



Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education's Inquiry into Factors Driving Educational Attainment

June 2026

Role of the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner

The ACT Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) is one of eight independent statutory roles that together make up the ACT Human Rights Commission. These roles promote the human rights and welfare of all people living in the ACT and have legislative responsibility for protecting some of Canberra's most vulnerable citizens.

The role of the CYPC is to:

- Promote the rights, safety, and wellbeing of children and young people,
- Consult and talk with children and young people and promote their participation in decision-making,
- Ensure stakeholders listen to and seriously consider the views of children and young people,
- Promote implementation of the ACT Child Safe Standards, and
- Provide advice to government and community agencies about how to improve services for children and young people.

The CYPC is also the ACT Public Advocate.

Membership of the ANZCCGA

The CYPC is also a member (and currently Co-Chair) of the Australian and New Zealand Children's Commissioners, Guardians, and Advocates (ANZCCGA), a collective body made up of independent statutory officeholders from each of Australia's states and territories, as well as National Commissioners from Australia and New Zealand.

ANZCCGA members, individually and collectively protect and promote the rights, safety, and wellbeing of children and young people across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and advocate for their best interests to be a primary consideration in public policy and decision-making so all children and young people can grow up safe, supported, and able to thrive.

Opening statement

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this Inquiry. My team and I regularly speak directly to children and young people in a range of settings. Their experiences of school are often at the forefront of the issues they wish to bring to my attention. It is clear that the education system is no longer fit for purpose for too many of our children and young people. This Inquiry is an important part of reflecting on what needs to change to better support all students to reach their full potential, in their own unique ways.

This submission draws on what we hear directly from children and young people about their experiences of school in the ACT. It sits alongside what we know from research and evidence regarding education attainment in Australia. The quotes included from the children and young people we have spoken to paint a poignant picture of the gaps in support, the increased mental health strain, and of inequality – all of which affect educational attainment.

As you will see in the research referenced throughout this submission, the evidence demonstrates that educational outcomes are not solely determined within schools but are the product of cumulative experiences across early childhood, health, social services, family environments, and community contexts.

While gender is a relevant dimension of analysis, particularly in how students' needs are identified and responded to, it is not the primary driver of inequity. Instead, disparities in attainment are strongly associated with the education system's response to socioeconomic status, disability and neurodiversity, cultural background, access to services, and variability in system capacity.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)¹ provides longitudinal evidence that these disparities emerge prior to school entry. Development across its five domains of physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication, has been shown to predict later academic performance and wellbeing outcomes. As of 2024, only 52.9 per cent of Australian children were developmentally on track across all domains, while 23.5 percent were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, demonstrating that a substantial proportion of Australian children begin school already at a disadvantage.²

Trigger warning

Many students quoted are being let down by the education system, and as a result are facing significant mental health challenges. Our submission includes references to suicide, bullying, abuse, and discrimination. I advise you to take necessary steps to protect your own wellbeing while reading their words.

I also encourage decision makers to sit with the discomfort that the brutal honesty of these children and young people may cause. In doing so, I urge you to acknowledge the responsibility we have as adults to take immediate and decisive steps to ensure **all** children and young people can thrive in Australian schools.

¹ Australian Early Development Census. (n.d.). *About the AEDC domains*. www.aedc.gov.au/what-is-the-aedc/about-the-aedc-domains

² Australian Government, Department of Education. (2025). *Australian Early Development Census national report 2024*. www.aedc.gov.au

Recommendations

1. Take an intersectional approach to educational attainment

- Ensure national policy moves beyond binary gender framing to address intersecting drivers of inequity, including:
 - a. Disability
 - b. Socioeconomic disadvantage
 - c. Racism and cultural exclusion
 - d. Gender diversity
- Align Commonwealth inquiries and reforms to avoid siloed responses.

2. Embed a child rights framework in national education policy

- Legislate and operationalise a Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA) across all Commonwealth education laws, funding agreements, and national strategies.
- Require Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) for all education-related policy, legislation, and budget decisions.
- Apply a “best interests of the child” (Art. 3) and maximum resource allocation (Art. 4) lens to funding decisions.

3. Prioritise children’s participation in decision-making

- Establish national mechanisms for meaningful participation of children and young people (Art. 12) in education policy design, inquiries, and reforms.
- Require all Commonwealth-funded reforms to demonstrate how student views and perspectives have informed decisions.

4. Engage Australian and New Zealand Children’s Commissioners, Guardians, and Advocates (ANZCCGA) in all inquiries relevant to children and young people to ensure decisions are informed by independent, child-centred expertise that reflects the lived experience of children and young people.

