



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Inquiry into School Refusal

Senate Education and Employment
Committee

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

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Brotherhood of St. Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy Vic. 3065

ABN 24 603 467 024
ARBN 100 042 822

Ph. (03) 9483 1183

www.bsl.org.au

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

Melinda Moore
Acting Director, Community Programs
Brotherhood of St. Laurence
Email: Melinda.Moore@bsl.org.au
Ph: 0490 124 796

Summary

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working to prevent and alleviate poverty across Australia. Our mission is to pursue lasting change, to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive. Our approach is informed directly by the people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our research, together with insights from our programs and services, to develop practical solutions that work.

This submission speaks to both the data and lived experience of program participants we work with across several schools in Melbourne's south-east.

Our key findings and recommendations are:

a. Recognise the protective factors that early learning and family services programs can provide towards reducing school refusal.

Programs like BSL's HIPPY program provides parents with the tools, knowledge and confidence to take responsibility for their children's learning at home and hence sets the foundation for fostering parents' familiarity with and role in their child's education, whilst also building the confidence of parents to be engaged and advocate for their children, whilst developing a relationship with their child's school. This provides both crucial knowledge and skills for parents when they have concerns about their children's educational progress and/or any disengagement risks which may act as a precursor to school refusal. **Reinforcing the importance of early intervention.** Programs like ours also have the ripple effect of building parental confidence and engagement in both

1. The school community – parent engagement in school activities (e.g. Reader programs), fundraising and earlier engagement with teachers when issues arise.
2. Broader community and economy - leading to employment, increased financial well-being and independence.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Recognise the role of early learning programs which lay the foundation for achieving educational milestones and/or family services programs, which also build parental capacity, familiarity with the education system and foster relationships with school and engagement in children's learning, in providing protective factors against future school refusal.

b. Varying reasons for school refusal and/or seeking other schooling options, COVID related and not

Whilst some factors have been related to the pandemic, there are a broad range of factors contributing to students and their families' reasons for seeking alternative schooling and education options.

c. Whilst remote learning during COVID led to an increase in school refusal so did the return to face to face learning.

At one school, when COVID first hit, **2882 days were missed** due to school refusal and truancy. As students adjusted to remote learning, this **decreased by 44% by 2021 with a reduction to 1334 days** being missed. However, when school went back to face to face, school refusal increased again by **65% back up to almost 2020 levels at 2207 days**. Anecdotal feedback indicates that the return to school was traumatic for many students, whose mental health was greatly impacted.

d. Having intensive supports available, like BSL's engagement program, assisted to bring high school refusal rates down

Another school's data showed that the pandemic led to an **83% increase in school refusal rates in the first year of COVID** and remote learning (2020) with 485 days missed, this **decreased by 36%** to 309 days in 2021 when remote learning continued with breaks of return to school and **down**

86% to only 43 days in the current year. Apart from no remote learning, the latter decrease can also be attributed to intense support with students and families from BSL’s Engagement and Enhancement programs.

e. School refusal starting younger, and supports are not age appropriate for increasing demand from younger learners

Data across two schools shows that the days missed due to school refusal starting as early as Prep (5-year-olds) and hitting disturbing levels by Year 4 and 5, when students are 9 and 10 and currently ineligible for intensive supports. That current Victorian state programs do not service any of these students and don’t catch those at the beginning of their school refusal journey, hence a missed opportunity for early intervention.

RECOMMENDATION 2 – Ensure government funding for long-term intervention programs which are universal and allow for:

- a. Students at-risk of school refusal of any age to be referred**
- b. Student referral should be based on concerns about risk rather than waiting to meet thresholds such as needing to have missed 30% of schooling in a previous term.**
- c. 1-1 therapeutic and learning supports to foster re-engagement and re-entry into school at the earliest opportunity.**

These are currently funded philanthropically to fill gaps in government funding. Programs like the BSL’s Engagement program and Barwon Child & Youth’s [The Geelong Project](#) are but two examples.

f. Demand for alternative schooling options has increased and the slight decrease in the average age of young people seeking alternative schooling options

Within BSL’s primary and secondary education programs and services, demand for enrolment is one indicator of the extent of school refusal within the communities within which we work. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, our David Scott School has experienced increasing numbers of enquiries requesting entry and enrolment in the senior secondary schooling program. Between October 2021 to October 2022, two key trends were observed

1. A **46% increase in enquiries** (from 130 to 190)
2. The **age of students requesting school entry decreased** - in October 2020, the average age of students requesting entry was **16 years and 5 months** and in November 2022 the age is **15 years**.

g. Not all children, young people and/or families are affected in the same way

Children and young people from marginalised households who face complex circumstances regarding educational engagement have had added challenges for learning engagement.

h. Young parents and carers

The requirement to undertake remote home-learning during COVID raised specific challenges for students who were in caring roles, whether these were older people and/or their own children. Being within the home environment, their role at school had to take a lower priority and/or they were concerned about exposing immunocompromised family members to COVID if they returned to school.

i. School refusal has long term impacts on family relationships, employability and economic security for students and their families

