



Parkerville CYC Response to The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment

Our holistic support to children, young people, and families

Parkerville Children and Youth Care is a For Purpose organisation that supports children, young people, and their families to build skills and capacity, address the impacts of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, and develop capabilities that will enable them to be the best versions of themselves.

We see a future where Western Australia is the safest place in the world and all children, young people, and their families feel safe to dream, to thrive, and to reach their fullest potential.

We have been working alongside vulnerable children, young people, and their families for over 120 years, and every year, we support more than 13,000 people across WA through our therapeutic, out-of-home care, and early intervention and prevention services. The future of those we serve depends on what we do in the present to support them to reach their potential.

Our Purpose

Our purpose as an organisation is to support children, young people, and their families to build skills and capacity, address the impacts of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, and develop capabilities that will enable them to be the best versions of themselves.

Our Vision

We see a future where Western Australia is the safest place in the world and all children, young people, and their families feel safe to dream, to thrive, and to reach their fullest potential.

Our Values

As a strong, values-based organisation, we are dedicated to an ongoing journey of self-awareness, learning and improvement in everything we do because the children and young people with whom we work deserve nothing less.



Curious and humble: We search out information and data that will help us remain at the forefront of all that we do.

Caring and respectful: We acknowledge and embrace the diversity and individuality of everyone we meet and those we serve.

Hopeful: We believe in the power of positivity and are optimistic about change, having faith that together we can overcome any challenge we may face.

Truthful and accountable: We are committed to being open, honest, and taking responsibility for our actions.



Parkerville CYC's services

Therapeutic Services

- **Multi-agency Investigation and Support Team (MIST):** co-located, multi-disciplinary, trauma-informed model to reduce harmful impacts of trauma from abuse. It is WA's first truly integrated child sexual abuse (CSA) response, with Child Advocacy Centres in Armadale (2011), Midland (2019), and Rockingham (2024). MIST's core principle is to reduce instances of children having to tell and re-tell their story, and coordinate services (including Police) to wrap around the child and family, through collaboration and knowledge-sharing.
- **Therapeutic Services:**
 - **CSATS:** We provide a Child Sexual Abuse Therapeutic Service (CSATS) in a regional area of WA.
 - **PACTS:** We also provide a Parents and Children's Therapeutic Service (PACTS) in a northern Perth suburb. 84% of children and young people receiving a service had experienced child sexual abuse.

Out of Home Care

- Parkerville CYC have had children in our care for the entirety of our 122-year history. We are implementing an innovative, award-winning new model, Our Way Home: radically personalised shared care, that focuses on the needs and desires of each child, and deliberately seeking to establish, maintain and deepen connections between children and their families. We care for children through a mixed provision across family group homes, foster care, and temporary care homes.

Early Intervention, Prevention and Youth Services

- **Child and Parent Centres (CPCs):** Parkerville runs two CPCs in Perth, servicing 12 primary schools in vulnerable communities. The centres work to create an entry point into the school system and help with school readiness, but importantly they focus on increasing family capacity and help them provide appropriate developmental experiences.
- **Kids' Hub:** multi-disciplinary approach to providing comprehensive mental health/wellbeing services for children aged 0-12 years, targeting mild to moderate emerging complexity. This service is a collaboration with Koya Aboriginal Corporation, Pregnancy to Parenthood, Lifespan Psychology Services, and MIFWA.
- **Family Support Network:** an early intervention program that connects families with coordinated services to strengthen child safety and prevent entry into out-of-home care.
- **Intensive Family Support Service:** in partnership with Koya Aboriginal Corporation, this service provides practical, in-home support to families who are engaged with the Department of Communities (Child Protection), where children are either at significant risk of entering out-of-home care or are working towards reunification with their families.
- **Education Employment and Training Program (EET):** For young people at extreme educational risk due to trauma, mental health, family issues.
- **Support and Community Services (SACS):** For families with children aged 4-14 that are experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness and living in supported accommodation.
- **Moving Out, Moving On (MOMO):** service for young people aged 15-21 who are experiencing homelessness, or at significant risk of homelessness or transience.
- **Reconnect:** a diversion and early intervention service for families with young people (12-18) at risk of homelessness or family breakdown.
- **Young Women's Program:** medium-term accommodation and support for young women (including those with children) aged 16-25 experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or who need help to live independently.
- **Ruby's Reunification Program:** seeks to prevent youth homelessness through part-time accommodation, whilst engaging and supporting the family with counselling and practical support. It aims to foster hope for staying together or reunification, and keep young people out of the youth (and ultimately adult) homelessness sector.