5. Invest in early childhood and integrated supports services for children and young people

- Expand Commonwealth investment in early childhood development, screening, and intervention, consistent with evidence that inequities begin before school.
- Fund integrated, cross-sector service models (education, health, mental health, disability) to support the whole child.
- Reduce waiting times and out-of-pocket costs for diagnosis and support services.

6. Guarantee inclusive education systems

- Strengthen national obligations to deliver inclusive, individualised education (Art. 29), including ensuring needs-based (not diagnosis-gated) support and increase workforce capability in inclusive practice.
- Monitor and enforce consistency in how inclusion policies are implemented across jurisdictions and within schools.

7. Strengthen equity through needs-based, rights-aligned funding

- Increase and better target Commonwealth funding to ensure equitable access to education (Art. 28), prioritising socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students with disability and neurodivergence, culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and those facing discrimination and exclusion.
- Address cost barriers (e.g. uniforms, materials, extracurriculars) through national affordability measures.

8. Address mental health as central to educational attainment

- Scale up Commonwealth investment in accessible, school-linked mental health services and ensure early intervention and preventative models, not crisis-based systems.
- Embed wellbeing as a core outcome of education policy, not a secondary objective.

9. Adopt a long-term, whole-of-government strategy for children's education wellbeing

- Develop a national, cross-portfolio strategy on children's educational wellbeing and attainment, integrating education, health, social services and housing and community supports. In doing so, apply a Future Generations lens to ensure sustainability and long-term outcomes of funding and programming.

10. Promote safe school environments

- Partner with states and territory governments to embed whole-of-school approaches to anti-bullying.
- Require accountability measures for safe reporting, transparency, and culturally safe practice.

11. Strengthen national action on racism, cultural safety, and inclusion in education

- The Australian Government should lead a coordinated national approach to eliminate racism and improve cultural safety across education systems. This should include:
 - a national anti-racism framework for education, co-designed with students
 - mandatory evidence-based anti-racism and cultural safety training for school staff
 - embedding safe reporting pathways to ensure students are heard, and
 - expanding culturally safe wellbeing supports for affected students.

12. Lead a national response to school disengagement and attendance

- Implement outstanding recommendations from the National Inquiry into School Refusal, including a national action plan, consistent data collection, and early identification and intervention.

Intersectional drivers of attainment

This submission acknowledges the importance of examining educational attainment; however, it respectfully notes that a framing limited to “boys and girls” risks oversimplifying a complex issue and may inadvertently exclude or marginalise students whose experiences do not align with a binary understanding of gender. Such an approach can minimise the diverse factors that shape educational outcomes and may unintentionally reinforce inequities.

Educational attainment is influenced by a broad range of structural, social, and individual factors. These include, but are not limited to, racism and the ongoing impacts of systemic disadvantage, insufficient support and inclusion for students with disability, discrimination experienced by LGBTIQ+ children and young people, and the prevalence and effects of bullying and exclusion within school environments. An exclusive focus on gender, risks overlooking how these factors operate together to affect engagement, wellbeing, and academic achievement.

Boys

There is evidence the education system is not adequately meeting the needs of boys, particularly in relation to literacy, engagement, and retention, with a substantial and persistent gender gap documented across Australia and comparable OECD countries. International data shows that boys consistently underperform girls in reading, often lacking the foundational literacy skills required for future learning and employment, while also being more likely to disengage, repeat grades, or leave school early. This pattern is reinforced by large-scale reviews indicating that boys in high-income countries are more likely than girls to fall behind academically, especially in literacy and school completion outcomes. In the Australian context, similar trends have long been identified, with boys demonstrating lower literacy achievement, higher rates of behavioural exclusion, and earlier school-leaving compared to girls.³

Maggie Dent and other practitioners draw on this evidence to argue that these outcomes are not simply individual deficits but reflect systemic misalignment between schooling structures and boys’ developmental needs. Dent highlights that boys are over-represented in discipline incidents, learning difficulties and disengagement, with gaps visible from the early years and persisting throughout schooling. She and others point to developmental differences in language acquisition, movement, and relational learning – supported by broader research on gendered patterns of engagement – as factors that are insufficiently accommodated within increasingly formalised, sedentary, and test-driven educational environments. The convergence of international evidence and practitioner insight suggests a need for more responsive, differentiated approaches that better align pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom environments with the diverse ways boys learn, while avoiding generalisations and recognising that outcomes are also shaped by socio-economic and contextual factors.⁴

³ Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. (2000, August). *The education of boys: Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations*. <https://aphref.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/eofb/subs/sub117.pdf>

⁴ Dent, M. (2018, July 13). *Boys, schools and the change that is needed*. Maggie Dent. <https://www.maggiedent.com/blog/boys-schools-and-the-change-that-is-needed/>

Other drivers

Although the issues for boys within the education system must be addressed, approaches to generating solutions must also recognise the other barriers to attainment many Australian students are facing. While I acknowledge inquiries necessarily require focused scopes, there is a risk associated with choosing to focus on only one aspect that contributes to attainment. Not only can it reinforce discriminatory systems, it also risks recommendations being siloed, which in turn results in changes that do not address key issues of inequity.

We know from our own engagement with students, as well as the wealth of research in this area,⁵ that non-binary and gender-diverse students experience very high levels of discrimination, bullying, and abuse. A national inquiry into education that reinforces binary views of students' gender identity contributes to a too-often hostile school environment for these students.

Accordingly, this submission seeks to broaden the scope of consideration beyond gender binaries, to include a specific focus on non-binary and gender-diverse students, as well as highlighting other key drivers of educational attainment that intersect with gender, and emphasise the need for inclusive, evidence-informed approaches that recognise the full diversity of students' identities and experiences.

Recommendation

1. Take an intersectional approach to educational attainment

- Ensure national policy moves beyond binary gender framing to address intersecting drivers of inequity, including:
 - a. Disability
 - b. Socioeconomic disadvantage
 - c. Racism and cultural exclusion
 - d. Gender diversity
- Align Commonwealth inquiries and reforms to avoid siloed responses.

The right to education

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) enshrines the right to education in Articles 28 and 29, which require all appropriate measures to be taken to ensure education:

- is accessible to every child
- supports the development of the child's full mental and physical abilities
- develops a respect for human rights and freedoms
- fosters the connection to the child's culture, language, and values, and
- develops a respect for the environment.

The Convention recognises children have the right to an education that supports their full development across cognitive, social, emotional, and cultural dimensions. Article 29 emphasises that education must be directed to the development of each child's personality, talents, and abilities to their fullest potential.

⁵ Hill, A. O., Lyons, A., Jones, J., McGowan, I., Carman, M., Parsons, M., Power, J., & Bourne, A. (2021). *Writing themselves in 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia* (National report). Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

Article 28 and Article 2 establish that this education must be accessible on the basis of equity and non-discrimination, including on the basis of gender identity.⁶

The Convention also affirms that education should be appropriate to the individual child's needs, requiring education systems to respond to diverse abilities, identities, and circumstances, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

This demands we consider educational attainment in nuanced ways, that acknowledge patterns and categories but keep a focus on the need for an education system that is responsive to children as individuals.

It is important to note, that although Australia's education system is devolved to state and territory governments, the ultimate responsibility for upholding these rights rests with the Commonwealth government, as the signatory of the Convention. The Commonwealth's approach to allocating funding to education, national legislation, and policies must all reflect this obligation.

The evidence demonstrates that current funding and policy settings are insufficient to meet the complexity of student need. Even in relatively well-funded systems, resources are often inadequate to provide early intervention, inclusive education, and integrated services. The ACT is a good example of this.⁷

A long-term, coordinated policy approach is required, with investment focused on early childhood, integrated services, and equitable access to support. As such, the Commonwealth Government, and state and territory governments must apply child rights principles to budget decisions. The Convention requires governments to allocate resources to support the realisation of children's rights. Article 4 obliges governments to use the maximum available resources to fulfil children's economic, social, and cultural rights.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee) emphasises that child-rights-based budgeting:

- contributes to the realisation of rights
- strengthens long-term economic and social outcomes, and
- supports sustainable and inclusive development.

To do so requires the undertaking of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) when developing legislation, policy, guidelines, programs, and services. These assessments would ensure children's rights are upheld by government spending and enable a transparent analysis of how children's best interests are being supported by proposed spending or programming.

“Every State should consider how it can ensure compliance with article 3 (1) [best interest of the child] and do so in a way which further promotes the visible integration of children in policy-making and sensitivity to their rights.”⁸

⁶ United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

⁷ Please see CYP submission [Better and fairer school funding 2024](#)

⁸United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2003). *General comment No. 5 (2003): General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6)*.

The UN Committee calls for governments to use CRIAs at all levels of decision-making, so that government obligations are upheld in the implementation of policy and legislation. Furthermore, the UN Committee considers that this self-monitoring and evaluation of the impact of laws, policies, and budgets is an obligation of governments.

