

# **Entrenched School Refusal – Draft Pilot Project**

## **Discussion Paper**

The following Entrenched School Refusal Pilot Project discussion paper has been developed in response to Recommendations (Recommendations 1 & 10) of the School Refusal Scoping Study.

It is important to note its particular focus is on working with “young people /families/school/community” where there is entrenched school refusal. It is our belief that ‘entrenched school refusal’ will require a ‘holistic’ service intervention as we have outlined whereas ‘short term school refusal’ will be more amenable to the intervention of specialist service intervention.

**Definition:** School refusal is 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. (*Reference: 99 Consulting, School Refusal Scoping Study, Community Connections (CLA Inc) 2009.*)

### **Important Variable**

#### **Short Term School Refusal**

Some school refusal is short term and is able to be responded to quickly and effectively by child, parents, school and other professionals. It is a mark of the success of these responses that the school refusal is only short term. Much of the literature suggests that the earlier the intervention the higher the possibility of success in encouraging the child / young person to return to school.

#### **Entrenched School Refusal**

Some school refusal is long term and entrenched. It may date from primary school or early high school. Community Connections tends to be referred young people who have multiple complicating factors and be more reluctant to engage with services. These young people often have entrenched, long term experiences of school refusal.

### **Community Connections Study**

In 2008 Community Connections commissioned a review of school refusal literature and engaged in a small scoping project which gathered data from parents, students, school authorities, other service agencies and Community Connections referrals.

From that scoping study we have developed:

- A framework which outlines the potentially contributing realms to entrenched school refusal

- A framework of intervention drawing on our practice experience and the literature
- A suggested service response to 'entrenched' school refusal which could be trialed.

### **Potentially Contributing Realms**

Community Connections scoping study suggests there are four major realms which can contribute to school refusal. Some or all of these realms may be significant in a student's school refusal. Each realm has a number of potential factors, and there may be multiple factors operating from each realm. The factors operating from each realm will probably vary in importance in their impact on a student's school refusal. Where there are multiple factors across multiple realms this could make the situation and interventions more complex (Please note these are the same realms which could apply in short term school refusal.)

The four major realms that we see as contributing to school refusal are:

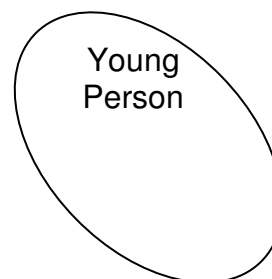
- The young person
- School
- Family and home
- The community.

In discussing these realms we will utilize a case study of a young person that Community Connections has worked with. Identifying data has been altered.

### **Young Person Realm**

Factors involving the young person who may be involved in school refusal can include:

- Drug or alcohol use
- Criminal justice engagement
- Challenging behaviours
- Anxiety or other mental health issues
- Mental illness
- Intellectual disability
- Specific learning disabilities
- Other developmental disabilities ADD/ADHD/autism
- Victim of sexual assault
- Teenage pregnancy



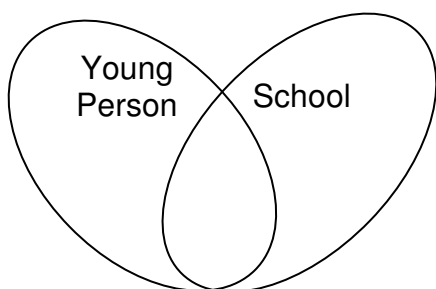
*Community Connections was referred a young man who began school refusing in primary school. Another pupil's father intervened at this time by picking up the boy every morning and taking him to school. This intervention meant the boy returned to school attendance; however school refusal began again in year 8.*

*He was abusive towards his mother and his diet consisted solely of white bread. His deceased father had been very violent to his child, both physically and verbally. The father had also been physically violent and verbally degrading towards his wife. This young man's older sister was living out of home and had little contact with her family. The young man who was now fourteen refused to speak to the Community Connections worker who was referred his case. The young man behaved contemptuously towards his mother.*