Therapeutic Education Services

- **Parkerville Grove School:** a specialist secondary school delivering a healing-first therapeutic education model for young people whose engagement in mainstream schooling has been disrupted by trauma, adversity, and instability.



Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education inquiry. Parkerville Children and Youth Care's work with children, young people and families affected by trauma, disadvantage and adversity provides a clear view of the conditions that both support and impede meaningful engagement in education.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration sets out a vision for a world-class education system that supports every young Australian to become a confident and creative individual, a successful lifelong learner, and an active and informed member of the community. This submission reflects and champions that vision. At the same time, the more recent national reform process highlights a persistent gap in translating this vision into consistently equitable and responsive system design.

Drawing on direct practice evidence from Parkerville's work across early years services, out-of-home care, youth services, and alternative education, this submission highlights where current systems continue to fall short for children and young people affected by trauma, adversity, and instability, and what needs to change if educational participation, wellbeing, and attainment are to be meaningfully improved.

Executive summary

Parkerville Children and Youth Care's central position is that educational attainment is best understood as a systems outcome, not an individual attribute. Across our practice in early years services, out-of-home care, youth services (including responses to homelessness), and alternative and therapeutic education, we see that children's and young people's ability to engage in learning is shaped by the conditions of their lives: safety, stability, attachment, family capacity, access to support, and the extent to which education systems respond to complexity.

Educational participation and attainment are not improved by relying on standard assumptions of readiness, continuity, and linear progression. For many children and young people affected by trauma, adversity, disability, family instability, family and domestic violence (FDV), care transitions, or homelessness, these assumptions do not hold. In these contexts, educational disruption is frequently system-produced; created by fragmentation, delayed support, inaccessible settings, and insufficient adaptation to need.

At the same time, Parkerville's practice demonstrates that engagement can be strengthened when education is organised differently. Across community-based early childhood settings, integrated family support, and therapeutic education responses such as Parkerville's Education, Employment and Training program and Parkerville Grove School, we see the importance of relational safety, flexible and developmentally aligned learning, and the integration of wellbeing with education. These are the conditions that make participation possible for many of the children and young people most likely to be excluded by current settings.



The policy question, therefore, is not simply how to improve attendance or lift attainment within largely static educational models or conditions. It is how to better design the education system to respond to trauma, instability, and non-linear pathways through childhood and adolescence. This includes strengthening family and community supports in the early years, reducing barriers to early learning, improving continuity and adjustment for children in care and children affected by homelessness and FDV, and recognising the need for different educational offers for some cohorts.

As Bessell *et al* (2025) note: 'There is much work to be done to ensure that education in Australia is of the highest quality for all students, is equitable, provides children with the learning outcomes expected in the 21st century, and fulfills the promise of contributing to positive health outcomes and wellbeing.'