Recommendation

2. Embed a child rights framework in national education policy

- Legislate and operationalise a Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA) across all Commonwealth education laws, funding agreements, and national strategies.
- Require Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) for all education-related policy, legislation, and budget decisions.
- Apply a “best interests of the child” (Art. 3) and maximum resource allocation (Art. 4) lens to funding decisions.

Children and young people’s perspectives

“I hate that adults don’t listen to me.”

“I want adults to know that when I’m frustrated no one listens to me.”

Any efforts to fully understand the factors influencing educational attainment should consider the perspectives of children and young people who are currently moving through their education. This necessitates hearing from children and young people themselves.

Article 12 of the UNCRC affirms that children and young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This not only includes decisions relating directly to their individual circumstances, but also policies, frameworks, and legislation that affect children and young people as a cohort and as citizens. Seeking out children and young people’s perspectives about the factors driving educational attainment would therefore support Australia’s commitment to, and obligations under, the Convention.

Hearing from children and young people themselves provides an important and invariably different perspective to that of adults, and one that benefits our consideration of matters such as those that are the subject of this Inquiry.

To this end, if you have not already done so, I encourage the Committee to establish appropriate mechanisms to enable children and young people to contribute to your Inquiry and, in doing so, enhance your understanding about what it is currently like to be a student in an Australian school.

Children’s Commissioners, Guardians and Advocates

It should also be standard practice when conducting Parliamentary Inquiries relevant to children and young people, to actively engage the collective body of Australian and New Zealand Children’s Commissioners, Guardians, and Advocates (ANZCCGA).

As independent statutory officeholders with direct insight into the rights, safety, wellbeing, and lived experiences of children and young people, ANZCCGA members provide evidence-based and child-centred perspectives that can enhance the quality and relevance of inquiry processes and outcomes. Greater engagement with the ANZCCGA would support more informed decision-making and ensure that the rights, best interests, and unique perspectives of children and young people are meaningfully considered across all relevant programs, policy, and legislation.

Recommendation

3. Prioritise children's participation in decision-making

- Establish national mechanisms for meaningful participation of children and young people (Art. 12) in education policy design, inquiries, and reforms.
- Require all Commonwealth-funded reforms to demonstrate how student views and perspectives have informed decisions.

4. Engage Australian and New Zealand Children's Commissioners, Guardians, and Advocates (ANZCCGA) in all inquiries relevant to children and young people to ensure decisions are informed by independent, child-centred expertise that reflects the lived experience of children and young people.

Access to support

"School support systems are not very accessible to a lot of students. Many are overlooked and dismissed."

"Not having mental health support diagnosis available makes school unsafe."

"People need help regardless of their silence or situation."

Students with disability and neurodiversity face systemic barriers to educational attainment, including limited access to support, inadequate adjustments, and insufficient staff training.

Differences in educational attainment are strongly influenced by unequal access to support within education systems. Across jurisdictions, thresholds for accessing targeted support are often misaligned with student need, resulting in a 'missing middle' of students whose learning difficulties are not mild, but also not severe enough to attract formal support.

"I need more support, but I can't get it because of my diagnosis. Apparently, my ADHD isn't bad enough and I haven't attempted suicide, which means it's incredibly difficult to get support without spending hundreds and thousands of dollars. I wish adults knew how hard it still is for me and I wish we could get more financial support for medical and wellbeing needs." (2025)

AEDC data indicates that increasing numbers of children are entering school with developmental vulnerabilities across multiple domains, suggesting rising demand for early and sustained intervention. Where support is not available early, these vulnerabilities translate into difficulties with engagement, behaviour, and academic progress throughout schooling.⁹

Access to support is also mediated by family capacity to navigate systems, creating inequity. Families with greater financial, linguistic, and educational resources are better able to advocate for their children, while others encounter barriers that delay or limit access to assistance.

⁹ Alston, F. (2025, June 19). *New AEDC data provides national insight into early childhood development*. The Sector. <https://thesector.com.au/2025/06/19/new-aedc-data-provides-national-insight-into-early-childhood-development>

Many specialist health services are oversubscribed in the ACT. Wait lists for Autism diagnoses, for example, can be up to two years, and given the demand for diagnosis in early primary school, this wait-time can significantly impact supports for children at a crucial time for their schooling.

The ACT Education Directorate has taken positive steps to address the impact of this through the *Inclusive Education: A Disability Inclusion Strategy for ACT Public Schools 2024-2034*,¹⁰ which emphasises what support a student needs, as opposed to being solely focused on diagnoses.

