chronic illness 10. very young parents who had not had much parenting themselves 11. highly disorganised parents 12. parents low on time and energy 13. negative views and self blame by parents 14. parents’ sense of failure 15. isolation and lack of confidence in parenting 16. social isolation 17. grief and loss associated with loss of significant male role models. 18. housing stress, shared living arrangements, transience, lack of privacy 19. non-custodial parent excuses non-attendance as compensation for perceived lack 20. co-dependency issues with a parent using the child to help deal with their own anxieties 21. families’ norms are outside social norms, for example that school attendance is expected

Issues for young people	Issues for family
	22. parents may have had poor school attendance histories or find school a threatening place 23. lack of parental persistence and energy to keep following through, setting limits.

Responses

There are a number of potentially effective responses suggested by the literature, practice wisdom and the experiences of young people and families. Some of the key elements are presented here – once again, each young person is different so not all strategies are appropriate for all young people.

Coordination

The complexity of the situation faced by young people suggests that a number of agencies may need to work closely with the young person and their family to resolve the situation. These could include

- school support staff such as guidance officers and Youth Support Coordinators
- medical practitioners including the family GP, psychiatrist or mental health worker
- other community support services including Child Safety, youth and family support agencies
- police
- teachers and fellow students.

Some young people and their families reported frustration at receiving conflicting advice from professionals, and also reported frustration at not being listened to or taken seriously over issues related to school refusal such as bullying.

Early intervention

Once again, most sources agree that given the self-reinforcing nature of school refusal, early intervention is essential to success. This entails having a system which can identify patterns of absence, assess the cause of this absence and make an effective referral to support staff where a school refusal situation is suspected.

School based responses

Support agencies and young people reported varied responses from different schools within the Community Connections catchment. This reflects inadequate policy guidance or support provided for schools to understand and respond to school refusal, leaving the response up to the skills, interests and level of resources available to each school. In general, schools appear to have a greater chance of responding successfully where they:

- have a good system for early detection of absence from school and assessment of the reasons for this absence
- take a “student centred” approach which starts with the needs of the student rather than the maintenance of, or compliance with, school systems

- are able to be flexible about attendance and enrolment issues, allowing for options like part-time attendance, graduated return to school, and flexibility in subject choice
- have a relaxed approach to minor disciplinary issues such as uniform requirements
- have an effective process for responding to bullying
- link effectively with outside agencies to support young people and their families.

Alternatives to school

While it does not seem to ever be appropriate to simply not intervene with a young person who is refusing school, this does not mean that a return to school should always be the aim, particularly with older students.

Some of the following options may also be appropriate for some young people:

- *Switching schools* may be appropriate where the school in which the young person is enrolled is unable to provide the kind of flexible approach outlined above – however this option should be viewed with caution as many young people have made multiple changes of school with the same pattern repeating at each school
- *School of Distance Education* can be an appropriate option where the young person is reasonably competent academically, is motivated to continue their education and has good parental support
- *Employment or vocational training* can be good options for young people who struggle academically, especially where their family situation makes financial independence desirable.

Responding to multiple life issues

As reported above, many young people who refuse school are experiencing multiple life issues. In many cases, other demands in their life take precedence over school participation, and these issues need to be addressed before school attendance could be resumed. Some key issues include:

- *violence* – many young people are either living in violent situations or suffering from the trauma of past violence. In these situations, the safety of the young person, and the post-traumatic stress issues, need to be dealt with as a priority. Some young people are also reported to use violence and coercion towards their parents to maintain their absence from school
- *caring responsibilities* – where young people have caring responsibilities (e.g. for parents or younger siblings) alternative care arrangements need to be in place if consistent school attendance is to be achieved
- *physical and mental health issues* – some young people are battling chronic physical and/or mental health issues which may need to be treated before a consistent return to school can be achieved.

In all these situations, it is essential for the school to be aware of the situation in which the young person finds him or herself, work closely with other support services and respond appropriately to absences caused by these issues.

Peer support

Many young people who refuse school are described as being socially isolated, having few or no friends and having negative experiences with peers such as bullying or ostracism. The development of positive peer relations can be a crucial element in assisting young people to return to school.

While it is important not to over-burden other young people with responsibility for a young person's school attendance, peer to peer strategies which can help include:

- having a friend call for the young person on the way to school
- having a friend meet the young person on their arrival to school and accompany them either to class or to the guidance officer's room
- having a friend phone the student from the guidance office and encourage them to attend, or keep them in touch with events at school.

