Raise Foundation submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee's Inquiry into

'The national trend of school refusal and related matters'

About Raise Foundation

Raise Foundation is a national charity building resilience, hope and engagement for young people in early high schools across Australia. Since our inception in 2008, we have supported close to 11,000 young people, trained more than 7,200 mentors and delivered 868 mentoring programs.

We currently deliver programs in every Australian state as well as the Australian Capital Territory, prioritising public and low fee-paying non-government schools with secondary enrolments.

Our 23-week evidence-based Raise Youth Mentoring program is delivered in schools during school hours. Our program is delivered in collaborative partnership with the school wellbeing team. Schools identify up to 15 students who are at risk of disengagement or poor wellbeing to be invited to participate in our program. Students are then matched by our degree qualified Program Counsellor to a volunteer mentor, who is fully trained and screened prior to their commencing in a Raise mentoring program.

Our second offering, Youth Introduction to Mentoring, is a ten-week workshop style program, facilitated by a Raise Program Counsellor with the support of 2-4 Raise volunteer mentors. We deliver this program in areas where we have been unable to recruit the required number of mentors for one-to-one matching, and the school has chosen not to deliver our online version of the 23-week Raise Youth Mentoring program.

Profile of the Students in the Raise Program

In 2022, we supported 2,088 students in 180 programs. Of these students:

- Their average age was 14 and the majority were in grades 8 or 9
- 49% identified as female, 39% as male and 8% identified as outside the gender binary
- 32% had caring responsibilities for family or friends due to mental illness, disability or health condition
- 31% speak another language at home
- 12% identified as having a disability
- 13% were born outside of Australia
- 6% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

The power of showing up

At the beginning of the program 84% of students identified having faced at least one mental health or environmental (such as bullying, drug and alcohol use, financial stress and insecure housing) issue. For students who identified outside the gender binary this rose to 95%.

In relation to how students felt about school, at the beginning of the program:

- 1 in 3 rated their attendance as only 'Okay', 'Not so good' or 'Terrible' (note we do not distinguish between non-attendance due to illness or non-attendance due to school refusal)
- Close to half (47%) did not agree with the statement 'I feel safe at my school'
- More than half did not agree with these statements:
  - 'Teachers treat students fairly at my school' (54%)
  - 'I feel happy at my school' (54%)
  - 'I belong at my school' (56%)

The Raise Foundation Curriculum – building a toolkit to navigate life's challenges

The Raise Youth Mentoring Program Curriculum has been designed and developed in order to improve outcomes in:

- Mental health literacy – key outcome area of help seeking
- Social and emotional wellbeing – key outcome areas of resilience and hope for the future
- School engagement – key outcome area of belonging at school

We employ a scaffolded learning approach. Each session has been designed to focus on one of these key outcome areas through group activities and prompted discussion for 1:1 mentoring time.

The Impact of Raise Mentoring

Each year we comprehensively evaluate our program's impact, through measuring outcomes for students at the beginning and the end of the program and validating these outcomes through capturing observations from mentors, school contacts and Raise Program Counsellors.

In 2022, with a return to in-school learning in every jurisdiction, we saw improved outcomes across our programs. For the majority of outcomes we saw significant improvements at the whole of cohort level as well as for those who started the program with a low score in the given outcome. For example, for Resilience, Hope and Help seeking and associated secondary outcomes we saw statistically significant improvements for our whole cohort of students and stronger improvement for those who started the program with a low score in the given outcome.

The power of showing up

The exception to this was in School Belonging and self-reported attendance where we saw improvement for those who started the program with low scores in these areas, but not at the whole of cohort level.

We did however see improvements at the whole cohort level for intention to finish school and make a positive post school transition, as well as relationships with teachers and friends at school.

Our conclusion from this was that currently outcomes relating to the whole school environment are harder to shift, whereas outcomes relating to how the young person feels about themselves, their capabilities and their future are able to be improved. We do however feel confident that students attend more on mentoring days:

We see these themes confirmed in our qualitative evaluation, in the feedback provided from students, mentors and parents/carers:

'[The biggest impact of Raise mentoring has been my] confidence and probably looking forward to coming to school more because of the program.' (Student)

'[The biggest impact of Raise mentoring has been that] I have been less anxious coming to school. I have also been better at talking to new people and adults.' (Student)

'I've been feeling more grateful to be here and I've attended school every day this term and brought my attendance up 40% since term 2' (Student)

'I had less to deal with myself as I had someone to talk to, it also helped me come to school on days where I felt I couldn't.' (Student)

'The Raise program has helped me in many ways I got a job because of it and I am starting to come to school more often' (Student)

'He seemed to be well engaged and making positive steps in his life. He only attended two classes in the first term, but then attended all in the second term' (Mentor about impact on student)

'Definitely school attendance has improved. Seems more confident.' (Parent/carer about impact on student)

'Improved relationship with parents and improved attendance at school' (Parent/carer about impact on student)

The power of showing up

The connected, safe and inclusive environment we create at Raise

From feedback and data we collect directly from students as part of our formal program evaluation we know that we create a safe and engaging space for the young people in our program.

- o 94% of mentees rated their connection with their mentor as 'Excellent' or 'Very good'
- o 98% of mentees felt safe talking to their mentor
- o 95% felt safe talking to their Raise Program Counsellor
- o 85% felt safe talking in their mentoring group
- o 96% of mentees felt supported by their Program Counsellor

We see the environment we create as integral to the impact of the program. Education research consistently finds that students are more engaged and ready to learn in environments that are psychologically safe and respectful (Clapper, 2010).

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People's Nest six wellbeing domains (ARACY, 2018) also underpin the importance of connectedness and belonging. We know that connectedness and belonging is closely linked to social and emotional wellbeing outcomes and to learning outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995),

"An environment that is spiritually, socially, and emotionally safe as well as physically safe for students; where there is no assault challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are, and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge, and experience of learning together" (Williams, 1999)

From delivering our program in schools and hearing directly from schools about the challenges they are facing, we understand that this is impacting their ability to provide the environment in which every student feels connected, feels psychologically safe and can thrive.

How we co-design with young people

We co-design the solutions we create and the programs we deliver with young people. Our dedicated youth engagement function reviews and improves our program curricula and resources provided to support students in the Raise programs using feedback from and the experience of:

- Students in the Raise program through evaluation focus groups and surveys
- Raise Youth Advisory Committee

In 2022, we ran our inaugural Raise Youth Summit, in partnership with six diverse schools based in Sydney and will do the same this year, looking to expand into other states.

The power of showing up

We recognise that young people are experts in their own lives and have valuable insights into what they need to thrive. We also know from research that co-design in service delivery improves idea generation, service and most importantly outcomes (Steen, Manschot & DeKoning, 2011).

Our Recommendations for consideration by the Inquiry

Based on our 14 years of experience delivering programs in the school environment as well as our more recent experience of delivery in the disruption of the pandemic, we recommend the Inquiry consider the following:

- Engaging directly with young people and **co-designing solutions** to ensure they are youth centred, appropriate, inclusive and accessible.
- The **value of mentoring relationships**, both formal and informal, in the school environment and engaging with mentoring organisations to help design solutions.
- The importance of the school environment and ensuring it is **student centred, safe and inclusive**. The myriad of challenges schools face is impacting the environment schools are able to create for students.
- **Measuring** and **providing access to attendance data** to support programs to monitor and evaluate their own outcomes and ensure a wholistic approach to attendance, school refusal and associated impacts.
- The **particular challenges** around safety and environmental and mental health issues that **students who identify outside the gender binary face.**

References

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The power of showing up