This approach is commended and should be noted as an example for other jurisdictions; however, it still leaves children and families without other supports in the wider community. Furthermore, schools vary widely in how they implement policies and allocate support, so despite the positive policy environment, the ACT has not sufficiently addressed all inclusion needs.

Gender differences in access to support are evident in some areas, for example, girls may be under-diagnosed with Autism in childhood,¹¹ and ADHD is also more frequently diagnosed in boys. There is evidence that girls are under-identified due to differences in symptom presentation and recognition, rather than actual prevalence.¹²

However, the overarching issue is the responsiveness and accessibility of systems rather than gender itself. Without greater resources for early diagnosis, mental health support, and needs based learning support, too many students are struggling without adequate or timely help.

Recommendation

5. Invest in integrated support services for children and young people

- Expand Commonwealth investment in early childhood development, screening, and intervention, consistent with evidence that inequities begin before school.
- Fund integrated, cross-sector service models (education, health, mental health, disability) to support the whole child.
- Reduce waiting times and out-of-pocket costs for diagnosis and support services.

6. Guarantee inclusive education systems

- Strengthen national obligations to deliver inclusive, individualised education (Art. 29), including ensuring needs-based (not diagnosis-gated) support and increase workforce capability in inclusive practice.
- Monitor and enforce consistency in how inclusion policies are implemented across jurisdictions and within schools.

¹⁰ Australian Capital Territory, Education Directorate. (2023). *Inclusive education: A disability inclusion strategy for ACT public schools 2024-2034*. ACT Government. act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/2596509/Inclusive-Education-Strategy-2024-2034.pdf

¹¹ Bawden, A. (2026, February 4). *Autistic girls much less likely to be diagnosed, study says*. The Guardian. www.theguardian.com/society/2026/feb/04/autism-women-men-diagnosis-childhood-adulthood

¹² Ibid

The impact of socioeconomic disadvantage

“Have education fees lower.”

“Cheaper for school camps.”

“Recently people we know at certain public schools didn't have enough tables and chairs to sit exams and had to sit their semester tests on the floor.”

“School uniforms should be cheaper.”

Socioeconomic disadvantage is one of the most significant predictors of educational attainment. The cost of education, including learning materials, extracurricular participation, and uniforms, creates barriers for many families.

The cost of living, and of education, has emerged as a significant theme during our consultations over the past two years, including from very young children.

In the AEDC 2024, 61 per cent of children in the most advantaged areas were developmentally on track across all domains, compared to only 41 per cent in the most disadvantaged areas. This shows children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to start school with developmental gaps that persist over time.¹³

Cost barriers extend beyond schooling into health systems. Limited access to bulk-billing services and long wait times for diagnoses delay intervention, compounding disadvantage and affecting educational engagement and achievement.

A substantial body of research demonstrates that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds consistently experience reduced access to resources, lower academic performance, and increased barriers to participation in education.¹⁴ Factors such as limited access to learning materials, food insecurity, and reduced parental capacity to support learning further compound these challenges, often leading to widening achievement gaps over time. These disparities are not isolated but contribute to entrenched patterns of educational inequality and reduced social mobility across generations.

This disparity is keenly recognised by students themselves, who reflect on disparities between private schools and public schools in sought after areas. Students have told us that ATAR scaling can demotivate even high achieving students.

“Private schools also have higher scaling so you end up paying for better scaling.”

“Students at another college might do really well but will get scaled down [in ATAR] because they are at a different school.”

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025, September 15). *Childhood development*. www.abs.gov.au/statistics/measuring-what-matters/measuring-what-matters-themes-and-indicators/prosperous/childhood-development

¹⁴ Morris, A. (2024). *Inequality and education in Australia*. Economic and Labour Relations Review, 35(2), 221–242.

Addressing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage requires sustained, systemic efforts to ensure equitable access to high-quality education, targeted support for disadvantaged learners, and policies that tackle the broader structural conditions influencing educational success. This requires whole of government cooperation to properly address the intersecting factors, and should be implemented using a child rights analysis and child rights approach to budgeting as suggested earlier.

Recommendation

7. Strengthen equity through needs-based, rights-aligned funding

- Increase and better target Commonwealth funding to ensure equitable access to education (Art. 28), prioritising socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students with disability and neurodivergence, culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and those facing discrimination and exclusion.
- Address cost barriers (e.g. uniforms, materials, extracurriculars) through national affordability measures.

Mental health and wellbeing

“School avoidance issues are major. I wish adults knew how much the state of the world affects all aspects of students’ lives.”