In a similar way, a positive response from administrative staff and teachers can ease a return to school, making the young person feel welcome and valued.

Policy issues

This study identified a number of policy and system issues which hamper effective responses to school refusal.

School attendance policies

Department of Education, Training and the Arts' regulations and policy set out a process for responding to unexplained absence. This identifies a number of steps which should be taken to respond to repeated unauthorised absences, starting with direct contact with parents and formal correspondence, proceeding through referrals for support and potentially ending with prosecution.

This approach can be adapted for school refusal situations, and particularly makes it possible for schools to pick up issues early and get support to young people. However, if applied to the letter it can be unhelpful and stakeholders reported instances where it *appeared* that the response to unexplained absences was suspension and exclusion, even though that is contrary to Education Queensland policy and the suspension was most likely linked to some other issue involving the young person. In the absence of clear guidelines and support for schools, responses vary widely from school to school.

The Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) has developed *Guidelines to address chronic absenteeism, school refusal and truancy* promoting collaboration with other agencies. DETA also promotes multi-agency work to support students with mental health problems (SMS-PR-035: *Supporting Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing*). The wider promotion and use of this resource would help improve responses to school refusal.

Child Protection

Given the prevalence of violence in the lives of the young people who refuse to attend school, developing an effective response to this violence is of the highest priority.

High school aged young people tend to fall through the gaps of a child protection system which is under chronic stress. Because they are deemed to have some capacity for self-protection, and because there are limited options for them outside the family situation, they tend to be left to cope on their own. It was beyond the scope of this study to pursue this issue in detail.

Information and advocacy

An issue highlighted by families in this study was the difficulty in navigating the various options in the education system for young people who do not fit easily into mainstream schooling. Families reported being largely left alone to sort through the options of vocational education, alternative schooling arrangements and transition to employment – a difficult task for families already under stress. A simple information resource or source may help families to deal with this issue.

Early Intervention

Many professionals interviewed for this study report that school refusal often begins at primary school. However, primary school students and their families have fewer options for support around these issues, with no equivalent to the Youth Support Coordinator roles and more limited access to guidance services. The development of effective responses at this stage may help prevent the development of more serious issues in the high school years.

Recommendations

Based on the literature, input from agencies, schools and families, recommendations to Community Connections are made to inform future practice within Community Connections, within the wider service system and within policy setting agencies.

While acknowledging Community Connection's constraints as a small service provider, this recognises that families and young people often rely on several agencies being willing to pool resources and efforts to solve a problem or achieve a change. It also recognises the fundamental necessity of policy makers to be informed by an understanding of what occurs *at the coalface*, and how the intended or unintended impacts of policy are played out. The scoping study clearly illustrated this interplay between interpersonal work, service system characteristics and the policy environment.

The recommendations are outlined in the table overleaf.

Community Connections School Refusal Scoping Project – Recommendations for Discussion

Observations	Team Capacity	School / Service Sector Capacity	Policy Sector Capacity
Young people			
<p>1. Some agencies and schools report that knowledge and understanding about young people who school refuse is minimal.</p>	<p>Develop an in-house version of this report and a public version (without information which could identify young people) for wider circulation.</p>	<p>Consider launching a public version of the report at an event including a workshop and panel session involving people working on school refusal from various points of view.</p> <p>Use school in-service training days (pupil-free days) as an opportunity to provide input to school staff.</p>	<p>Use the launch of the report as an opportunity to discuss the issue with the Education Minister.</p>
<p>2. Workers reflected that male client-male worker relationships could be the key to engagement for some young men. The same is likely to apply to young women, but as most workers in this field are women the issue is not so pressing.</p>	<p>When engagement between female workers and young males is particularly difficult, and as Community Connections currently has no male staff, work on ways to enlist the help of suitable male workers from other agencies. Using two workers is often necessary given the complexity of family issues.</p>		