Summary of Recommendations

Recognise educational attainment as a systems outcome	• Ensure that future reform is designed around the realities of trauma, disadvantage, instability, and non-linear developmental trajectories.
Strengthen family systems as the foundation for learning	• Increase coordinated, long-term investment in the early years to support families as the primary learning environment.
Invest in integrated, community-based early childhood models	• Expand place-based approaches that combine early learning with health, developmental, and family support services.
Guarantee access to early childhood education for children in care	• Ensure universal access for children under five in out-of-home care, with learning and developmental goals embedded in care planning.
Prioritise early learning access for children affected by homelessness and FDV	• Recognise disrupted participation as a driver of developmental harm and ensure continuity of early learning and support.
Improve continuity and adaptation within schooling for children in care	• Strengthen coordination across systems, accelerate access to assessment, and ensure timely, meaningful educational adjustments.
Embed relational, flexible, and integrated approaches within mainstream schooling	• Design learning environments that respond to complexity, rather than expecting young people to adapt to fixed models.
Recognise and resource therapeutic and specialist education models	• Treat integrated wellbeing support, staffing ratios, and flexible delivery as core system features, not marginal responses.
Align funding, workforce, and accountability settings with complexity	• Ensure that system settings support sustained participation, belonging, and meaningful progression for all learners.



1. Family systems as the earliest and most influential learning environment

Children's development and capacity to engage in education are built first within the home and family environment, through safety, attachment, responsiveness, stimulation, health, and material stability. Learning in the early years is not driven by formal education alone; it emerges through responsive relationships, emotional security, communication, play, and consistent, predictable rhythms of care and interaction.

Central to this is a secure and consistent relationship with at least one primary caregiver - a critical foundation for a child's sense of belonging and their social and emotional development. This demands a broad and inclusive understanding of family, recognising that care and support may come from a range of people who shape a child's early experiences and learning (National Mental Health Commission, 2021).

However, while families are central to children's development, many are navigating conditions that fundamentally constrain their capacity to support learning. Social and economic pressures, including poverty, unemployment, housing instability, and limited access to healthcare, shape the environments in which children grow and engage with the world. These conditions are not evenly distributed; they reflect broader systemic inequities, including racism and discrimination, that continue to shape life opportunities. For many families, these pressures sit alongside cumulative and interrelated adversity, including FDV, mental health challenges, other adverse experiences, and the need to navigate multiple complex systems with constrained supports or capacity. In this context, stability, safety, and consistency cannot be assumed, with direct implications for children's ability to engage in early learning.

For the children and families that Parkerville works alongside, these conditions can shape how children and young people are able to engage in learning, and how their strengths are recognised and supported over time; often directly affecting children's ability to feel safe and secure, regulate emotions and attention, form relationships of trust with adults and peers, and participate in structured or unfamiliar environments.

In this context, expectations of 'school readiness' that focus on the individual child risk misinterpreting structural adversity as developmental delay or personal deficit. And as such, the conditions for educational attainment cannot be understood as beginning at school entry. It is shaped from the earliest years of life through the interaction between children and the systems, environments, and relationships that surround them.

We acknowledge that the policy and legislative landscape frequently recognise the critical role of families in early childhood development; but this is often not matched by sustained, coordinated investment in the supports required to strengthen family systems under pressure. For families experiencing adversity, disadvantage, and trauma, the question is rarely whether they understand their role in supporting their child's learning, but whether they are adequately supported to do so.

We must recognise families as the primary learning environment for children, but more than this: we must see active, integrated, and long-term support wrapped around families whose capacity has been impacted by structural disadvantage, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing instability. Without this, expectations of school readiness, early attainment and sustained engagement will continue to reflect inequality in underlying conditions, rather than differences in children's and young people's potential.



2. Community-based, holistic learning environments support early participation and readiness

If family systems are the first and most influential site of learning, the next question is what surrounds families in the early years, and whether those environments help to strengthen or narrow children's developmental opportunities. Evidence consistently shows that access to high-quality early learning supports the development of foundational skills for school readiness, later participation, and lifelong wellbeing, and that children facing disadvantage stand to benefit the most from this investment.

This is where community-based, integrated models become relevant. Parkerville's Child and Parent Centres (CPCs), which combine early childhood education with co-located family, health, and developmental supports in school-based settings; function as entry points into early learning while enabling developmental needs, family support requirements, and barriers to participation to be identified and addressed alongside education. This is a clear response to the fact that service availability alone does not drive early participation; it is the surrounding conditions affecting families' capacity to engage that are decisive.