BSL staff reported that the students most affected are those with a lived experience of poverty, family violence, inadequate or unpredictable housing or trauma. School attendance and

achievement is an investment in future economic and social security, but disadvantaged families often describe living from day to day experiencing considerable stress related limited income and resources.

j. Need for innovative support services - what can work and what is needed – The Engagement and Outreach model can work to tailor approaches for individuals

BSL has been working with Monterey Secondary College (MSC), a large secondary school in the low socio-economic area of Frankston North. Prior to COVID, MSC identified a need to provide intensive support to young people who disengaged from education. The Engagement Program was designed as a school-based program providing educational and therapeutic support for students experiencing complex issues which led to school refusal. Following the pandemic, participant numbers have grown from 35 to 118, representing a **237% increase** and an outreach component has been added to enable in home support. Such programs, with practices underpinned by trauma informed theories and capabilities approaches, need to be universal.

k. Allied health and community services are overwhelmed and exacerbating school refusal

Many students require support services external to the school environment. However, post-COVID-19 local services have significantly long waiting time for appointments in the Frankston local area. For example, from 3 months for homelessness services to 6 months for counselling appointments to 12 months for either a speech pathologist or occupational therapist.

RECOMMENDATION 3 – Funding for allied health services, which impact school engagement and leads to an increase in school refusal, need to be increased to maximise early intervention and not exacerbate the impacts of school refusal.

l. Education systems lack line of sight to the extent of school refusal, the geographic concentrations and the demographic patterns

Across Australian schooling systems and jurisdictions there is limited availability of public monitoring and tracking data that reveals the true extent of school refusal. State based post-school tracking initiatives such as *On Track* in Victoria and *Next Step* in Queensland have in previous years included samples of early school leavers. The public reporting arising from these tracking initiatives have provided an insight into some of the factors contributing to school refusal amongst young people in the middle and senior years of schooling. However, the data within these publications is a limited sample and does not provide a detailed or in depth illustration of the breadth of school refusal.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Federal Government should co-ordinate to ensure a national picture can be easily obtainable to provide a line of sight to the extent of school refusal, the geographic concentrations and the demographic patterns.

1 . The Brotherhood of St. Laurence

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working to prevent and alleviate poverty across Australia. Our mission is to pursue lasting change, to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive. Our approach is informed directly by the people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our research, together with insights from our programs and services, to develop practical solutions that work.

This submission will speak to both the data and lived experience of program participants we work with, reflecting our experience as an alternative school provider ([David Scott School](#)) and deliverer of the below support services for primary and secondary students and their families across several schools in Melbourne's south-east – the [School Engagement and Enhancement Project](#).

David Scott School

The David Scott School (DSS) has been established to deliver a personalised and high-quality senior secondary (VCAL) education in Frankston. DSS engages young people who have been marginalised from mainstream educational settings due to complex personal circumstances. DSS has 120 full time registered students (15-20 years old) onsite and almost 300 alumni are provided with support as they transition into employment, further learning and/or community connectedness.

School Engagement and Enhancement Project - Frankston North

Our **Engagement program** supports students living in Frankston North who are disengaged from their education, or at risk of becoming disengaged, to improve their connection to school and their engagement with learning opportunities. Located at Monterey Secondary College (MSC) in Frankston North, **Engagement** works with middle-year students, and their families, to re-engage in full-time mainstream education or enter an alternative learning pathway. Engagement focuses on reducing risk factors for school disengagement while concurrently enhancing protective factors. We provide a differentiated curriculum in a small group setting – along with therapeutic support – within the context of the school. Learning is facilitated by teachers and therapeutic workers working together to improve students' education and wellbeing outcomes.

Our **Enhancement program** aims to build positive relationships between the child, family and school, through trust and connection, creating opportunities for students and their families to participate in further academic, social and recreational activity in their local school community. We provide a program of activities outside the formal structure of the school day, supporting the academic, social and personal development of students and contributing to their success in learning and life community volunteers and local businesses, across three sites: Aldercourt Primary School, Mahogany Rise Primary School and Monterey Secondary School. We enable parents to volunteer in extended school day programs, participate in adult learning opportunities and enhance their learning and employment pathways. We establish a safe learning environment to foster connection and build family capacity to improve parent-child relationship and family functioning.

Whilst working with three- and four-year olds, in our introduction overleaf we also touch on our [HIPPPY program](#), a two-year, home-based, early learning and parenting program for families with young children. We share this as the importance of ensuring children from disadvantaged backgrounds meet their education milestones and parents are engaged in their children's learning **sets the foundation to providing key protective factors** to mitigate against or reduce the likelihood of school refusal.

2 . Introduction

BSL welcomes this Inquiry into school refusal. Before we respond to each of the terms of reference drawing on our aforementioned expertise, we would like to make the following key four points as important context:

- a. While the focus of the terms of reference draw attention to the student and family circumstances, we believe it is important that the inquiry explores the broader structures and systems that impact on individuals and communities and how they contribute to ongoing refusal behaviours.
- b. Whilst COVID-19 has exacerbated existing failures and weaknesses in education and support services system, many of these were present prior to the pandemic.
- c. The long periods of disruption and 'lockdown' have meant many more young people have found it difficult to reintegrate into mainstream educational environments and their families do not have the strategies or resources to manage school refusal behaviours.
- d. The role of schools in responding to school refusal also needs to be understood within their broader local service ecosystems.

