

COVID-19 highlighted the profound impact that education gaps and lack of access to peers have on the current generation of Australian children. But even before COVID, this was a significant but overlooked issue for the growing cohort of children who miss school owing to chronic medical and/or mental health disorders.

The scale and consequences of this double disadvantage are far-reaching, impacting students, families, schools, and national education outcomes. We request that a "Better and Fairer Education System" firmly identifies this cohort, for reasons covered in our backgrounder and pointed below:

- a) Recognising the urgency of this issue, we have continued to advocate tirelessly for students facing ongoing medical and mental health conditions that lead to chronic unaddressed absences. These students are a priority equity cohort in need of recognition, specialised approaches, and support.
- b) Our advocacy efforts have been diverse and far-reaching, encompassing government and commission submissions, outreach to state and federal MPs across Australia, meetings with MPs and ministers, initiating and authoring national reports, evaluation and research, positive social education campaigns, media engagement, and our nationally respected service that engages families and all state and territory school systems and sectors. These multifaceted efforts aim to bring visibility and support to this neglected national challenge.
- c) Unfortunately, owing to an ongoing lack of school and national systems data, the issue remains invisible (see point (d)). This lack of data – and consequent systemic approaches and guidelines - means that these students, despite their substantial numbers, are being overlooked by the very systems that should support them.
- d) Despite having authored, promoted, and triggered policy change actions, and our current work on a Commonwealth Department of Education funded grant (in the Emerging Priorities Program), and despite our continued work for pro-positive systems change, this priority equity cohort remains absent even in the Consultation Paper for a Better and Fairer Education System. The commitment is there, but the recognition in formative government initiatives such as this is missing.
- e) Further, whilst mental health conditions/considerations receive palpable coverage in reports, funding, and policy actions (as they should), the mention of medical health conditions is still completely missing from the picture—even as an undisputed factor of pandemic trailing effects. Additionally, the comorbidity of medical-mental health conditions is not realised in the Consultation Paper, leaving a significant gap in discussion and, therefore, probably policy responses.
- f) The lack of consideration is more than disappointing, especially given the extent of the issue in terms of student cohort size and critical consequences for students and families, as well as the challenges it's creating in schools and for national education outcomes. This gap in attention in the Consultation Paper for a Better and Fairer Education System threatens to further exacerbate

invisibility and entrench educational inequalities. It's a consequential threat, as it neglects the daily struggles tens of thousands of families and educators face. By inadvertently failing to name and recognise the problem, it sends a message that the matter is unworthy of attention, thereby solidifying and justifying a lack of action by schools, forcing parents to give up trying.

- g) As a continued call to action, we submit our backgrounder again, and note we are preparing a fuller response using questions from the online submission form. Having worked on this issue since 2012 in every conceivable way, we are underscoring our unwavering commitment to having the educational and social absences facing students with medical and mental health conditions addressed, ensuring that they no longer remain invisible in our educational landscape.

We value the ongoing collaboration with all stakeholders in this vital matter and look forward to continued engagement with the Commonwealth Department of Education, as well as other relevant parties. Together, we can work towards a more inclusive and innovative education system that recognises and addresses the unique needs of these students and supports their families and teachers on the frontline. This will contribute to a Better and Fairer Education System and better student, family and teacher wellbeing. It will also have the positive effect of reducing non-systemic interventions in schools and the de-implementation of evidence-poor or ineffective school substitutions.