Observations	Team Capacity	School / Service Sector Capacity	Policy Sector Capacity
<p>3. Agencies reported that some young people began to have school refusal problems in primary school, and by high school age had entrenched school refusal behaviours.</p> <p>4. School refusal often begins in years eight and nine.</p>	<p>Focus more energy on intervention in years eight and nine, aiming to avoid entrenched patterns of school refusal in older students.</p> <p>If possible, join in the year 8 and 9 support staff meetings to analyse the absentee figures.</p>	<p>Encourage schools to use absentee information as a planning tool for school support teams.</p>	<p>Use the meeting with the Education Minister (see 1) to raise the issue of support in primary schools.</p>
<p>5. Early detection of school refusal behaviours enabled prompt intervention. Schools varied in their ability to interrogate school attendance patterns to ‘diagnose’ a problem of school refusal. They also varied in their ability to act promptly to respond to suspected school refusal although staff found prompt attention was more likely to lead to solutions.</p> <p>6. Some schools were focused on systems (conforming to procedures) and some on students (flexible approach to individual needs).</p>	<p>Maintain Community Connections’ capacity to respond promptly to Education Queensland referrals.</p>	<p>While EQ has a mandatory procedure to respond to student absences, there needs to be encouragement/training inform the interpretation of patterns of absenteeism and prompt response if there are signs of school refusal</p> <p>Use the in-service process (see 1) to raise awareness amongst school staff and encourage flexible approach to absenteeism and early referrals to Community Connections and other supports.</p>	<p>Use a meeting with the Education Minister (see 1) or Education Queensland (EQ) to advocate that in cases of school refusal, school policies need to create the capacity to respond flexibly to address causes of the problem, not just the behaviour of non-attendance.</p>

Observations	Team Capacity	School / Service Sector Capacity	Policy Sector Capacity
<p>7. For some young people, alternatives to school attendance mean they continue to have opportunities to learn and connect with peers. Many parents and some services don't know what is available other than school and so don't ask or advocate for other options. The School of Distance Education has high enrolments of young people who school refuse but the school has limited capacity to follow up students who do not return work.</p> <p>8. Some students did well in the School of Distance Education (highly motivated to learn, supportive parents/stable family environment but anxious in social situations) while some of those with less support at home continued to avoid school work or became less involved over time.</p>	<p>Continue contacts with those offering courses and programs outside traditional classroom arrangements.</p> <p>Continue to advocate for flexibility so at risk young people can be accommodated in some form of education.</p> <p>Inform families about alternative learning/training options.</p> <p>Where there are systemic barriers that exclude young people, advocate to policy makers for changes.</p> <p>Exercise caution in referring to the School of Distance Education if help is not available for young people who are experiencing issues related to school refusal. Raise schools' awareness of limits to support able to be offered by the School of Distance Education to young people who are school refusing.</p> <p>Seek resources to conduct a pilot project on methods of working with "hard to engage" young people and families with complex needs, using an action research methodology.</p>	<p>Support lobbying to have YSC or similar resources available to the School of Distance Education.</p>	<p>For young people with a history of school refusal, alternative school options should preserve flexibility that allows these young people to be included.</p> <p>Support policies for enrolment in the School of Distance Education to include assistance to students who are enrolling for reasons connected with school refusal, particularly if the young person has learning difficulties, is in a disrupted home situation or has other problems.</p> <p>Communicate with EQ, the Department of Communities and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) about the need for new responses, particularly where there are complex family situations.</p>

Observations	Team Capacity	School / Service Sector Capacity	Policy Sector Capacity
9. Bullying is common feature of the experience of young people who school refuse. Schools do not always resolve it successfully.	Where bullying is unresolved, Community Connections should assist the family and/or young person to advocate.	Encourage schools to implement EQ bullying policy and follow through with young people who report that bullying is unresolved. Investigate opportunities to integrate understanding about the bullying-school refusal links into EQ's in-service training program.	EQ's bullying policy should be consistently implemented.
10. Community Connections (and others) find some young people who school refuse very difficult/challenging to engage.	Seek resources to conduct a pilot project on methods of working with "hard to engage" young people and families with complex needs, using an action research methodology.	Conduct pilot project in partnership with other agencies working with young people on the northside.	
11. Young people with a goal or hope about where their lives were headed were motivated to keep trying to overcome their difficulties.	Continue to use a "strength-based", future focused approach in working with young people, centred on the young person rather than the institution.		
12. The voice of young people on the issue of school refusal is hard to find in the literature or in documentation within agencies.	Instigate youth-friendly ways to progressively enable young people to have their say about their experience of school refusal. "Scared of School" might be one model - http://www.scared-of-school.tk/		

