

JUNE 2026

# Submission to the Standing Committee on Education: Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment

Principal Commissioner Luke Twyford

# Education as a protective factor

## *School readiness and progression through school education*

Educational attainment is both a protective factor and a predictor of long-term wellbeing. A thematic assessment of 30 Queensland cases reviewed by the Child Death Review Board identified the role of education in improving access to secondary supports, identifying families in need of assistance, and fostering belonging and connection for children and young people.<sup>1</sup> In that review, all young people in the compulsory participation phase who died by suicide during the review period were disengaged from education at the time of their death.

Educational attainment cannot be separated from the conditions in which education is delivered. Where education systems are under-resourced, insufficiently responsive to student need, or rely on exclusionary practices, disengagement becomes more likely and outcomes decline.

The Commission's *Deaths of Children and Young People Queensland 2024–25* report and the *Child Death Review Board Annual Report 2024–25* identify disengagement from education and educational stressors as significant risk factors associated with youth suicide.

This evidence supports reframing engagement with education not solely as a measure of academic achievement, but as a matter of child safety. Many of the factors driving educational attainment sit across multiple systems, including education, child protection, disability and youth justice.

The Commission's work also highlights the experiences of First Nations children and young people, who continue to experience significant disparities in educational outcomes despite strong aspirations for learning and achievement. Addressing these disparities requires education systems that are culturally safe, responsive and developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Disengagement is associated with increased risk of poor mental health, homelessness, and contact with the youth justice system. Early and sustained engagement in education is therefore a key protective factor, with strong social and economic returns across the life course.

# School attendance, retention and structural drivers

## *School attendance, retention and senior secondary attainment rates*

Attendance and retention data show persistent disparities across priority cohorts. In 2025, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability and students in care all recorded lower attendance rates than the general student population, with more pronounced gaps at the secondary level.

In 2025, attendance rates were 87.9 per cent for non-Indigenous students, compared to 77.5 per cent for First Nations students. Among students with disability, attendance was 84.8 per cent for non-Indigenous students and 76.2 per cent for First Nations students with disability, demonstrating compounded disadvantage at the intersection of identity and support needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission (2023). *Lessons from the life-story timelines of 30 Queensland children who have died: A small sample review of commonalities in child and family trajectories considered at the Child Death Review Board.* <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/report-lessons-from-the-lifestory-timelines-of-30-queensland-children-who-have-died.pdf>

The *Queensland Child Rights Report 2025* identifies these disparities as the product of structural and systemic factors, including:

- insufficient resourcing
- limited cultural responsiveness in curriculum and practice
- workforce capability gaps
- inflexible school environments and pedagogies

These disparities are not a reflection of the attitudes or capability of individual children, but of how education systems are experienced by different cohorts. System settings—including cultural responsiveness, support availability and flexibility of delivery—directly shape whether students are able to engage consistently.

Evidence from engagement with First Nations young people shows that they value education and are motivated to succeed. However, disengagement often follows repeated experiences where the system does not respond to their cultural identity, lived experience, or support needs.

## Disciplinary absences and inequitable outcomes

*Drivers of differences in outcomes (including gender, disability, cultural and socio-economic factors)*

The Commission's reports *Include me, don't exclude me* and *Beyond behaviour* identify school disciplinary absences (SDAs) as a significant driver of disengagement and poorer educational outcomes. In 2025, 71,805 SDAs were issued to 38,171 Queensland state school students (6.8 per cent of all students).<sup>2,3</sup>

In 2025, First Nations students and students with disability received SDAs at approximately twice the rate of all students, while students in care received SDAs at more than four times the rate. Where these characteristics intersect, the likelihood of exclusion increases further, demonstrating that disciplinary absences are concentrated among cohorts already experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage.<sup>4</sup>

Student disciplinary absences disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability, and students in care—groups already at risk of lower attendance, retention and attainment. These patterns reinforce that exclusion is concentrated among students already experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage.

Evidence demonstrates that exclusionary discipline negatively impacts attendance, engagement and learning outcomes, and is associated with higher rates of early school leaving and justice system contact. Notably, 18 per cent of Queensland state schools issued no SDAs in 2025, demonstrating that low-exclusion approaches are achievable across diverse contexts.