In practice, CPCs support children not only through engagement with learning activities and opportunities for structured interaction, but through the wider conditions that make participation possible: trust in adults, confidence in unfamiliar settings, routine, connection, and reduced isolation for caregivers. CPCs are universal in ambition but targeted in effect; reducing inequalities, providing wraparound developmental and family support, and responding in a place-based, community-informed way to local need. That includes responsiveness to cultural context, with Parkerville's CPCs serving communities with high proportions of families from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and taking a place-based, culturally responsive and trauma-informed approach to building trust where government and health services may otherwise be met with deep reluctance.

This is important, because for families affected by poverty, social isolation, trauma or FDV, early engagement often requires a more active, relational and flexible response before educational participation becomes possible. Parkerville's CPC practice has shown that for some families, the Centre is the only service with which they meaningfully engage; for others, it functions as a bridge - reducing stigma, creating safety, and helping families access co-located health, developmental and parenting supports that the wider system expects them to navigate alone.

That same principle becomes even more critical for children whose early years are shaped by care instability, homelessness, or family violence.

Children in Care

This issue is particularly acute for children in out-of-home care. Access to early childhood education remains inconsistent, despite clear evidence that children experiencing disadvantage stand to gain the most from sustained engagement in early learning environments: 'early disadvantage can be mitigated by providing access to early learning opportunities through well-financed ECCE policies and programmes' (UNESCO, 2024).

Younger children in care are often navigating disruption, trauma, and instability at precisely the point at which foundational development occurs. In this context, early childhood education cannot be treated as ancillary to care. It is a core developmental environment, and access should



be guaranteed regardless of placement type or location, with learning and developmental goals embedded within care planning from the outset.

Early learning settings provide a distinct but complementary environment alongside care, offering consistent routines, safe and stimulating experiences, and opportunities for relationships beyond the placement. For children whose early experiences have been characterised by disruption, these additional attachment figures play an important role in supporting trust, co-regulation, and a sense of safety over time.

They also provide opportunities for peer interaction that are essential in the early years. Through play, shared activity, and repetition, children begin to develop social confidence, language, and a sense of belonging in group environments. For children who have experienced disruption or trauma, these interactions are central to rebuilding connection and supporting healthy development.

Without access to these environments, children risk missing not only early learning opportunities, but the relational and social foundations on which later engagement in education depends. For those already experiencing disadvantage, this represents a compounding loss at a critical developmental stage.

Children and FDV/homelessness

A similar pattern is evident for children and families experiencing homelessness and FDV. In these contexts, access to early childhood education is not only limited, but frequently disrupted or entirely inaccessible.

Repeated moves between crisis accommodation, refuges, temporary housing, and short-term arrangements make consistent participation in early learning difficult to establish or sustain. Children may miss extended periods of early education altogether, or move in and out of settings without continuity, losing access to the stable relationships, routine, and structured environments that support early development.

These disruptions are compounded by barriers to the wider supports that sit around early learning. Even where developmental concerns are identified, follow-through is often constrained by system design: referrals are delayed, appointments are missed, and access to services such as child development, health, or allied supports becomes difficult to maintain in the context of instability and crisis. Early learning environments, which would ordinarily support identification and coordination of these needs, are therefore unable to perform this function consistently.