The evidence consistently shows that mental health and developmental wellbeing are central to educational attainment. Increasing levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among children and young people are affecting engagement with education.

“There is a stigma around seeking help within school, which can influence students to not seek help and therefore negatively impacts their mental wellbeing and their ability to achieve at their maximum throughout school.”¹⁵

“Excessive schoolwork can lead to an overall decline in academic performance, as stressed students struggle to concentrate and work as hard.”¹⁶

Emerging evidence highlights that non-binary, transgender, and gender-diverse children and young people experience the poorest mental health outcomes of all groups, with significantly elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress compared to their cis-gender peers, and steeper deterioration across adolescence. These disparities reflect the discrimination, and exposure to violence and marginalisation, that disproportionately affects gender-diverse populations in the community, as well as at school.

¹⁵ Lily. *Mental wellbeing and emotional development throughout high school*. ACT Human Rights Commission, April 2025, www.hrc.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/3017120/Mental-Wellbeing-and-Emotional-Development-throughout-High-School-1.pdf.

¹⁶ Zynah, *Stress in Australian students caused by schoolwork*, ACT Human Rights Commission, September 2023, www.hrc.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2326915/Student-stress-YTF-article.pdf.

Collectively, the evidence underscores the need for gender-responsive and inclusive policy and service responses that recognise the differing trajectories and intersecting vulnerabilities of boys, girls, and gender-diverse children and young people within the Australian context.¹⁷

Delayed access to mental health and developmental services is a significant issue. Long waiting times, cost barriers, and limited service availability mean that many students do not receive support until they reach crisis point. This limits the effectiveness of interventions and increases the likelihood of disengagement.

These disparities in mental health outcomes have important implications for educational attainment, as higher levels of psychological distress are associated with reduced school engagement, attendance, and academic performance, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities in educational outcomes.

Recommendation

8. Address mental health as central to educational attainment

- Scale up Commonwealth investment in accessible, school-linked mental health services and ensure early intervention and preventative models, not crisis-based systems.
- Embed wellbeing as a core outcome of education policy, not a secondary objective.

9. Adopt a long-term, whole-of-government strategy for children's education wellbeing

- Develop a national, cross-portfolio strategy on children's educational wellbeing and attainment, integrating education, health, social services and housing and community supports. In doing so, apply a Future Generations lens to ensure sustainability and long-term outcomes of funding and programming.

School environment, culture, and leadership

"A lot of people don't know about bullying, how you don't want to come to school because of that."

"Bullying occurs really often but isn't as obvious as people think it would be"

"I want more people to know that bullying could make people want to kill themselves and that people can't control how they look."

"Being queer isn't a bad thing that should be avoided."

Variation in school culture and leadership is a key determinant of educational outcomes. Schools with strong leadership and inclusive practices are more effective at supporting diverse learners, while others struggle to meet students' needs. We regularly hear from children and young people that many schools do not know how to properly address bullying and racism.

¹⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Children with mental illness*, last updated February 25, 2022, www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/health/children-mental-illness.

Bullying has a significant impact on educational attainment, affecting students' engagement, attendance, and academic performance. Students who experience bullying are more likely to feel unsafe at school, which can lead to increased absenteeism and, in more severe cases, school refusal. Over time, this disengagement reduces opportunities for learning, participation, and skill development, ultimately lowering academic achievement.

The psychological effects of bullying, such as anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem, also directly interfere with students' ability to concentrate, retain information, and perform effectively in assessments. When students are preoccupied due to fear or distress, their cognitive resources are diverted away from learning, resulting in poorer academic outcomes and diminished motivation to succeed. These impacts can accumulate, contributing to long-term disengagement from education and limiting future opportunities.

Bullying further undermines educational attainment by disrupting relationships with peers and teachers, which are critical protective factors for learning. Students who feel socially isolated or unsupported are less likely to participate in class, seek help, or engage in collaborative learning activities. In addition, school environments where bullying is prevalent often experience broader declines in school climate, affecting not only victims but also bystanders and contributing to reduced overall academic performance.¹⁸

Importantly, the effects of bullying are not evenly distributed. Students experiencing other forms of disadvantage, including disability, socio-economic hardship, or discrimination, may be more vulnerable to bullying and its educational consequences. This can exacerbate existing inequalities in attainment and reinforce long-term disparities in educational outcomes.

"It feels like you're not supported even when they say they care."