### School Realm

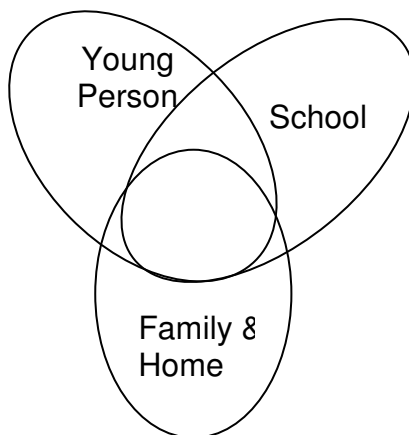
- Bullying
- Lack of peer relationships
- Lack of relationships with teachers
- School structures
- Lack of engagement with school
- Transitional periods (primary to high school etc)
- Dislike of particular lessons or particular teachers or perceived irrelevance of curriculum

*This young man was bullied at school. The school refusal emerged in primary school and reemerged at the transition stage from primary to high school. He had poor relationships with other students.*



### Family and Home Realm

- Absentee Parent or Parents – Marital Discord / Correctional Incarceration / Hospitalisation of parents
- Poverty
- Domestic violence
- Mental health of family member
- Disability of family member
- Drug and alcohol issues of parent
- Carer role for young person
- Family reinforcement of school refusal
- Availability of school alternatives - video
  - internet
  - drugs/alcohol
- External help not sought
- Child safety
- Divorce and Parental Separation
- Homelessness
- Family does not prioritise school
- CALD- Intergenerational conflict
- Frequent moving

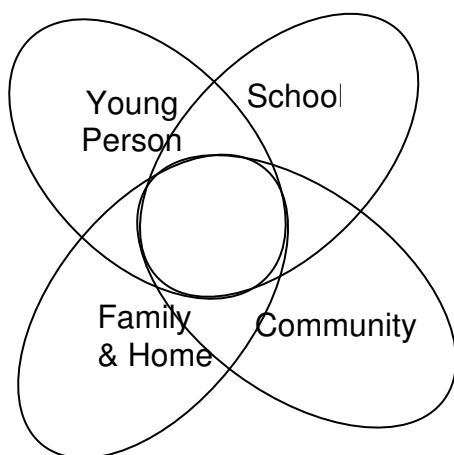


*His mother's parents died in a car crash when she was four. Her siblings were placed in an orphanage and she was raised by her Grandfather. His mother was sexually abused at the age of eight and had a near drowning incident at ten which led to cognitive impairment, plus partial paralysis of one side of her body. There were also impacts on her hearing and verbal ability. She married at 18 to her husband who was controlling, abusive and very violent. He died in a pub brawl leaving her at twenty four with a daughter and the young man. His mother was on a disability pension but had no disability services assisting her. The house was extremely chaotic and mum was finding it difficult with planning and decision making. She had very poor literacy.*

### **Community Realm**

- Service responses not adequate
- Lack of part-time employment (for the young person)
- No participation in sport or other extra curricular activities
- Lack of supportive other adults
- Peer relationships that support school refusal – direct or indirect

*The young man was not involved in any community activities, employment, or sporting groups. There was very little engagement outside of the home. This young man did have one friend who he would often get into trouble e.g. vandalism. However this friend would often leave him to take the blame. The family as a whole was very isolated. One important contact had been the father of another child who used to pick him up and take him to primary school. This appears to be the way the earlier school refusal was resolved. Mum had sought the help of a number of agencies around her issues. These attempts were short lived. It appeared services found her 'odd', and not good at following through on suggestions for change.*



### **Consequences of School Refusal**

The consequences of school refusal particularly long term (entrenched) school refusal are noted in the literature as:

- Poor educational attainment
- Reduced employment prospects
- Social isolation/relationship problems

### **Responses to School Refusal (Short Term)**

Response to school refusal suggested in the literature are:

- Therapeutic Interventions
  - pharmacological
  - somatic management skills
  - behaviour intervention – organizing progressive exposure to source of anxiety/gradual reintroduction to school
  - cognitive restructuring of negative self talk
  
- Social/Family Support
  - parent training
  - changing parent commands
  - establishing routines
  - contracting with parents to increase incentives for school attendance.

These responses are usually the responses which work to limit school refusal to being a short term phenomena.