Early Learning Programs as Preventative and Early Intervention

Whilst the submission primarily touches on insights from our programs working with students and families currently engaged in school refusal, we think it's worthwhile touching on the importance of preventative and early intervention.

In partnership with local providers and with funding from the Federal Department of Social Services (DSS), BSL delivers the **Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)** as an early learning and parenting program targeting young children and their families living in disadvantage across 100 sites nationally. With the support of tutors, parents conduct weekly early learning activities at home with children aged 4 and 5.

[Research](#) has shown that it is the most effective way to provide early childhood learning in the home, improving children's school-readiness. It recognises that children's earliest and most powerful learning comes from their family. Through a structured education program, parents are supported to shape their child's learning opportunities around their strengths and interests. HIPPY helps parents lay the foundations for success at school by teaching their child literacy, numeracy and language skills as well as physical skills, so they develop a love of learning that lasts throughout their lives. HIPPY children graduate from the program with literacy and numeracy skills above the Australian average. The program:

- encourages a love of learning;
- increases the likelihood that children enjoy and do well at school;
- promotes language, listening and concentration skills;
- builds children's self-esteem and confidence in learning; and
- improves relationships between parents and children.

Out of the children graduating from HIPPY in 2019:

- 98% perform above average in abstract, pre-numeracy skills
- 79% perform above average in literacy skills
- 90% of parents reported that their child was school-ready because of HIPPY
- 93% of parents report overwhelming enjoyment of HIPPY by their children.

As a program which provides parents with the tools, knowledge and confidence to take responsibility for their children's learning at home, HIPPY sets the foundation for fostering parents' familiarity with and role in their child's education, whilst also building the confidence of parents to be engaged and advocate for their children, whilst developing a relationship with their child's

school. This provides both crucial knowledge and skills for parents when they have concerns about their children’s educational progress and/or any disengagement risks which may act as a precursor to school refusal. **Reinforcing the importance of early intervention.** Programs like ours also have the ripple effect of building parental confidence and engagement in both

- a. The school community – parent engagement in school activities (e.g. Reader programs), fundraising and earlier engagement with teachers when issues arise.
- b. Broader community and economy - leading to employment, increased financial well-being and independence.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Recognise the role of early learning programs which lay the foundation for achieving educational milestones and/or family services programs, which also build parental capacity, familiarity with the education system and foster relationships with school and engagement in children’s learning, in providing protective factors against future school refusal.

3 . Response to Terms of Reference

1. The increasing number since the COVID-19 pandemic, of young people and their families who are experiencing school refusal

BSL has seen increasing numbers of young people engaging in school refusal as a result of the pandemic. Our key trends indicate a complexity to this increase – the following have been observed in our practice:

a. Varying reasons for school refusal and/or seeking other schooling options, COVID related and not

Whilst some factors have been related to the pandemic, there are a broad range of factors contributing to students and their families’ reasons for seeking alternative schooling and education options. Students and families reported their reasons for seeking entry DSS to be related to:

COVID-RELATED AND/OR LIKELY EXACERBATED BY COVID

- i. Fear of exposure regarding what learning has been done from home or concern about other students and staff perceptions of their family, home, relationships or lack-of-resources being ‘seen’ as inadequate due to the home learning context
- ii. Anxiety connected to being unable to keep up with academic requirements, health anxiety related to contracting disease
- iii. Students have been acting as carers during the pandemic and are now required at home for this role or are required to contribute financially to the family resources
- iv. Social divide and concerns of marginalisation regarding vaccination status noting that David Scott School community are often distrustful of government mandates and experience living on the societal margin
- v. Less hope for the future and decreasing sense of hope being connected to mental health challenges

NOT DIRECTLY COVID RELATED

- vi. Social conflict, bullying or social anxiety at previous school (including cyber-bullying) and perception of being unable to build and maintain relationships
- vii. Drug and alcohol dependencies of student and/or family members impacting school connection
- viii. Poor sleeping patterns – often but not exclusively connected to gaming

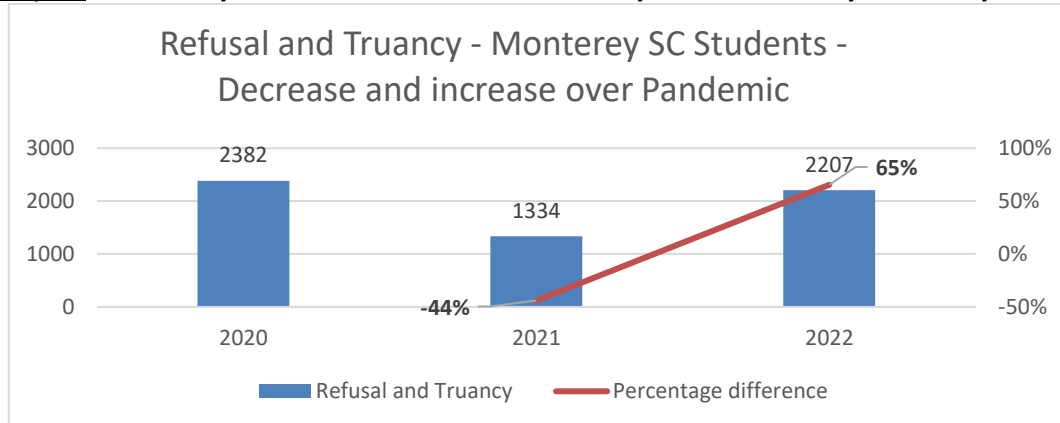
Beyond the aforementioned factors, broader systemic factors have also been exacerbated by COVID