Observations	Team Capacity	School / Service Sector Capacity	Policy Sector Capacity
Families			
<p>13. Domestic and family violence (between parents, parent to child, between siblings, child to parent) either in the past or continuing, can be a feature of the families referred.</p> <p>14. Workers report dissatisfaction with the Department of Child Safety's response to young people exposed to violence.</p>	<p>When violence is part of the problem, this needs to be a prominent focus of intervention in terms of: immediate safety post-trauma support.</p>	<p>There may be potential to partner with the Brisbane Domestic Violence Advocacy Service, DV Connect, Kid's Helpline or others for exploration of school refusal, Community Connections worker training and/or for enhanced service response.</p>	<p>Explore the options to pursue greater responsiveness from Child Safety for young clients exposed to violence</p>
<p>15. Some families live in chaos and/or high stress, dealing with multiple hardships simultaneously, including school refusal.</p>	<p>When families are dealing with several difficult issues, it may not be fruitful or possible to focus on school refusal. Working with (or referring) the family to deal with the most critical issue/s needs to happen before young people or parents can effectively deal with school refusal</p>	<p>Promote greater awareness of appropriate responses to complex family issues, and encourage school administrative staff not to pursue the <i>letter of the law</i> around absenteeism in these situations. Rather, prompt detection of unexplained absence needs to inform appropriate strategies/support mechanisms.</p>	<p>Education policies need to acknowledge the complexity of problems for some families and focus on effective support to the family and young person rather than punishing absenteeism. Communicate with Education Queensland, Department of Communities, Department of Child safety and FaHCSIA on this issue.</p>

Observations	Team Capacity	School / Service Sector Capacity	Policy Sector Capacity
16. Some cases showed that young people in resilient families were likely to benefit from treatment for their anxiety.	Make good referral information available to families to link them with practitioners who have experience with school refusal and treatment of anxiety disorders.		
17. Some families and young people are working with a range of services (such as school guidance officer, Community Connections worker, GP etc) but they rarely meet up to coordinate how their responses fit together. Some services adopt responses that contradict the approach of another service.	When multiple services are involved, Community Connections can play an important role in case coordination, including convening joint meetings in some instances.		The Department of Education Training and the Arts developed <i>Guidelines to address chronic absenteeism, school refusal and truancy</i> promoting collaboration with other agencies. EQ also promotes multi-agency work to support students with mental health problems (SMS-PR-035: Supporting Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing). Advocate to EQ to use this policy in response to school refusal situations.
18. Some families are isolated and have more connections with services than friends or relatives. Research shows social connections are important social determinants of health and help protect against poverty.	Continue to offer opportunities that help young people and families build sustainable social and community connections. Given the uniqueness of each family, it may be worthwhile to evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies.	Open dialogue with other northside services on the issue of social isolation and potential approaches to overcoming this.	

Observations	Team Capacity	School / Service Sector Capacity	Policy Sector Capacity
19. Drug and alcohol misuse was prevalent in the lives of families and young people. Are these families exposed to health awareness and education information?		Approach drug and alcohol services about ways to get the message to families and young people in school-refusal situations.	