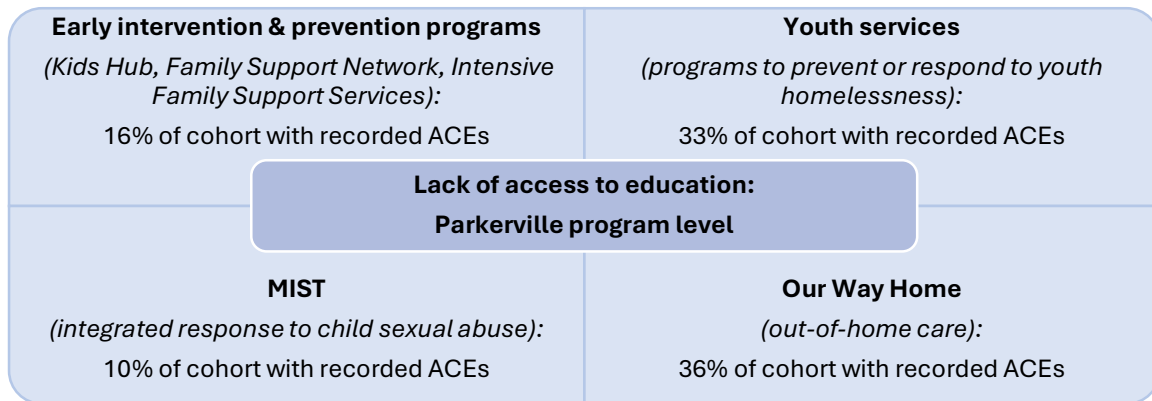
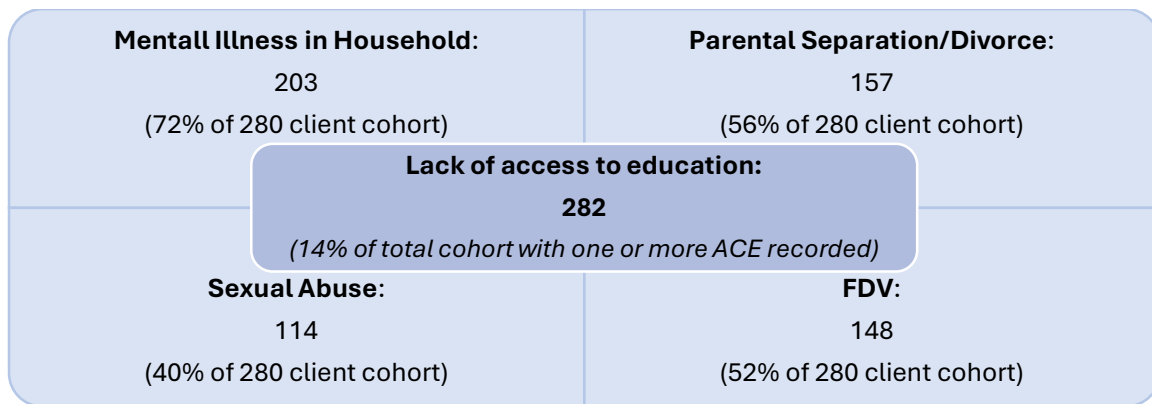
This pattern can be intensified by experience of FDV. The need to prioritise immediate safety often requires rapid relocation, disconnection from community, and withdrawal from visible systems, including early education settings. In practice, this results in children missing critical early learning opportunities at the same time as their need for stability, support, and developmental intervention is heightened.

The cumulative effect is that children experiencing trauma and instability are least able to access the very environments that provide the foundations for safety, wellbeing, and later educational engagement. Early education is positioned as a universal starting point, but for these children it is often absent or interrupted; removing a key stabilising platform from which development, connection, and recovery might otherwise be supported.



2. Educational disruption is often system-produced, not child-driven

Across Parkerville’s services, our data shows a clear relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and lack of access to education. This analysis draws on Parkerville’s internal recording of presenting and emerging ACEs, covering 2,148 clients with at least one recorded ACE; within this cohort, 282 children and young people are identified as experiencing a lack of access to education. The following figures draw on this practice data to illustrate the broader context in which educational disengagement occurs, highlighting both the clustering of adversity and the service systems within which young people are currently engaged.



Children and young people with recorded experiences such as household mental illness, parental separation, sexual abuse, and FDV are disproportionately represented among those experiencing educational disruption. This pattern is particularly pronounced in *Our Way Home* and youth services cohorts, underscoring that educational participation is constrained by and structurally linked to trauma, fragmented care and support environments, and the broader conditions of children’s lives.

The policy implications of this are significant. The *National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* argues for education settings to build a positive wellbeing culture through dedicated wellbeing staff, tailored wellbeing planning, and proactive, trauma-informed responses to disengagement. In other words, children’s participation in education cannot be separated from how well schools recognise and respond to distress, adversity, and unmet need.