- ix. Those for whom school and home is culturally not aligned (social class, economic circumstance, family history of school disconnection, language, etc)
- x. Those for whom *shame* about poor living circumstances had been a prominent lived experience before the pandemic
- xi. Those who have had intergenerational experiences of early school leaving and/or distrust of schooling institutions
- xii. Those who are unable to access the health system (particularly the mental health system) for reasons including but not limited to financial, disproportionate wait times to need, distrust, prior poor experiences, limited connection, lack of awareness for first point of call, navigational capabilities.

Data from Frankston and Frankston North Community

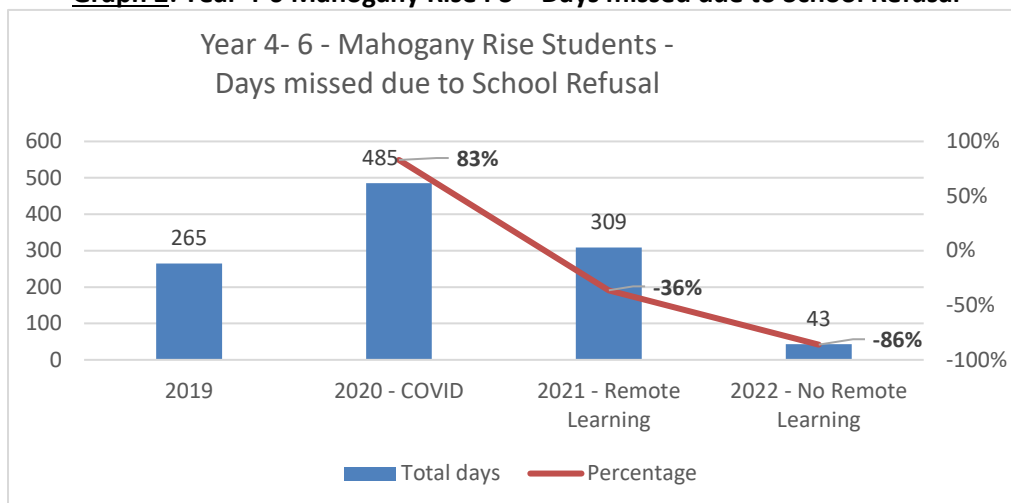
The numbers for school refusal and truancy at **Monterey Secondary College** in **Graph 1** shows that when COVID first hit, **2882 days were missed** due to school refusal and truancy. As students adjusted to remote learning, this **decreased by 44% by 2021 with a reduction to 1334 days** being missed. However, when school went back to face to face, **school refusal increased again by 65% back up to almost 2020 levels at 2207 days**. Anecdotal feedback indicates that the return to school was traumatic for many students, whose mental health was greatly impacted. These high numbers of school refusal led to BSL developing its aforementioned Outreach model of the Engagement Program.

Graph 1: School days missed due to Refusal & Truancy across Monterey Secondary College



Graph 2, reflecting data from Mahogany Rise Primary School, shows that the pandemic led to an **83% increase in school refusal rates in the first year of COVID** and remote learning (2020) with 485 days missed, this **decreased by 36% to 309 days** in 2021 when remote learning continued with breaks of return to school and **down 86%** to only 43 days in the current year. Apart from no remote learning, the latter decrease can also be attributed to intense support with students and families from BSL’s Engagement and Enhancement programs. Both student and parent engagement are now growing at Mahogany Rise Primary School.

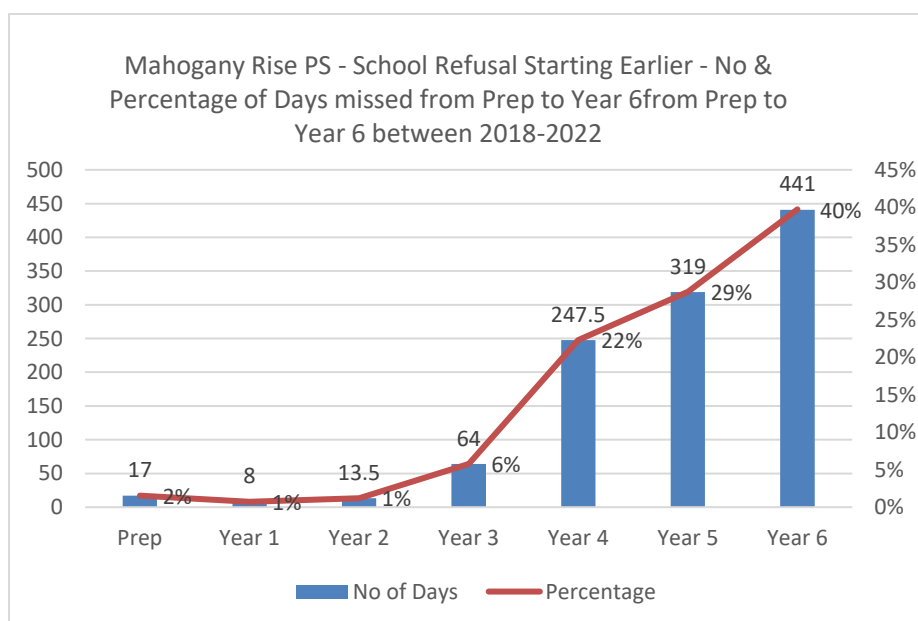
Graph 2: Year 4-6 Mahogany Rise PS – Days missed due to School Refusal