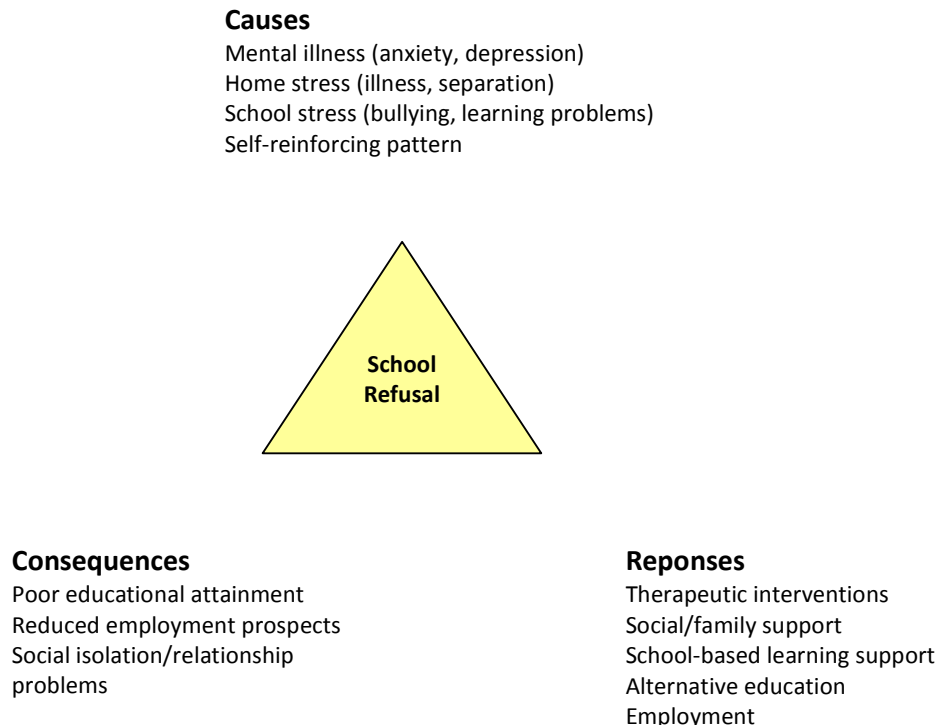
Appendix A – Literature review summary

Introduction

A lot has been written about school refusal under various names since the term “school phobia” was first coined in the 1940s. This summary is based on a small sample of that literature. Much of the literature on the subject is only available at a cost and the budget of this project did not extend to acquisition, so we have relied on items that are available free of cost drawn from the results of a more comprehensive literature search which is attached at Appendix 1. We haven’t attempted a comprehensive review, but have captured a flavour of the debate and the key issues involved.

“School refusal” seems to be a term mainly used in the medical/psychiatric literature, and most of the literature specifically discussing that issue reviewed here is from a medical point of view. By contrast, much educational effort and writing addresses the wider issue of “school non-attendance”, and particularly “unauthorised non-attendance”, without mentioning school refusal as such. We have reviewed a sample of that literature and tried to identify correspondences or overlaps with the issue of school refusal.

The findings of this literature review are summarised briefly in the following diagram.



What is school refusal?

Neville King¹ quotes three different definitions of school refusal. The first is from Berg et al, 1969 and identifies four elements of school refusal:

- “severe difficulty attending school, often resulting in prolonged absence
- severe emotional upset when faced with the prospect of going to school
- staying at home with parents’ knowledge
- absence of anti-social characteristics.”

The others are more recent definitions:

“Difficulty attending school associated with emotional distress, especially anxiety and depression” King and Bernstein, 2001

“Child-motivated refusal to attend school, or difficulty remaining at school for the entire day” Kearney and Silverman, 1996

The NYU Child Study Centre describes school refusal as follows²:

“school refusal behavior is identified in youths aged 5-17 years who:

1. are entirely absent from school, and/or
2. attend school initially but leave during the course of the school day, and/or
3. go to school following crying, clinging, tantrums or other intense behavior problems, and/or
4. exhibit unusual distress during school days that leads to pleas for future absenteeism.”

Wanda Fremont³ provides a set of characteristics which distinguish school refusal from truancy, as shown overleaf.

¹ *Anxiety-based school refusal: Contemporary Assessment Innovations*, Assoc Prof Neville King, Monash University (ppt presentation)

<http://www.med.monash.edu.au/spppm/research/devpsych/download/neville-king.pdf>

² *Understanding School Refusal* prepared by the staff of the NYU Child Study Center

<http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/refusal.html>

³ *School Refusal in Children and Adolescents*, Wanda P Fremont, MD, State University of New York Upstate Medical University, from the American Family Physician, 2003 <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20031015/1555.html>

School Refusal	Truancy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe emotional distress about going to school; may include anxiety, temper tantrums, depression or somatic symptoms • Parents are aware of the absence; child often tries to persuade parents to allow him or her to stay home • Absence of antisocial behaviours such as juvenile delinquency • During school hours child usually stays home because it is considered a safe and secure environment • Child expresses willingness to do school work and complies with completing work at home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of excessive anxiety or fear about going to school • Child often attempts to conceal absence from parents • Frequent anti-social behaviour, including delinquent and disruptive acts (e.g. lying, stealing), often in company of antisocial peers • During school hours, child frequently does not stay home • Lack of interest in schoolwork and unwillingness to conform to academic and behavioural expectations.

These definitions highlight some persistent themes in the literature:

- school refusal is different from truancy, in that it is not an anti-social act
- children and young people who refuse school experience a high level of emotional distress related to attending school
- the term may include children who are attending school, but experience extreme distress in doing so.

How common is it?

To put the level of school refusal into context, Graeme Withers has gathered data from various Australian states on non-attendance at school⁴. Some of this data includes:

- overall absence rate of 9.1% in South Australia in 2002, and an Indigenous absence rate of 17.2%
- in Victoria a 93.64% attendance in Year 5, falling to 87.86% in Year 10
- in Tasmania an average daily absentee rate in Term 1 of 6.37%, 9.16% in Term 2 and 7.73% in Term 3.