These findings are consistent with emerging Australian evidence linking exclusionary discipline to longer-term outcomes. Analysis of linked administrative data from the New South Wales Child Development

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<sup>2</sup>Queensland Family and Child Commission (2025). *Include me, don't exclude me*. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/report-include-me-dont-exclude-me.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Queensland Family and Child Commission (2026). *Beyond behaviour*. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/report-oatsicc-beyond-behaviour.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Queensland Family and Child Commission (2025). *Queensland Child Rights Report 2025*. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/report-queensland-child-rights-report-2025.pdf>

Study found that children who experienced out-of-school suspension in primary school had significantly higher odds of contact with police by early adolescence. After controlling for factors including socio-economic disadvantage and early behavioural vulnerability, suspended children were more than three times as likely to have any police contact and more than six times as likely to have contact as a person of interest.<sup>5,6</sup>

The likelihood of police contact increased with both the frequency and duration of suspensions, indicating that more severe patterns of exclusion are associated with progressively poorer outcomes. Importantly, children who experienced suspension were also more likely to have contact with police as victims, highlighting the need for coordinated, multi-agency responses that address both risk and vulnerability. These findings reinforce that disciplinary exclusion functions as a key systemic pathway through which educational disengagement compounds into broader social and justice system involvement.

These system and research findings are consistent with the lived experiences of children and young people.

Children and young people report that SDAs negatively affect their mental health, sense of fairness, and connection to school. Evidence shows that exclusionary discipline:

- reduces engagement in both the short and long term
- breaks down relationships with peers and teachers
- increases stress within the home
- exacerbates behaviours of concern
- increases the likelihood of youth justice contact
- contributes to poorer long-term outcomes, including lower attainment, reduced employment opportunities, and increased risk of homelessness.

These patterns indicate that disparities in outcomes are driven by systemic factors—particularly school practices and policy settings—and that reform efforts must focus on system design rather than being driven by the behaviour of individual students.

## **Inclusive education and students with disability**

### *Representation in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on school students with disability*

Students with disability are over-represented in exclusion data and national datasets, underscoring ongoing challenges in delivering inclusive education. Parents and carers consistently report that supports are insufficient, with contributing factors including limited funding, workforce capability gaps and inflexible school infrastructure and pedagogy.

Challenges in delivering inclusive education are compounded by fragmentation between the education system and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Unclear delineation of responsibilities and

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<sup>5</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission (2026). *Sector Insights – April 2026*. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/sector-insights-2026-april.PDF>

<sup>6</sup> Laurens K, Piltz L, Graham L, Carpendale E, Tzoumakis S, Harris F, Whitten T, Carr V, Dean K & Green M 2026. Out-of-school suspension from primary school and early contact with police. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 728. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/ti78182>

gaps in coordination can place additional burden on families and create barriers to sustained engagement in education.<sup>7</sup>

Exclusionary practices, including disciplinary absences and limited access to appropriate adjustments, continue to undermine participation and learning outcomes for students with disability. Families are often required to navigate multiple service systems to secure appropriate supports, highlighting the need for more coordinated and integrated responses.

The Commission notes the Queensland Government's 2025 announcement of additional special schools, alongside concerns raised by the Australian Disability Discrimination Commissioner that this approach risks a return to more segregated models of education. Access to appropriate supports is often inconsistent, with delays, service availability constraints and variation in provision contributing to reduced participation, engagement and learning outcomes for students with disability.

Consistent with Australia's obligations under the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)*, the Commission supports strengthening inclusive mainstream education as the primary model. Evidence indicates that inclusive settings improve both academic and social outcomes and reduce exclusion.

## Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

### *School readiness and progression through school education*

Participation in high-quality early childhood education is a key driver of school readiness, progression and long-term attainment.

While participation in early childhood education is high for First Nations children, this is not yet translating into equitable developmental outcomes at school entry. This indicates that access alone is insufficient without consistent quality, cultural responsiveness, and alignment between early learning and school systems. Gaps in early intervention supports, including those delivered through the NDIS, further affect children's developmental trajectories and readiness for school.

The Commission has previously provided detailed evidence on these issues through its submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment inquiry into the quality and safety of Australia's early childhood education and care system. The Commission also appeared before the Committee in January 2026, where it expanded on this evidence following the publication of *In Plain Sight*.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence-based models, including Griffith University's *Pathways to Prevention* and the ARACY Nest Wellbeing Framework, demonstrate that early intervention improves developmental outcomes and reduces later disengagement.

Investment in ECEC therefore represents a critical upstream strategy to improve learning outcomes, attendance, retention and post-school pathways. This includes the need for strengthened system oversight, workforce sustainability, and consistent quality across regions.

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<sup>7</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission (2026). *Submission to the Joint standing committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme*. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/submission-2026-joint-standing-committee-on-the-national-disability-insurance-scheme-principal-commissioner.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Queensland Child Death Review Board (2025). *In plain sight: System responses to child sexual abuse*. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/report-csa-in-plain-sight-web.pdf>

# Pathways, visibility and system gaps

*Learning approaches and pathways, including subject selection, that may influence uptake of different forms of post-school education;*

*Participation and completion rates in vocational education and training (VET) in schools;*

*Participation, completion and attainment rates in tertiary education, including VET, apprenticeships and higher education*

## Home education

There has been a significant increase in home schooling, creating a growing cohort of children whose educational engagement is less visible to government systems. This trend reflects both increased demand for flexible learning pathways and the limitations of mainstream schooling in meeting the needs of all students.