Addressing bullying is therefore essential not only for student wellbeing but also for improving educational attainment. Whole-of-school approaches that promote safe, inclusive environments, strengthen relationships, and provide early support are critical to ensuring that all students can fully engage in their education and reach their academic potential. Approaches must be developed in consultation with children and young people, including:

- Safe reporting pathways
- Transparent incident handling processes
- Staff capacity building to identify and manage bullying, and
- Realistic, student-informed, strategies to reduce bullying.

Recommendation

10. Promote safe school environments

- Partner with states and territory governments to embed whole-of-school approaches to anti-bullying.
Require accountability measures for safe reporting, transparency, and culturally safe practice.

¹⁸ La Salle-Finley, T., Yang, C., Espelage, D., & Jimerson, S. R. (2024). *Understanding and promoting school climate, bullying, and social-emotional learning: Transdisciplinary and transnational science advancing positive youth outcomes*. *School Psychology Review*, 53(5), 417–424.

Discrimination, cultural safety, and inclusion

“I wish they knew how shit this school is. So racist.”

What makes you feel safe at school? “Not getting beat up, not getting made fun of, no sexism, racism.”

“Feeling different and unsafe in school.”

“Treat everyone the same, don’t be mean to them if they are a different colour.”

Children and young people report that racism is pervasive across school and community contexts and is often inadequately addressed. Racism affects students’ engagement, wellbeing, sense of belonging, and capacity to succeed in school. The ACT Children and Young People Commissioner’s report *“It really stabs me: From resignation to resilience”*¹⁹ highlights that racism is a common experience for many students, occurring across everyday settings including schools, and shaping how children and young people experience education.

When students are subjected to racism, they often report feeling dismissed or unsupported by adults, which can erode trust in school systems and reduce their willingness to seek help or fully participate in learning.²⁰

The report emphasises the significant emotional toll of racism, including impacts on mental health, self-esteem, and identity. These impacts directly affect educational attainment by undermining students’ confidence, concentration, and motivation. Experiences of racism can make school environments feel unsafe and unwelcoming, contributing to disengagement, reduced attendance, and in some cases school avoidance. The powerful testimony that racism

“...affects their future and ruins it.”

illustrates how children and young people themselves understand the long-term consequences of these experiences on their life trajectories.

Racism also contributes to structural inequities within the education system. When incidents are minimised or not effectively addressed, it signals to students that their experiences are not taken seriously, reinforcing exclusion and limiting their ability to thrive academically. This can compound other forms of disadvantage and deepen disparities in educational outcomes. AEDC data shows increased vulnerability among children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, reinforcing the need for culturally responsive education systems and early learning.²¹

¹⁹ Fawcett, A., *It really stabs me: From resignation to resilience—Children and young people’s experiences of racism in the ACT*, ACT Human Rights Commission, 2023, www.hrc.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/2269830/It-really-stabs-me_2023.pdf.

²⁰ Ibid:31

²¹ Australian Literacy & Numeracy Foundation, *2024 AEDC results sound the alarm on early childhood development vulnerability*, www.alnf.org/2024-aedc-results-sound-the-alarm-on-early-childhood-develop.

The CYPC's report highlights that many young people want stronger action from schools, including education, accountability, and safe spaces to speak up, underscoring the critical role of school environments in either mitigating or exacerbating these impacts.

It is important to recognise that experiences of racism among children and young people are impacted by gender. There is evidence indicating that girls and gender-diverse young people who experience racism, may experience compounded forms of discrimination, including racialised sexism and exclusion. However, boys who experience racism, and respond to incidences themselves, report being likely to encounter punitive or disciplinary action from adults. This highlights the need for intersectional approaches that address both racial and gender-based inequities in wellbeing and educational attainment. Ensuring that all students feel safe, respected, and supported is fundamental to enabling their full engagement in education and their ability to achieve their academic potential.

Recommendation

11. Strengthen national action on racism, cultural safety, and inclusion in education

- In collaboration with relevant partners such as the National Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, the Australian Government should lead a coordinated national approach to eliminate racism and improve cultural safety across education systems. This should include:
 - a national anti-racism framework for education, co-designed with students
 - mandatory evidence-based anti-racism and cultural safety training for school staff
 - embedding safe reporting pathways to ensure students are heard, and
 - expanding culturally safe wellbeing supports for affected students.

Student engagement and attendance

"Some of my friends haven't attended school because they are afraid of being attacked by other individuals. Additionally, they have been so depressed that they skip school because the teachers are disappointed in the lack of efforts they put in."

"People learn differently and shouldn't face harsh consequences for not going to a place that doesn't suit their way of learning."