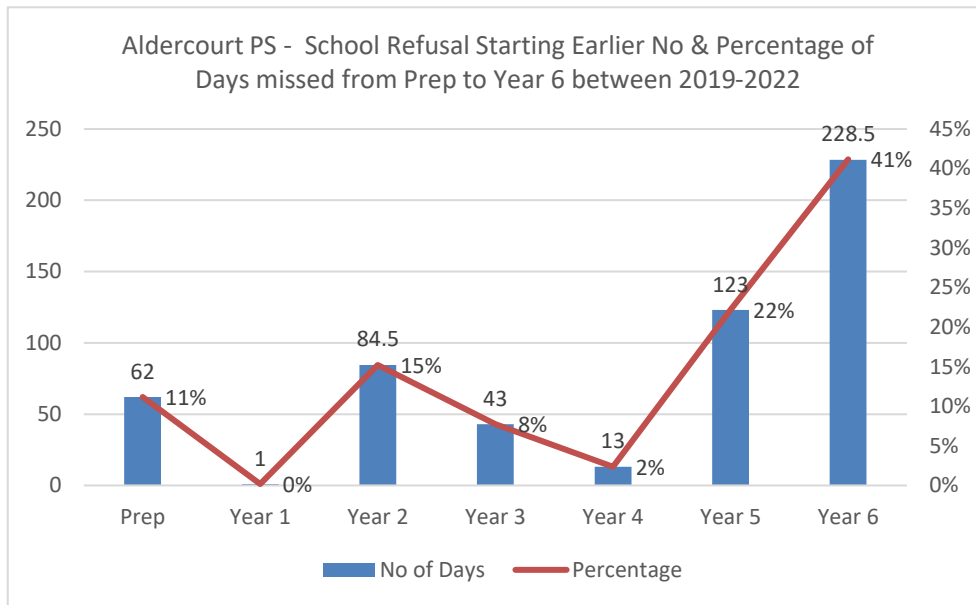
b. School refusal starting younger and supports are not age appropriate for increasing demand from younger learners

Whilst there are many state government funded support programs, like [Navigator](#) in Victorian schools, the eligibility is limited to young people aged 12 and above, undergoing the transition from grade 6 to high school. We acknowledge and appreciate that the [Victorian Government has recently announced that in 2023 they will pilot the eligibility being lowered to include 10-11 year old's](#) (those in Grade 4-5) in four LGAs before that is expanded statewide in 2024. Waiting another two years for this support will have irreparable impacts on students' mental health, education engagement and potentially longer-term employment prospects. As Graph 3 and 4 below demonstrates, data from students at Mahogany Rise PS and Aldercourt PS shows that the days missed due to school refusal starting as early as Prep (5-year-olds) and hitting disturbing levels by Year 4 and 5, when students are 9 and 10 and currently ineligible for intensive supports. That current Victorian state programs do not service any of these students is a missed opportunity for early intervention.

Graph 3: Mahogany Rise PS –Days missed due to School Refusal starting as early as Prep



Graph 3: Aldercourt PS –Days missed due to School Refusal starting as early as Prep



Apart from the age eligibility reducing the capacity for early intervention, such state programs also require students to have “attended 30% or less of the previous school term”. This requires waiting for disengagement to have occurred, rather than allowing for intervention for students who are at risk of disengagement and/or those for whom who are not yet reaching that 30% criteria.

As the case study of Philip (a pseudonym) overleaf demonstrates, whilst the decline into ongoing school refusal can be quick, the pathway back to re-engagement can be slow and require intensive support. Hence, reflecting the above data and the learning from this program, our second recommendation focuses on the following:

RECOMMENDATION 2 – Ensure government funding for long-term intervention programs which allow for:

- d. Students at-risk of school refusal of any age to be referred
- e. Student referral should be based on concerns about risk rather than waiting to meet thresholds such as needing to have missed 30% of schooling in a previous term.
- f. 1-1 therapeutic and learning supports to foster re-engagement and re-entry into school at the earliest opportunity.

These are currently funded philanthropically to fill gaps in government funding. Programs like the BSL’s Engagement program and Barwon Child & Youth’s [The Geelong Project](#) are but two examples.

This would ensure universally available programs regardless of which region a student lives in. Such programs could provide a tailored response at an individual or community level to ensure vulnerable students have those bridges to access a mainstream system. It also recognises that not all schools have the flexibility to shift funds to provide wrap-around supports for students.