### **Responses to School Refusal (Entrenched)**

The following diagram summarises Community Connections understanding of the causes/consequences and responses to entrenched school refusal.

#### Causes:

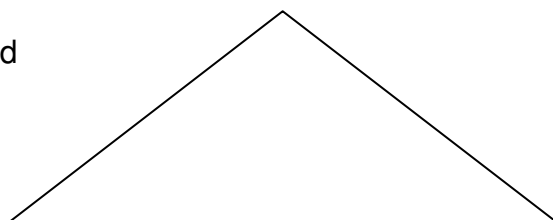
- YP Realm
- School Realm
- Home/Family Realm
- Community Realm

#### Responses:

- Young person directed support
- Home and family supportive interventions
- School based change including alternative education options
- Community connection intervention to build Young persons and family's capacity e.g. employment

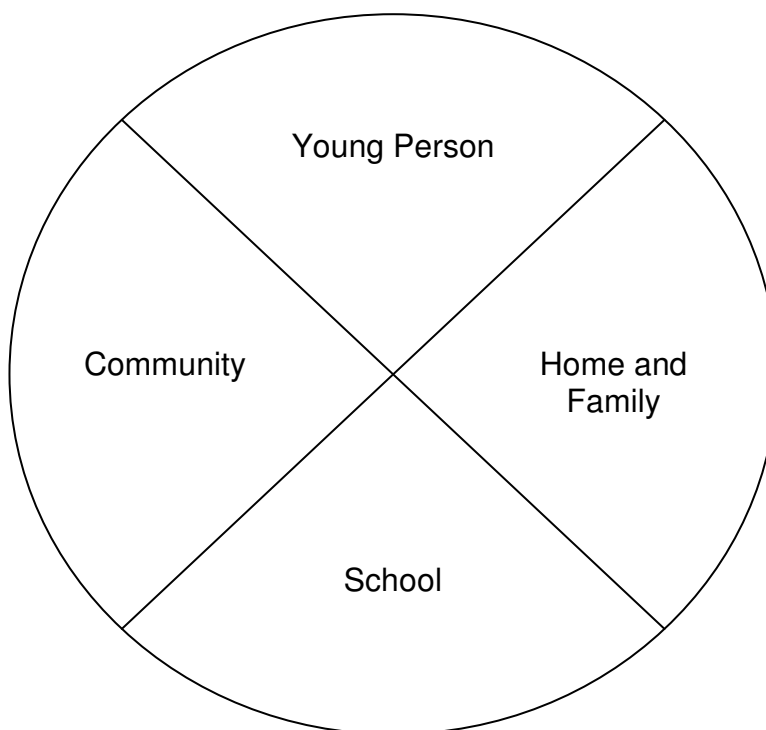
#### Consequences:

- Poor education achieved
- Reduced employment prospects
- Social isolation/relationship problems



## Response Framework to Entrenched School Refusal:

Diagrammatically the response framework to entrenched school refusal is as follows:



### Young Person:

- Counseling
- Therapeutic assistance
- Medication
- Mentoring
- Support to deal with addictions
- Peer relation support
- Tutoring

### School:

- Build links with YP and school
- Address bullying
- Early school response to non attendance
- Alternate curriculum
- Alternate schools

### Home and Family:

- Conflict resolution
- Parenting support
- Support to deal with DV/addictions/poverty/homelessness etc
- Parental conflict support

### Community:

- Employment opportunity
- Meaningful use of time/opportunity
- Mentoring
- Peer support and development

## **Community Connections Practice Principles for Entrenched School Refusal**

- Early Intervention (If this is successful then school refusal may remain a short term phenomena)
- Although school refusal is the presenting issue , school return may or may not be the supportive resolution
- At various times the main intervention will be with the other realms and not the young person
- Connection with the young person will probably require time and persistence
- Engagement with parents or care givers is as critical as engagement with the young person
- Outreach to the young person and family is a necessity
- Workers will probably need to engage with a range of issues that contribute to school refusal
- The work will potentially require working with a number of people; e.g. young person, parents, siblings, teachers, peers, community members and therefore workers will need to have a good sense of who is the primary client, who is secondary and what this means in terms of intervention
- Workers will need to be explicit that they will connect with not only the young person but the significant others in the young person's life. They will need to be clear about limits to confidentiality
- Introducing other workers from the team to assist where there are multiple relationships will be necessary
- Workers will seek to build young person's/parent's/family's/school's/community's capacity (i.e. relationships/decision making/information/resources) by building bridges between parties and developing shared agendas. These can include referrals to other parties for young person's counselling, or family mediation, or school based projects or community projects
- Workers need to avoid taking sides in conflict between parties unless issues of exploitation are present.