He points to differences in definitions, and different ways of measuring this non-attendance which make it difficult to calculate comparative rates of non-attendance. However, it seems that on any one day between 7% and 13% of students are absent from school. It is not clear how many of these are unauthorised absences.

⁴ *Disappearance: Some recent statistics and a commentary on non-attendance in school*, A paper prepared for the **Learning Choice Expo** conducted by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Sydney, 23-24 June 2004, Graeme Withers, Senior Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research, <http://www.dsf.org.au/learningchoices/papers.php>

These figures are similar to those quoted in Britain. There has been considerable policy effort around improving school attendance in Britain, and in its audit of these efforts the National Audit Office⁵ estimates that about 7% of students are absent on any one day, including 0.7% whose absence is unauthorised.

Estimates of the prevalence of school refusal, by contrast, vary widely. The Monash University school refusal program⁶ suggests that between 1% and 2% of children suffer from school refusal at some point. Wanda Fremont⁷ uses a figure of 1-5%, while Kearney⁸ quotes a figure of 5-28%. Kardeniz and Cantali⁹ suggest “most children refuse to go to school at some point, and it’s only a problem if it persists or becomes a habit”. This divergence suggests there is some confusion about exactly what constitutes “school refusal” – or, if Kardeniz and Cantali are right, that there is not agreement about the point at which it becomes a problem.

There is more agreement about peak times during which school refusal can occur. All writers agree that it occurs in children of all ages and equally for both genders, but that it peaks at certain times. Kearney¹⁰ suggests peak onset is between 10 and 13, and at the first contact with a particular institution (for instance, the transition from elementary to middle school). King¹¹ expands this a little, suggesting peaks at 5-7, 11 and 14. Nishida et al¹² point to a peak in their sample at 13 years of age. These differences might be explained partly by differences in the school system, with Kearney writing in the USA, King in Australia and Nishida et al in Japan – this would make particular sense if the idea of peaks at transition times is correct, with schooling systems differing in the different countries.

There is some difference of opinion about whether there is a greater prevalence in some ethnic groups. Certainly, data on absences points to a much higher rate of non-attendance amongst Indigenous children (see above), and research for the English National Audit Office¹³ found higher levels of absence in students of African and Caribbean descent and students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and lower levels in those of Indian and Pakistani descent.

⁵ *Improving School Attendance in England*, Report by the National Audit Office, 4 February 2005
http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/04-05/0405212.pdf

⁶ Monash University Centre for Developmental Psychiatry and Psychology, School Refusal Program
<http://www.med.monash.edu.au/spppm/research/devpsych/srp.html>

⁷ Op cit

⁸ *Dealing with school refusal behaviour: A primer for family physicians – workable solutions for unhappy youth and frustrated parents*, Christopher A Kearney, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, *Journal of Family Practice Online*, Vol 55 No 8, August 2006

<http://www.jfponline.com/Pages.asp?AID=4322&UID>

⁹ *Is your child or adolescent refusing to go to school*, Nesli Karadeniz and Rose Cantali, “Psych Matters”
http://www.psychmatters.com.au/downloads/school_refusal_article.pdf

¹⁰ Op cit

¹¹ Op cit

¹² *Characteristics and Outcomes of School Refusal in Hiroshima, Japan: Proposals for Network Therapy*, Atsushi Nishida et al, *Acta Medica Okayama*, 2004, Vol 58 No 5, pp 241-249

<http://escholarship.lib.okayama.ac.jp/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1279&context=amo>

¹³ *Study of attendance in England. Report for the National Audit Office*, Ian Schagen, Tom Benton and Simon Rutt http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/other-publications/downloadable-reports/pdf_docs/NAAfinalreport.PDF

Causes and symptoms

Everyone writing in this field agrees that the problem has multiple causes, and that the causes are different for each child even though they may fall into a general pattern. The medical literature on the subject generally takes the school environment as a “given” and focuses on strategies to help the child operate within that environment, while the educational literature also deals with aspects of the school environment which may promote or inhibit school attendance.

Kearney¹⁴ points to four processes which interact to bring about school refusal:

- “to avoid school-based stimuli that provoke a sense of negative affectivity, or combined anxiety and depression; examples of key stimuli include teachers, peers, bus, cafeteria, classroom, and transitions between classes
- to escape aversive social or evaluative situations such as conversing or otherwise interacting with others or performing before others as in class presentations
- to pursue attention from significant others, such as wanting to stay home or go to work with parents
- to pursue tangible reinforcers outside of school, such as sleeping late, watching television, playing with friends, or engaging in delinquent behavior or substance use.”