- c. Demand for alternative schooling options has increased and the slight decrease in the average age of young people seeking alternative schooling options

Within BSL’s primary and secondary education programs and services, demand for enrolment is one indicator of the extent of school refusal within the communities within which we work. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, our David Scott School has experienced increasing numbers of enquiries requesting entry and enrolment in the senior secondary schooling program. Between October 2021 to October 2022, two key trends were observed

3. A **46% increase in enquiries** (from 130 to 190)
4. The **age of students requesting school entry slightly decreased** - in October 2020, the average age of students requesting entry was **16 years and 5 months** and in November 2022 the age is **15 years**.

Case Study – Philip*

Philip is 14 years old and in Year 7. He was referred to BSL’s Outreach program when he transitioned from primary school into high School. Prior to COVID, owing to social skills challenges, multiple different diagnosis and his experience of family trauma, Philip had engaged in schoolwork but had not attended in person for about two years. During COVID, he turned to gaming and would spend all day on the computer. He was extremely resistant to engaging with support workers and would become threatened and angry when approached. Philip’s father felt powerless owing to this own limited parental capacity and challenges with information processing,

The Outreach team began providing both therapeutic and learning support, working with Philip and his father on setting small achievable goals to improve his learning. The first steps of intervention were for the team to organise weekly home visits at the same time to implement a predictable routine. The team then set a timer each session and set the goal for Phillip to increase his engagement time in a task by 2 minutes each session. Philip started at 10 minutes of engagement time and is now able to complete a full session with the team (up to 45 minutes). He is now engaging in schoolwork and has increased his social skills, engaging in conversation and eye contact. Phillip has begun to share more of his thoughts and ideas and is creating his own poetry. Philip has not yet been able to set or express his own goals however the team are working with him to get him outside into the front yard to do some of their sessions. This will be the first small step on getting Philip accustomed to moving out of his home environment and comfort zone.

Philip now engages with school for weekly sessions with an Outreach teacher and Therapeutic Worker. The consistent routine that the team have provided has been a big factor in building a safe learning environment for Phillip, one that he can trust after experiencing trauma.

2. How school refusal is affecting young people and their families and the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents and carers

a. Not all children, young people and/or families are affected in the same way

Children and young people from marginalised households who face complex circumstances regarding employment engagement have had added challenges for learning engagement. **Barriers** to online learning included issues related to:

- a. **TECHNOLOGY** - limited or no internet access and fewer technological devices
- b. **MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES** - depression and anxiety and barriers to school attendance can become amplified by isolation and what was potentially resolvable becomes insurmountable.
- c. **PARENTAL SKILLS/CAPACITY** - limited parental capacity/confidence to support learning from home, reduced energy and capacity of families to support students to attend and/or

implement school connective strategies at home, language background other than English, technology skills - creating barriers to engagement

- d. **COMPROMISED HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS** - family conflict leading to limited support. In addition, many students and their families had and still have limited or no contact with schools and support services raising concerns about increased risk of family violence and mental health concerns amongst other issues associated with disengagement.

Impacts of school refusal on students include

- a. **Real or perceived gaps in understanding that compound over time** - Introductory lessons are missed so returning becomes harder as students try to pick up in the middle of a unit or assessment tasks without the foundation knowledge or skills.
- b. **Self-esteem** - The students' academic self-concept and self-esteem is impacted and replaced with negative beliefs about academic abilities, teachers and learning.
- c. **Difficulty resuming friendships** - Peer groups are fragile, particularly in secondary school, and BSL staff have observed those who have long absences from school find it hard to resume or initiate friendships and they have no sense of belonging. Due to the precarious nature of their social situations, young people can miss the opportunity to realise that others are facing the same challenges.

b. Young parents and carers

The requirement to undertake remote home-learning during COVID raised specific challenges for students who were in caring roles, whether these were older people and/or their own offspring. Being within the home environment, their role at school was taken less seriously and/or they were concerned about exposing immunocompromised family members to COVID if they returned to school.

BSL's alternative school, DSS, has a significant (40%) number of students who self-report as carers. Caring for grandparents, parents and siblings during this time with responsibilities usually held by adults posed particular challenges. DSS students reported the following

1. Managing 'home-learning' for younger siblings
2. Navigating the health and safety for family members living with drug and/or alcohol dependencies and/or significant mental health challenges.
3. Undertaking these in an environment of isolation and limited resources.

Furthermore, **student mothers** often refer to the importance of holding a 'parent' identity at home and a 'student' identity at school. When this was compromised during pandemic lockdowns (in a broader context of the social isolation already experienced by student mothers and the literal social isolation of lockdowns), flexible settings have reported limited connection or complete disconnection of student mothers. Anecdotal evidence suggests this disconnection is a result of both the dual workload of being a student mother in these circumstances and the stubborn narrative of shame and self-protection that has long been a staple of the lived experience of younger mothers.

For many of these carers and younger parents, there has not been a return to school for a number of reasons

1. Perception of being too far behind
2. Being required at home for caring or domestic tasks
3. Being the main financial earner
4. Being 'exposed' due to home learning and having limited external input into the value of 'school' (where familial narratives may be incongruent with continued educational engagement).