*In the case study of the young man, Community Connections received a referral for him in term 1 of year nine. A Community Connections worker visited the young man's home to make contact. The house was visually chaotic (e.g. lots of rubbish in yard, holes in walls, broken windows) and mum presented as approachable, concerned, well-meaning but odd in her communication. She was very disorganized and overwhelmed by not only her son's school refusal but by many issues of daily living. She appeared afraid of her son and did not want to provoke him.*

*Her son behaved in a contemptuous manner towards her and cleverly utilized the Community Connections' orientation around confidentiality and other Community Connections' policies to forbid the Community Connections worker and his mother to talk about him. The Community Connections worker who was quite experienced and who generally did not have difficulty in developing rapport with young people was unable to get the young man to communicate with her. He would generally be sitting in front of the family computer in the lounge and would not respond to any overtures. A number of weeks of the worker visiting and putting herself in front of him did not elicit any response.*

*During this time the worker's relationship with the mother did develop. The worker was able to get a better understanding of her history and present social disadvantages, isolation and a history of abuse emerged from this process. The worker supported mum to access a disability service who gave her some support. A hunch revealed that she was suffering from a serious hearing defect, and she subsequently received speech therapy which assisted her communication. Most importantly mum was able to tell people she had a disability which meant more appropriate responses to her rather than services seeing her as 'odd', non compliant and not willing to follow through.*

*Community Connections assisted mum to develop recreational pursuits and find a coffee friend to meet with her weekly. Community Connections also assisted mum to organize cooking classes and taught her some cooking. Her house and life is less chaotic and is more organized. Her son still does not go to school and still sits in front of the computer. He now eats more than white bread, is talking about employment and has independently engaged with Community Connections seeking our support. Mum reports that he has friends on the internet and he appears happier than he has been.*

This was one of Community Connections first entrenched school refusal referrals. It and other cases' successes and failures have assisted in the development of our ongoing practice.

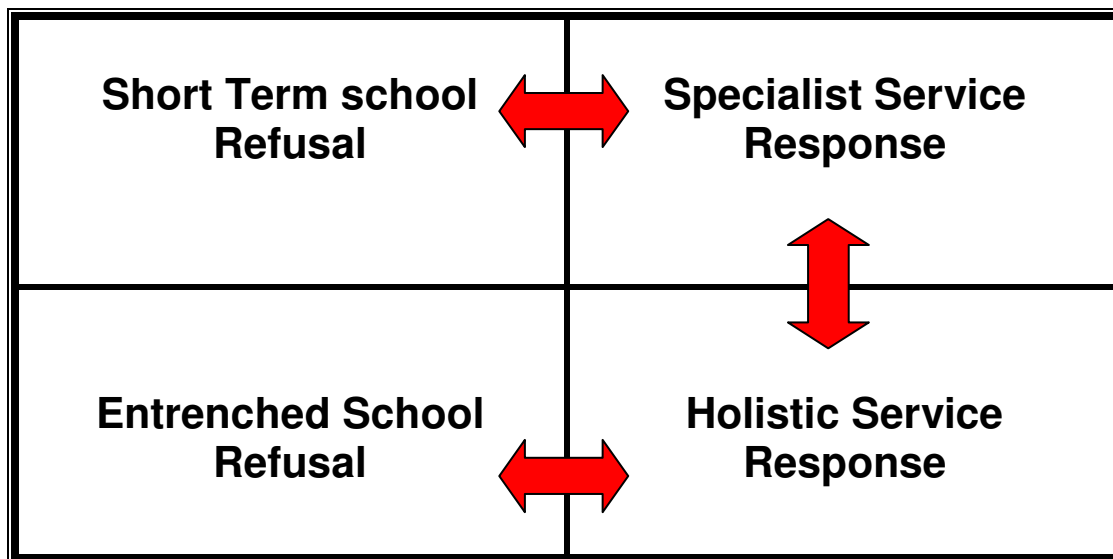
## On Specialist and Holistic Service Responses

As indicated earlier it is our belief that ‘entrenched school refusal’ will require a ‘holistic service response’ while short term school refusal will be amenable to ‘specialist service response’.