He suggests that these elements reinforce each other when children don’t attend school – they both avoid the stressful situations by staying home and get more access to the positive rewards of staying home, so that over time the behaviour becomes more entrenched.

King¹⁵ describes the causal factors in similar terms, saying that three things interact to produce school refusal:

- temperamental/behavioural inhibition
- stressful life events (accumulated stress)
- conditioning/reinforcement.

These interact to produce a pattern of behaviour. Additional factors can be learning difficulties and family dysfunction.

Within this overall pattern, a number of other factors are seen to be at play:

- Kearney suggests that up to two thirds of children who refuse school have some form of diagnosable psychiatric disorder, including 38% with some form of anxiety. 8% with “oppositional defiant disorder” and 5% with major depression
- Fremont¹⁶ presents a similar list, with psychiatric conditions associated with school refusal including separation anxiety, various forms of phobia, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, dysthymia (a form of depression), and “adjustment disorder”

¹⁴ Op cit

¹⁵ Op cit

¹⁶ Op cit

- Nishida et al¹⁷ focus on the relational abilities of children with school refusal, noting that 30% are generally “withdrawn”, while 49% are able to relate in one-on-one situations but not in group situations
- King quotes a study by Last & Strauss of 63 children who were identified as including the following conditions – separation anxiety (38%), social phobia (30%) and simple phobia (22%)
- Franco and Silverman¹⁸ quote a similar list and add a set of social issues including homelessness, maltreatment, school victimization, teenage pregnancy, divorce, and child self-care
- The young authors of the “Scared of School” website¹⁹ point to factors within the school, especially bullying, as a major issue leading them to refuse school. Other writers point to schooling problems and learning difficulties as a contributing factor.

This adds up to a picture of young people who have suffered significant trauma in their life. In this analysis, school refusal could be interpreted as a symptom or an end result of this trauma, rather than the core of the problem.

Educational authors approach the issue from a very different angle. In talking about non-attendance at school, rather than specifically about “school refusal”, they try to identify factors that inhibit attendance or which promote it.

The English National Audit Office outlines three categories of factors which can inhibit school attendance. These are:

Home

- parental attitudes to education
- holidays during term-time
- other leave e.g. bereavement or religious
- familial problems
- children with caring responsibilities
- difficulties getting to and from school
- frequent movers

School

- attractiveness and relevance of curriculum
- quality of teaching
- management of behaviour including bullying
- school-parent relationships
- school policies

Student

- genuine illness and medical appointments

¹⁷ Op cit

¹⁸ *School Phobia and School Refusal - Clinical Picture, Contributing Factors, Culture/ethnicity And Race, Family Factors, Psychosocial Interventions - Age and Gender*, Article in the Marriage and Family Encyclopedia by Ximena Franco and Wendy K. Silverman

<http://family.jrank.org/pages/1469/School-Phobia-School-Refusal.html>

¹⁹ *Scared of School: A School-free zone with others who feel the same*, <http://www.scared-of-school.tk/>

- behavioural problems
- learning difficulties
- personal problems
- influence of friends and peers
- being bullied.

Graeme Withers²⁰ provides a similar list of reasons for students not attending school. Key reasons listed for non-attendance are:

- family relationships
- family values
- ethnic values
- excessive home responsibilities
- peer pressures (friends and enemies)
- strong attachment to friends or siblings in trouble with the police
- weak reading skills
- anxiety about course deadlines
- fear of bullying
- dislike of particular lessons or particular teachers
- perceived irrelevance of the curriculum.

These lists suggest a wider set of causes which include not only personal and family traumas, but difficulties in dealing with educational institutions and failures by those institutions to respond appropriately to their educational needs. The authors of “Scared of School” refer in quite strong terms to the failure of the school they attended to respond helpfully to their issues with bullying and the fear and anxiety they experienced while at school, and in this context they felt little inclination to return.

What can be done about this?

Naturally, the solutions proposed are driven to a large extent by the authors’ points of view. Psychiatrically-oriented authors talk about psychiatric solutions, while school-based authors talk about solutions related to school curricula and disciplinary processes.

People from both viewpoints agree that it is important to intervene. The Monash University school refusal program says:

“Left untreated serious short and long-term consequences are associated, such as interfering with a young person's social and emotional development, academic achievement and vocational opportunities, and leave them at risk of psychiatric difficulties later in life.”