As children move through education, their ability to engage is shaped directly by the stability - or instability - of the systems around them. For children in out-of-home care, educational disruption is rarely a single event; it is cumulative. Before coming into the *Our Way Home* program, children may have moved repeatedly between carers, placements, schools and regions, losing not only continuity of schooling, but also the adult relationships, peer connections and routines that make learning possible. For some, there is simply no predictable educational base from which trust, participation, or progress can grow.

Our Way Home practice makes clear that this is not just about change itself, but about the way multiple systems fail to organise coherently around the child. In our care, this pattern is evident among highly traumatised siblings and sibling groups who have experienced repeated movement across Perth, Geraldton and the Pilbara, alongside multiple changes in placements, schools and support staff, and environments that did not enable sustained participation in school. It is equally apparent in the experience of a 13-year-old in our care with FASD, mild intellectual disability and multiple learning and developmental needs, whose Individual Education Plan was significantly delayed while teaching approaches remained poorly aligned to his cognitive profile. In both situations, the issue is not refusal of education in the abstract; it is a system that expects participation while offering little consistency, little adaptation, and limited shared responsibility across care and education.

For children in our care with disability, neurodevelopmental differences, or multiple learning and developmental needs, access to meaningful educational adjustment remains heavily dependent on formal diagnosis, even though diagnoses can take years to obtain. During this time, children continue in mainstream settings without teaching approaches that align with how they learn, without timely review of Individual Education Plans, and often without the level of classroom support required to participate meaningfully. Rather than identifying and reducing barriers early, system responses are frequently delayed until difficulties become more visible or entrenched.

This means that children can spend years being taught in ways that do not align with their developmental level, while carers and service providers carry the burden of chasing reports, advocating for assessments, and securing adjustments that should be part of core educational practice. Adaptation - which should be routine - becomes inconsistent, contingent, and dependent on external persistence rather than system design.

Our practice also highlights a deeper issue: for some children in care, the immediate work of education is not academic attainment. ***Where trauma is severe and ongoing, the more urgent task is building enough safety, regulation, connection and routine for learning to become possible at all.*** In these circumstances, attendance on its own tells us very little, and academic performance even less. Standard measures can obscure the more meaningful question: whether the child is becoming safe enough, connected enough, and regulated enough to begin engaging in learning over time.

The core issue, then, is not that children experiencing care transitions, homelessness, FDV, or multiple ACEs are unwilling to learn. It is that education systems continue to be organised around assumptions of stability, continuity, and readiness that many children simply do not have the conditions to meet. What is often labelled as disengagement is, in practice, the visible outcome of instability, fragmentation, delayed support, and systems that are wired for compliance more than continuity.



If governments are serious about improving attendance, attainment, and participation for children facing adversity, the focus must shift from monitoring whether children can fit the system, to redesigning the system to hold children through instability, respond earlier, and support learning in the context of their lives.

3. Reframing disengagement: a system response, not a student ‘problem’

By adolescence, many young people have experienced a cumulative mismatch between their needs and what mainstream schooling is structured to provide. Our learning from practice is that this is rarely the result of a single breakdown point. It is more often the outcome of years of disruption, unmet need, and systems that have not adapted early or consistently enough to the realities of young people’s lives.

We see this mismatch in familiar ways: learning environments that assume stability, consistency and linear progression; limited capacity to respond to trauma-related stress, emotional dysregulation and developmental disruption; and disciplinary responses that interpret distress as behaviour and reinforce exclusion rather than re-engagement. For many young people supported through Parkerville’s youth services, disengagement from education occurs well before they formally leave school. Practice across *Ruby’s* and *MOMO* shows that school refusal, sporadic attendance, or attending without meaningful participation are common in the context of family conflict, housing instability, mental health challenges, and financial stress. Reconnection is possible, but it generally requires sustained, relational support that addresses the wider conditions shaping young people’s lives.