While home education is not inherently associated with increased risk compared to other forms of schooling, the Commission's work has identified that a subset of children within this cohort experience significant vulnerability.<sup>9</sup> This reflects a broader system issue—where information held across government agencies, including education, child protection and policing, is not routinely connected to identify risk and provide support.

These findings are consistent with the Commission's analysis in the Child Death Review Board Annual Report 2022–23,<sup>10</sup> which identified the importance of improved visibility and information sharing to better support children who may be experiencing vulnerability while engaged in home education.

The Commission also provided evidence to the Queensland Parliament's inquiry into the Education and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2026<sup>11</sup>, which further highlights that education pathways are not linear, particularly for children experiencing trauma, disengagement or system involvement. Effective systems require staged and flexible re-engagement options that recognise the complexity of children's lives and support their gradual return to learning.

## Education in youth detention and watchhouses

Over half of children in youth detention are disengaged from education, training or employment. Access to education is inconsistent, particularly in watchhouses, where provision is limited. A child's access to education should not cease in these settings.

Available data suggests that while enrolment in education within detention settings may be nominally universal, actual participation is inconsistent. Oversight findings indicate that staffing pressures, lockdowns and capacity constraints significantly limit meaningful engagement in education and training. This gap between enrolment and participation represents a critical system failure.

Re-engagement in education is not only a matter of learning, but a key protective factor in reducing risk, improving wellbeing and supporting successful reintegration following detention.

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<sup>9</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission (2024). *Regulation of home education: Insights paper*.

<https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/paper-regulation-of-home-education.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Queensland Child Death Review Board (2024). *Annual report 2022-23*. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/annual-report-child-death-review-board-annual-report-2022-23.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission (2026). *Submission: Education and other legislation amendment Bill 2026*.

<https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/submission-2026-education-and-other-legislation-amendment-bill-2026-principal-commissioner.pdf>

These issues reflect broader system gaps in maintaining consistent educational engagement, which further compound disengagement and reduce the likelihood of successful re-engagement in education, training or employment following release.

## Children and young people's perspectives

### *Incorporating children and young people's voices ('other relevant matters')*

The Commission's engagement work consistently shows that children and young people value education but experience significant barriers to participation.

Young people across Queensland have highlighted:

- barriers to attendance linked to wellbeing and unmet support needs
- exclusionary practices affecting students with disability and neurodivergence
- inequities in regional and remote education access
- systemic disadvantage experienced by First Nations children
- instability associated with out-of-home care
- challenges faced by culturally and linguistically diverse students

The Commission's Youth Summits and co-designed research have consistently demonstrated that children and young people care deeply about their education and their futures.

Young people from across Queensland have spoken directly to the issues this inquiry addresses:

- Stella (15, Warwick) on the underlying issues faced by children who struggle to attend school.
- Grace (18, Wynnum) on how the system fails to meet the needs of disabled and neurodivergent students.
- Esther (15, Umagico) on educational inequity in regional and remote communities.
- Makere (16, Townsville) on educational disadvantage experienced by First Nations children.
- Sheyteika (21, Brisbane) on the impacts of out-of-home care on education.
- Nagina (18, Logan) on the challenges faced by children with migrant backgrounds.

Speeches from the Commission's Youth Summit are available on our website.<sup>12</sup>

These perspectives point to the importance of education systems that are responsive, inclusive and adaptable, and reinforce that culturally safe and flexible approaches improve outcomes while exclusionary systems deepen inequality

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<sup>12</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission (2026). *2026 Youth Summit*. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/children-and-families/youth/summit/2026>

## Conclusion

Educational attainment is shaped by the interaction between education systems and the broader social, cultural and economic conditions in which children and young people live.

The evidence presented in this submission demonstrates that educational engagement is not solely a pathway to academic achievement. It is a critical protective factor that contributes to safety, wellbeing, belonging and long-term life outcomes. Conversely, disengagement from education can increase vulnerability and is often associated with poorer outcomes across multiple domains, including mental health, housing stability and contact with statutory systems.

The Commission's work highlights that disparities in educational attainment are not the result of individual deficits. Rather, they reflect systemic barriers that affect how children and young people experience education. These barriers are often most pronounced for children experiencing vulnerability, including First Nations children and young people, students with disability, children in care, and children engaged with child protection and youth justice systems.

Children and young people consistently tell us that they value education and want to succeed. Their experiences demonstrate the importance of education systems that are inclusive, culturally responsive, flexible and capable of recognising and responding to individual needs. Improving educational attainment therefore requires a sustained focus on equity, participation and wellbeing, supported by coordinated action across systems.

The Commission welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's consideration of these issues and would be pleased to provide any further information that may assist the inquiry.