"There's so much academic pressure. Some of my friends skip school to study."

A lot of burnout which leads to school refusal because you are too tired, too overwhelmed and you can't do it."

"I didn't see a point in school because no one was helping and I was lost, so I stopped going."

In response to evidence indicating increasing levels of school attendance challenges (often called school can't, or school refusal) in the ACT, and drastically different approaches by schools for managing it, CYPC and the ACT Education Directorate are partnering on a consultation with students to investigate the causes and best practice responses from the perspectives of children and young people.

School attendance challenges in the ACT are increasingly understood as part of a broader continuum of student engagement, where non-attendance reflects a student's inability to attend due to emotional distress rather than deliberate disengagement, and is closely linked to wellbeing, safety, and inclusion within the school environment.

Evidence from the CYPc's consultation so far highlights that these challenges are growing, with indications of high levels of chronic absence nationally and widespread recognition among ACT students that attendance difficulties are a significant issue.

The drivers are complex and frequently relate to unmet needs, including mental health challenges, bullying, lack of inclusion (particularly for LGBTIQ+ and neurodivergent students), inadequate disability supports, and environments that do not foster a sense of safety or belonging.

Importantly, attendance is not only about physical presence at school but is strongly tied to meaningful participation in learning and relationships, with disengagement often emerging when students experience sustained stress or exclusion. Given the well-established relationship between attendance, engagement, and learning, these attendance challenges have significant implications for educational attainment. Reduced or disrupted participation limits students' opportunities to access curriculum, build skills, and progress through educational pathways.

The 2023 Senate Inquiry into School Refusal and Related Matters made 14 recommendations aimed at improving educational engagement and attainment, centred on early identification, evidence-based intervention, and system-wide reform.

Key recommendations of relevance to educational attainment include:

- commissioning national research on drivers and effective interventions
- developing a national action plan
- improving early identification of at-risk students
- expanding flexible and inclusive education pathways
- increasing access to mental health supports, and
- embedding trauma-informed practices in schools.²²

However, the Australian Government's 2024²³ response largely "noted" most recommendations rather than committing to full implementation, with responsibility deferred to states and territories. This means that several system-level reforms, particularly a coordinated national action plan, consistent data collection, and widespread implementation of trauma-informed and early intervention approaches, remain incomplete or unevenly progressed.

²² Parliament of Australia, *The national trend of school refusal and related matters: List of recommendations*, August 2023, www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/SchoolRefusal/Report/List_of_recommendations.

²³ Australian Government, *Australian Government response to the Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment report: The national trend of school refusal and related matters*, April 11, 2024, www.education.gov.au/about-department/resources/national-trend-school-refusal-and-related-matters

In the context of educational attainment, this gap is significant, as the recommendations not fully implemented are those most directly aimed at preventing disengagement and sustained absence, improving early support, and ensuring inclusive learning environments that enable students experiencing distress to remain connected to education.

Recommendation

12. Lead a national response to school disengagement and attendance

- Implement outstanding recommendations from the National Inquiry into School Refusal, including a national action plan, consistent data collection, and early identification and intervention.

Closing comments

The evidence presented in this submission demonstrates that differences in educational attainment are the result of interconnected structural inequities that begin in early childhood and accumulate over time.

The evidence, alongside the views and perspectives of children and young people, consistently show that disengagement is often a response to unmet needs rather than a lack of motivation, and that supportive relationships, inclusive environments, and equitable systems are critical to success.

Improving educational outcomes therefore requires a holistic, student-centred and rights-based approach. One that addresses structural barriers, prioritises wellbeing, and actively listens to children and young people so that all children and young people have a genuine opportunity to engage in education and achieve their full potential.

While gender remains an important analytical lens, the most significant drivers of disparity are:

- socioeconomic disadvantage
- access to developmental and health supports
- mental health and wellbeing
- disability and inclusion
- experiences of trauma
- discrimination and exclusion, and
- variability in system capacity and capability.

Addressing these drivers requires a whole-of-government approach, with sustained investment in early intervention, equitable access to services, and inclusive, responsive education systems.

Educational attainment should therefore be understood not as an outcome of schooling alone, but as the product of broader social, economic, and policy environments that shape children's development and opportunities from the earliest years of life.

In closing, if we are genuinely committed to implementing and embedding sustainable long-term solutions then we need to engage directly with those who will be most impacted by systems reform, which in this case is children and young people themselves. Should the Committee be interested in exploring mechanisms by which to engage with children and young people, I would be pleased to discuss further, as I'm sure would be my fellow ANZCCGA members.