As the below case study on Ruby (a pseudonym), a young carer, illustrates, students not being at school meant that professionals like teachers and social workers were unable to monitor family dynamics impacting on educational engagement. As an example,

- a. a laptop provided for schooling purposes was utilised by her depressed mother for streaming services at the expense of Ruby’s education
- b. Ruby took on responsibility to home-school her four younger siblings
- c. As a result, Ruby lacked the energy and capacity to focus on her own schoolwork.

Case Study – Ruby*, a young carer

Ruby is 18 and lives with her mother and her five younger siblings. In 2021 she was trying to complete Year 12 at the David Scott School.

Ruby’s mother suffers from depression and social anxiety and rarely leaves her room. Throughout lockdown, Ruby borrowed a laptop and internet dongle from DSS. Both of these items were used by Ruby’s mother for streaming services and therefore were unavailable for Ruby.

Ruby describes supporting her younger siblings’ education and details her concern about her mother being exposed as not being ‘like the other mothers’. Ruby consistently wrote and signed emails for her siblings pretending to be her mother whilst attempting to avoid the exposure. Ruby stayed home with the siblings and did her best to help them complete their learning tasks (all primary school aged).

Ruby worked at a supermarket during this time, in between work, domestic duties and home-schooling her siblings. Ruby remembers this time as ‘exhausting’. Ruby engaged with the DSS wellbeing team but she was clear that she did not have time or energy for academic work. Ruby worked extensively with the DSS multi-disciplinary wellbeing team and experienced significant flexibility in the workload to re-connect her to her learning and her post school pathway goals. This connection is still tenuous, but she is planning to try to return to DSS in 2023.

c. School refusal has long term impacts on family relationships, employability and economic security for students and their families

BSL staff report that the students most affected are those with a lived experience of poverty, family violence, inadequate or unpredictable housing or trauma. School attendance and achievement is an investment in future economic and social security, but disadvantaged families often describe living from day to day experiencing considerable stress related limited income and resources. Students and families often develop complex strategies to survive in the ‘near future’ and have limited resources or experience to support them to be future focused. This leads to a tension between their current lived experience and the requirement to be ‘future-focussed’ to experience success, connection and purpose at school. Truncating education in this way is likely to impact an individual over the course of their lifetime potentially impacting on employability and future economic security.

Impact of school refusal on families

More broadly, in our experience, the impact on families has been

- a. Feeling a sense of failure and shame exacerbated by the pressure of schools calling and asking questions about student attendance
- b. Strain on parental relations leading to families experiencing increased relationship difficulties
- c. Increased stress levels due to
 - a. juggling supervision with other parental responsibilities;
 - b. study/work commitments;

- c. financial pressures arising from taking risks to set up a small business which would provide flexibility around work hours to accommodate supervision requirements of their child

And, as elaborated below, and in our overleaf case study, impact on

- d. Employment or employment-seeking ability
- e. Finances due to decreased hours
- f. Career choices.

Many of the parents we work with are not in jobs that can be done from home. **For those unable to attend work due to their inability to leave school-refusing children unsupervised in the house** are experiencing

- a. Reduction in work hours
- b. Increase in financial stress
- c. Inability to pursue seeking of employment due to support their child requires.

Parents and carers who are at work are often distracted by children who are unable to attend school and remain unsupervised at home. This can impact on perceptions of their reliability by the employer.

Case study – Levi*

Levi is 13 and in Year 8 at Monterey Secondary College, where he has a modified timetable as part of the Engagement Program, called Classroom Connect. Levi was referred to this program after experiencing periods of school refusal and a prolonged absence in primary school. Levi struggles with high anxiety and as a result he would struggle to come to school and need assistance to get out of the car.

Any break from school ie: weekends and holidays, would cause Levi's anxiety to rise and he would experience school refusal again. Levi's school refusal has contributed to the stress levels at home, as his mother has tried to study, while juggling family commitments. Her ability to get a job has been really difficult and she has had to take the risk recently to start her own dog grooming business, to secure employment with the necessary flexible hours. This risk has further contributed to her stress.

Levi has required intensive support to build up his stamina in routine to address his high anxiety. COVID was a defining factor for Levi as his anxiety in going out in public increased dramatically. COVID and subsequent school lockdown contributed further to Levi's school refusal and subsequent anxiety to return.

Levi has received intensive support from the Classroom Connect team – two specialist teachers and a Therapeutic worker. The Therapeutic worker has assisted Levi and his mum in addressing the anxiety he felt in the morning by meeting him at the car and walking him to class. This trusting relationship allowed Levi to feel comfortable to step out of his comfort zone and tackle his anxiety. Levi successfully graduated out of the Classroom Connect program at the end of 2021 into the Activate program as a part of his modified timetable, receiving small group support and individual project-based learning. Levi has been able to go from not attending school at all in primary school and at the start of year 7, to now being able to be in a mainstream learning environment on a modified timetable. Levi has built strong connections with staff and has also built lasting friendships with students that increase his willingness to attend school.