Insights from direct consultation for this submission with students in Parkerville’s Education, Employment and Training (EET) reinforce this pattern, with young people themselves describing the mismatch. In mainstream settings, they speak of “loud people”, “certain people”, “when there’s no help”, and “overload of work” as making learning harder. They describe school as working for “textbook smart” people, while, “the people that the teachers don’t care about or pay attention to” get missed when they are struggling.

The pattern across our practice is clear: disengagement is not sudden, and it is not best understood as a problem located in the young person. It is the cumulative outcome of systems that have not made participation realistically possible.

The impact for young people when systems do adapt

Parkerville’s EET program demonstrates that disengagement is not a fixed characteristic of young people, but a response to learning environments that have not met their needs or been designed to respond to the complexity of their experiences. Students typically enter EET after extended absence, disrupted learning, and low confidence in their ability to succeed. Across recent cohorts, students completed formal qualifications, improved literacy and numeracy, and moved into further education, training and work pathways, including apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, TAFE, employment and supported return to school. They also reported increased confidence, stronger connections, and renewed belief in their own capabilities.

The impact of EET is in strengthening the conditions and environment around young people so that learning feels more accessible, consistent, and achievable. This is reflected in attendance patterns across the program, with most students maintaining high attendance - over 90 per cent for some - across the six-month program, despite previously experiencing very low or highly



inconsistent participation in mainstream schooling. Young people explain this in simple, concrete terms. What makes it easier to show up and stay is “the environment”, “the people - people on the program and who work here”, “less people, feel safer”, “the safety aspect”, “that it’s flexible”, and “not being ignored by the teacher.”

The same pattern is evident in how they describe learning. What helps is “smaller classes”, “the help I get”, “we actually get help with stuff”, “the work makes sense”, and being “allowed to be more independent but still get help with stuff.” What makes learning possible on harder days is that “people in the room are supportive”, and, critically, “coming every day to see friends - it’s connection.”

Taken together, these reflections point to three features that matter in practice and serve as the conditions that make education possible in the first place:

1. **Relational safety:** trust, consistency and daily support enable young people to move beyond avoidance and re-enter learning environments.
2. **Learning that meets young people where they are:** small classes, flexible delivery, and teaching aligned to actual capability reduce repeated experiences of failure.
3. **Integration of wellbeing and education:** support for mental health, relationships, practical barriers and future planning sits alongside learning, rather than outside it.

Reframing disengagement

Our practice evidence, together with what young people themselves tell us, makes clear that education systems cannot continue to rely on deficit narratives to explain disengagement. Young people described as ‘disengaged’ repeatedly demonstrate the *opposite* when conditions enable it. In environments that are relational, flexible and responsive, children and young people participate, persist, complete qualifications, and move into pathways within or beyond education.

Equally important, young people are explicit about what current systems get wrong. One student reflected that, “Everyone’s different - you need more programs like this.” Another described the damage done by rigid streaming: “Don’t look at things so separately, like there’s always the smart classes and the dumb classes. It makes kids give up on their motivation. Like – ‘well, if I’m already in the dumb class I shouldn’t even try’...” Others were blunter: “Get teachers that actually care,” and, “too much has changed in the world from when school was invented.”

These are not descriptions of a lack of motivation, but of environments that feel unsafe, overwhelming, unresponsive, or fundamentally misaligned with how young people learn and live. At the same time, many young people are attempting to engage with education while managing unstable housing, family breakdown, significant mental health challenges, and limited access to income or basic needs. Far from being peripheral, these are factors that shape whether participation is possible at all.

The policy implication

‘Disengagement’ is often the point at which education systems have not adapted sufficiently to sustain participation. Where expectations of attendance, progression and behaviour remain fixed regardless of context, many young people will continue to be excluded from meaningful engagement. Where systems respond differently - with relational practice, flexibility, and integrated support - participation can be rebuilt.



The task for education systems is therefore not to find better ways of returning young people to unchanged models of schooling, but to embed the conditions that make participation possible in the first place. These conditions are already being demonstrated in practice; the challenge for policy is to make them part of the education system itself, rather than leaving them at its margins.