We distinguish between ‘holistic service response’ and ‘specialist service response’ as follows:

Holistic Service Response	Specialist Service Response
<i>**to be considered as a continuum rather than a dichotomy of service response**</i>	
The agency does what it needs to do to respond to the complexity of issues that may be present for a young person/ family/ school/ community.	Services that offer a particular service e.g. conflict resolution.
The service’s workers are more likely to be generalists who utilise multiple methods.	The service is more likely to be expert in one method
The service is more likely to engage with people in multiple settings, home, school, community, office.	The service is more likely to engage with people in one setting.
The service is more likely to actively outreach if people are difficult to engage.	The service, while stressing accessibility, will be less likely to actively outreach if people do not show willingness to engage
The service will hold open the question of ‘voluntary’ engagement and will seek to continuously offer opportunity for engagement.	The service will have a clear articulation that clients either engage ‘voluntarily’ or that there is an expectation of them to actively ‘engage with the service.’
The service is more likely to engage with multiple relationships.	The service is more likely to engage with fewer relationships
The service is more likely to have to negotiate issues of confidentiality between multiple relationships.	The service is more likely to have to negotiate confidentiality with one or a limited number of people.
The service will need to develop multiple understandings of their potential engagement contracts with people.	The service will be more likely to have a standard engagement contract.
More likely long term	More likely short term
The service will be more likely to engage a multiplicity of workers in a situation	The service will be less likely to need to engage a multiplicity of workers in a situation

The following diagram suggests the complimentary nature between specialist and holistic responses.



Short term school refusal is by its nature short term because it responds to specialist service response or to changes made by parents or the school. It is picked up and dealt with quickly.

However some short term school refusal is either not responded to or does not respond to specialist responses.

Entrenched school refusal will require holistic service responses. Holistic services will still need to engage specialist services as part of their response pattern.

### **Suggested Service Model**

The work with entrenched school refusers is likely to be:

- Slow
- Complex
- Multi-dimensional in terms of issues affecting young person/family/school
- Multi-dimensional in terms of responses e.g.;
  - young person support
  - parental support for change
  - school support for change
  - developing new community opportunities
- Multi-relational

In a perfect world Community Connections would suggest a team approach to entrenched school refusal with the following elements:

- Four member team

- Two primary workers to engage with young persons/family. Each of these workers can recruit the other primary worker plus the two remaining team members to become involved in one of their 'cases' if the need to deal with multiple relationships and realm develops
- The team leader will offer line of accountability, supervision, back up to the primary worker as above as well as provide a leadership role for some of the school and community work, including advocacy around policy change and programs and projects
- The fourth worker will provide back up to primary workers as above and also work developmentally to support school, community responses to young persons and families
- While team approach will be holistic – all issues are open for work – the team will not seek to directly address each issue (but will seek to link young person/family to specialist support e.g. Conflict resolution, family mediation, medical, employment)
- Each case could be up to a twelve month engagement and beyond
- Case loads will not be large.

Community Connections while presently incorporating some of these elements does not incorporate others.

In concluding this discussion paper Community Connections would like to acknowledge the many creative and committed instances of support to young people school refusing that have been enacted by school teachers, services, family members and community members.

These include:

- teachers, neighbours family members or service workers going to a child's home to support the parent and support the young person to get to school.
- teachers and others providing out of school tutoring
- teachers and others meeting with young people before school to check on those issues likely to cause trouble during the day; meeting with students after school to debrief the day.

Each of these instances has shown a commitment to the young person and a willingness to be creative.