3. The impacts and demands of the increasing case load on service providers and schools to support these students and their families;

a. Impact on school budgets and resourcing

BSL's alternative school setting, DSS, has doubled the size of the wellbeing team between 2019 and 2022 to accommodate the increase in demand. With limited budgets for support services most schools make decisions about which support services are most needed. At DSS, the direction of resources into the wellbeing team comes at the cost of being able to direct resources into other areas such as education support.

b. Need for innovative support services - what can work and what is needed – The Engagement and Outreach model can work to tailor approaches for individuals

BSL has been working with Monterey Secondary College (MSC), a large secondary school in the low socio-economic area of Frankston North. Prior to COVID, MSC identified a need to provide intensive support to young people who disengaged from education. The Engagement Program was designed as a school-based program providing educational and therapeutic support for students experiencing complex issues which led to school refusal. Following the pandemic, participant numbers have grown from 35 to 118, representing a **237% increase**.

The Engagement Program aims to meet students need for flexibility and tailored approaches either at school or in the home environment. Many students require programs to support self-

regulation and social interactions. The program endeavours to create a viable path suited for each student to enable educational access and pathways to further work or study. Demand for the service is high with ongoing requests from students and families who would benefit from involvement. **Unless this engagement occurs, these young people are at risk of long-term disengagement.**

An *Outreach Service* has also been developed as a part of their Engagement Program structure to meet the overwhelming need for in-home support. Together with Monterey SC, BSL has responded to the high numbers of disengaged students and the school refusals since COVID with the establishment of the **Outreach service** that has worked with 19 students in person at school or offsite, to date, which as involved therapeutic and/or educational support as well as providing weekly work packs to students. Underpinning the therapeutic practices in the program are **trauma informed theories and capabilities approaches.**

c. Allied health and community Services are overwhelmed and exacerbating school refusal

Many students require support services external to the school environment. However, post-COVID-19 local services have significantly long waiting time for appointments in the Frankston local area. For example:

- Service for young people 12-24 years at risk of homelessness – 6-12 weeks
- Eating disorder clinic – 12 weeks
- Psychology and psychiatry – 6 months
- Speech pathologist – 12 months
- Occupational therapy – 12 months

These extraordinary long waiting lists demonstrate that COVID-induced requests for services have compounded the demand on a support system which was already under strain and inadequate. The compartmentalised nature of service provision is very challenging for families to navigate particularly for those with limited resources, confidence, literacy levels and social connection.

RECOMMENDATION 3 – Funding for allied health services, which impact school engagement and lead to an increase in school refusal, need to be increased to maximise early intervention and not exacerbate the impacts of school refusal.

d. Catalyst for change

On the upside, throughout the pandemic, educators have ‘pivoted’ and been involved in the lives and experiences of students in a manner that has never been seen in the modern Australian mainstream education system. Educators have proven an their ability to respond flexibly and compassionately whilst maintaining high standards and expectations. There is an opportunity to capitalise on this new learning, knowledge and evidence and consider a broader range of successes through further research into:

- a. Multiple and flexible platforms where learning can occur and be credentialled
- b. Broader recognition of systems which focus on diverse outcomes
- c. Success credentials involving life experiences and/or workplace/industry experience
- d. Broader range of diversity in school staff including wellbeing staff (where relationships between students and staff benefit through common cultural connections or similar lived experiences) and benefits of staff diversity within the broader education sector
- e. Connected, wrap around support services with less ‘siloeing’ and single point entries for vulnerable families.

4. How relevant state, territory and federal departments are working to monitor and address this growing school refusal challenge; and

a. Education systems lack line of sight to the extent of school refusal, the geographic concentrations and the demographic patterns

Across Australian schooling systems and jurisdictions there is limited availability of public monitoring and tracking data that reveals the true extent of school refusal. While school attendance, attrition and early school leaving data is reported the various degrees of disaggregation by each state and territory's education department and limited nature of point in time data collections (e.g. annual census data) can hide the number of young people disengaging from school.

Reconnection and re-engagement strategies have long been used, to varying degrees of success, as safety nets for young people disengaging from school. While participation/enrolment numbers for government funded alternative schooling programs are variably available and reported by state/territory departments, the reasons for disengagement from school and engagement in alternative schooling options is not systematically collected or reported. State based post-school tracking initiatives such as *On Track* in Victoria and *Next Step* in Queensland have in previous years included samples of early school leavers. The public reporting arising from these tracking initiatives have provided an insight into some of the factors contributing to school refusal amongst young people in the middle and senior years of schooling. However, the data within these publications is a limited sample and does not provide a detailed or in depth illustration of the breadth of school refusal.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Federal Government should co-ordinate to ensure a national picture can be easily obtainable to provide a line of sight to the extent of school refusal, the geographic concentrations and the demographic patterns.

5. Other related matters

a. Positive news

BSL saw a small number of enrolled students with significantly increased engagement online than they have been able to demonstrate whilst face-to-face. This included two students with significant eating disorders, three students with anxiety disorders and several students with limited support systems to physically get to school - these students all effectively utilised borrowed technology during lockdown periods.

We were also able to see during remote learning that there were some students who thrived off site due to:

- b. less classroom distractions
- c. being able to get 1-1 support that they were ineligible for in the classroom
- d. reduced social anxiety pressures and
- e. learning at their own pace with a flexible scheduling of their learning.