²⁰ Op cit

Virtually all the medically-based authors agree that a response to the issue needs to involve collaboration with doctor, parents, school and school guidance counsellors. Fremont suggests an approach with the following elements:

- behaviour intervention – organising progressive exposure to the source of anxiety in a supportive environment
- education support – coaching the child through the situation, helping them to learn skills to manage their anxiety
- parent/teacher intervention – giving parents and teachers improved skills and strategies to deal with the behaviour
- pharmacological interventions may sometimes be appropriate in conjunction with these other approaches.

Other psychiatric approaches provide a variation on this theme. Kearney suggests that such an approach should include gradual re-introduction to school, perhaps starting with lunch-time attendance or attendance at the school counsellor's room, and progressive building up as the student learns to cope with the stresses. At the same time, following his understanding of the positive reinforcement of staying at home, he suggests deliberate strategies by parents to remove these "rewards". The NYU Child Study Centre recommends a variety of strategies aimed at dealing with the negative and positive reinforcers of school refusal, including the following:

“Escape from negative affect

(Sadness, the blues, fears, generalized anxiety and worry, separation anxiety, various phobias)

- Somatic management skills such as breathing retraining or progressive muscle relaxation training
- Gradual reintroduction (exposure) to school
- Self-reinforcement and building self efficacy

Escape from aversive social and evaluative situations

(Social phobia, test anxiety, public speaking fears, shyness, social skills deficits)

- Cognitive restructuring of negative self-talk
- Role play practice
- Graded exposure tasks involving real-life situations
- Social skills training and problem-solving skills training
- Building coping templates

Attention-seeking behavior

(Tantrums, crying, clinging, separation anxiety)

- Parent training in contingency management
- Changing parent commands
- Establishing routines
- Use of rewards and punishers for school attendance and school refusal
- Forced attendance, if necessary and under special circumstances

Positive tangible reinforcement

(Lack of structure or respect for house rules and responsibilities, free access to reinforcement, disregard for limits)

- Contracting with parents to increase incentive for school attendance
- Curtail social and other activities as a result of nonattendance
- Provide the family with alternative problem-solving strategies to reduce conflict
- Communication skills and peer refusal skills are also sometimes added to this process”.

As suggested by their focus on school attendance overall, educational writers take a broader approach to responses to the issue. The English National Audit Office reports a number of measures which it assesses as being effective in improving attendance. Methods used to respond (described from a national policy point of view) include:

- programs to address student behaviour
- monitoring of attendance through more sophisticated software etc
- “truancy sweeps” targeting young people in public places during school hours
- prosecution of parents.

Local initiatives discussed include:

- a clear policy on attendance
- effective monitoring of attendance
- “first day calling” where a student is absent without reason
- reward schemes to encourage attendance
- alternative curricula (especially vocational education)
- threat of legal sanctions
- working with education authorities’ welfare services to support students with problems.

Graeme Withers suggests that responses to issues around attendance are two-fold:

- a disciplinary approach, based on monitoring attendance, responding quickly to unauthorized absence via things like an automated SMS to parents, and support systems in place to address non-attendance
- making school programs more flexible and attractive for students - “providing a supportive school environment which is characterised by non-violent, non-coercive and non-discriminatory practices” (Queensland, Department of Education, 2004:2).

These approaches are seen as complementary not mutually exclusive, although the balance between them is a matter of dispute.

There is very little literature on what young people themselves see as helping with this issue. Withers reports a study by Oerlemans and Jenkins in Western Australia in which students identified the following factors:

- fewer compulsory subjects
- a friendlier school
- relaxation of school uniform policy

- more free time on site
- a learning environment closer to adult conditions.

The authors of “Scared of School” write about both techniques for dealing with anxiety while at school (reflecting the behavioural approach suggested by psychiatrists) and a range of alternatives to school including home schooling and part-time attendance.

There is no close connection between the psychiatric and education literature and it could be seen that many of the more punitive strategies discussed as education system responses to non-attendance would be counter-productive in the case of school refusal. However, there are some areas of overlap:

- Educational writers identify a range of home and personal issues which can impact on attendance, and recommend supportive intervention to deal with these. School refusal situations would come under this banner.
- Closer monitoring of attendance and quicker response would allow for earlier intervention and limit the self-reinforcing effects of school refusal.
- Developing more flexible curricula and approaches to education has the potential for reducing some of the causes of anxiety among students and allowing them to make up for missed education caused by frequent absences.
- A focus on improved behaviour in the school generally could help to reduce the fear of bullying which often triggers school refusal.