5. Toward a different model: education that meets children and young people where they are

This demands a model of education that recognises that for some children and young people impacted by trauma, adverse experiences, and systemic barriers, learning cannot be separated from healing, connection, and stability.

Parkerville Grove School (PGS), located in Parkerville in the Perth Hills, has been established to meet a clear gap in the local education landscape for young people whose trauma, disruption, or significant life circumstances have made mainstream schooling inaccessible at this time. It is a specialist secondary school delivering a healing-first education model for students who require a therapeutic learning environment and individualised education and healing support.

The significance of PGS is that it demonstrates, in concrete terms, the conditions that some young people require for learning to be possible at all. The school has been deliberately designed with small classes, high staff-to-student ratios, trauma-trained teachers, and integrated wellbeing support, alongside a calm, predictable environment that supports regulation. Teaching and support staff work together as a single, integrated team across the school day, replacing fragmented referral pathways with coordinated, consistent support.

For cohorts affected by trauma, instability and disruption, increasing compliance with standard expectations will not improve engagement. Instead, policy must recognise the need to redesign schooling environments around the conditions that enable participation. This includes embedding safety, regulation and belonging as foundational elements of learning; maintaining high expectations while providing structured scaffolding; and building flexibility into attendance, behaviour and curriculum as standard practice, rather than treating complexity as an exception to be managed.

The policy challenge, then, is larger than whether individual mainstream schools can 'do more.' It is whether funding settings, staffing models, accountability frameworks, and definitions of success are prepared to recognise that some children and young people require a different educational offer altogether. PGS provides a practical example of how education can be organised when healing, learning and belonging are treated as mutually reinforcing, rather than as separate responsibilities divided across disconnected systems.

If systems are serious about improving educational participation and attainment for trauma-impacted cohorts, they must move beyond expecting schools to absorb complexity without the structures, workforce, or policy permissions to do so. This means creating and resourcing models in which integrated wellbeing support, relational practice, flexible pathways, and regulation-supportive environments are recognised as core educational architecture; not specialist extras available only at the margins.



Conclusion

Parkerville's practice makes clear that educational engagement and attainment are shaped by the environments and systems within which children and young people are expected to learn. Participation is strengthened where those systems are deliberately designed to respond to trauma, disruption, and non-linear developmental trajectories in consistent, meaningful ways.

Across early learning, out-of-home care, youth services, and alternative education settings, our practice demonstrates a clear set of conditions that support engagement: relational safety, flexible and developmentally aligned learning, and the integration of wellbeing with education. These are foundational conditions for creating learning environments that are not built around assumptions of stability and continuity, but are equipped support participation for children and young people whose lived experiences and pathways do not fit those models.

We therefore call for these conditions to be embedded as core elements of the education system across the full continuum of learning, from the earliest years through to secondary and post-school pathways. This includes recognising the need for different educational responses for some cohorts, aligning funding and accountability settings with complexity, and supporting integrated models that reduce fragmentation across services.

Embedding these conditions consistently within system design provides a clear pathway to strengthening participation, improving outcomes, and progressing equity. What is now required is policy reform with enough clarity, courage, and resourcing to make these conditions part of the ordinary architecture of education, so that children and young people are no longer expected to fit systems that were not designed with their realities in mind.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kim Brooklyn".

Kim Brooklyn

Chief Executive Officer

June 2026

For further enquiries on this submission, please contact:

Dr. Sarah Priest, Research and Advocacy Lead Sarah.priest@parkerville.org.au



References

Bessell, S., O'Sullivan, C., Ahmed, Aaliyah, Jonathan, Lilyjana, & Tru (2025). "Learning for a healthy life now and in the future", *Children Australia*, 47(2)

Education Council. (2019). *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education declaration*. Australian Government

National Mental Health Commission. *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*. 2021, National Mental Health Commission

UNESCO (2024). *Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education: The right to a strong foundation*. UNESCO: Paris