

Where are we at? The 'School Can't' Senate inquiry recommendations on school refusal

The Senate's inquiry *The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters* (August 2023) made 14 recommendations. The Australian Government responded in April 2024. This is a plain-language check on where they appear to stand, and on which government is responsible for each.

A Helen's Way status check · July 2026 · sources verified

ABOUT THIS STATUS CHECK

This check draws on public documents: the Senate committee's report and list of recommendations, the Australian Government's response of 11 April 2024, the Australian Education Research Organisation's 2025 school-attendance publications, and the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034. It reflects the position as at July 2026. Many recommendations were directed to state and territory governments, which do not report progress in one place — so for those, the honest answer is often "not known nationally," and we say so rather than guess. We offer this constructively, to help turn an inquiry's findings into changes families can see.

In brief

The single most important fact about "where we're up to" is how the Government responded. Of the 14 recommendations, it noted 12 and supported just two in principle. Its stated reason throughout was that running schools is a state and territory responsibility, so it would "work in partnership" rather than act directly. The result is that no single government owns school refusal — which is itself part of the problem.

Two years on, **not one recommendation is clearly delivered**. Recommendation 1 asked Education Ministers to task AERO with research into the drivers, prevalence and the cost and effectiveness of interventions; what exists is a *rapid literature review* — two January 2025 documents that scan existing studies, plus an explainer — not that research, and with no engagement of the students, families and schools living school refusal (see the note below). So the research the inquiry asked for has not been done. Beyond that, the

main vehicle now carrying these issues is the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034 — a shared Commonwealth–state schools agreement that folds in a national attendance target, a wellbeing workforce, a Unique Student Identifier and "better measures" for students with disability. What is missing is a dedicated national school-refusal action plan, and the two most concrete family-facing asks — a funded independent support network, and more subsidised mental-health visits — have not been actioned.

On our reading: **0 clearly delivered, 7 partial or underway** (mostly through the schools agreement), 6 that cannot be verified nationally because they sit with the states, and 1 clearly not actioned.

Status at a glance

THE RECOMMENDATION (AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE)	GOV'T RESPONSE, APR 2024	WHERE IT APPEARS TO BE AT, MID-2026
1. Task AERO with research into the drivers, prevalence and effectiveness of school-refusal interventions. Responsible: Education Ministers (the Commonwealth funds AERO).	Support in principle	Partial. AERO published two <i>rapid literature reviews</i> and an explainer in January 2025 — evidence summaries of existing studies, not the new research the inquiry asked for, and with no engagement of students or families.
2. Develop and promote national resources on school refusal for parents, teachers and school leaders. Responsible: Australian Government, with states/territories and the non-government sector.	Noted	Partial. The Commonwealth committed to keep adding school-refusal resources to the Student Wellbeing Hub, but the "nationally agreed definition" this recommendation depends on is not settled.
3. Review child health and development screening to identify autism, ADHD, learning disorders and anxiety earlier. Responsible: State and territory governments.	Noted	Not known nationally. This sits entirely with each state and territory health system; there is no consolidated public reporting on whether reviews have happened.

THE RECOMMENDATION (AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE)	GOV'T RESPONSE, APR 2024	WHERE IT APPEARS TO BE AT, MID-2026
4. Identify students at risk of school withdrawal earlier, especially at transition points. Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector.	Noted	Partial / uneven. The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement pushes attendance-data use and a Unique Student Identifier, but consistent early-warning practice at transition points varies by system.
5. Increase the flexibility of education delivery — mainstream, distance, home schooling and alternative settings. Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector.	Noted	Not known nationally. Flexibility of delivery, distance-education access and alternative settings are set jurisdiction by jurisdiction, with no national picture.
6. Develop a national action plan on school refusal, informed by the AERO research. Responsible: Education Ministers.	Noted	Partial. No standalone national school-refusal plan has been published. Related elements — a national attendance target, wellbeing workforce, the Unique Student Identifier — were folded into the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement instead.
7. Improve awareness of school refusal in the health sector and embed it in training. Responsible: Australian Government, with states and territories.	Support in principle	Partial. The Commonwealth referred proposed changes to teacher Accreditation Standards to the Education Ministers Meeting; a concrete outcome is not confirmed, and it again depends on the unsettled national definition.
8. Review and soften attendance messaging so it does not alienate families. Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector.	Noted	Not known nationally. Attendance messaging is a state and territory matter; there is no national account of which systems have reviewed and softened their messaging.

THE RECOMMENDATION (AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE)	GOV'T RESPONSE, APR 2024	WHERE IT APPEARS TO BE AT, MID-2026
9. Develop resources to support trauma-informed practice in schools. Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector.	Noted	Not known nationally. The wellbeing-workforce reforms in the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement are relevant, but dedicated trauma-informed resources are not clearly evident at a national level.
10. Develop family-engagement resources and specialist family-engagement staff. Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector.	Noted	Not known nationally. The Commonwealth referred this to state and territory authorities; there is no national account of dedicated family-engagement staffing.
11. Build schools' capacity to provide reasonable adjustments under the Disability Standards. Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector.	Noted	Partial — our live gap. Overlaps Helen's Way Priority 3 and the DIAP/audit work. The Agreement promises "better measures" for students with disability, but adjustment capacity in schools is exactly the gap we are campaigning on.
12. Identify and promote effective education–health collaboration models. Responsible: Australian Government, with states and territories.	Noted	Partial. The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement commits to strengthening links between schools and non-school health services, but specific, named collaboration models have not been published.
13. Explore funding for an independent peer-support network / "one-stop shop" for families. Responsible: Australian Government, with states and territories.	Noted	Not evident. We can find no funded national independent peer-support network or "one-stop shop." Families still rely on volunteer-run groups such as School Can't Australia.

THE RECOMMENDATION (AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE)	GOV'T RESPONSE, APR 2024	WHERE IT APPEARS TO BE AT, MID-2026
14. Increase subsidised mental-health visits for students experiencing school refusal. Responsible: Australian Government.	Noted	Not actioned. The Commonwealth pointed to the existing Better Access initiative, which remains capped at 10 subsidised sessions a year — no school-refusal-specific increase has been made.

Key: Delivered · Partial / underway · Not known nationally (sits with the states, no national reporting) · Not actioned.

Who is responsible — the split

This matters because it explains why so much is "not known nationally."

State and territory governments lead: Recommendations 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10 and 11 — schooling delivery, health screening, attendance practice, flexibility and reasonable adjustments. This is half the list, and it is where progress is least visible from a national vantage point.

The Commonwealth leads: Recommendations 2, 7, 12, 13 and 14 — national resources, health-sector awareness, education–health models, a funded support network, and Medicare-subsidised mental-health visits. These are the ones the federal government can act on more directly; of them, the two most tangible (13 and 14) are the clearest gaps.

Education Ministers act jointly: Recommendations 1 and 6 — an AERO rapid literature review (done, but not the research asked for) and a national action plan (not delivered as a standalone plan). These run through the Education Ministers Meeting, and in practice have been routed into the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement.

Recommendation by recommendation

Recommendation 1 — Task AERO with research into the drivers, prevalence and effectiveness of school-refusal interventions

Responsible: Education Ministers (the Commonwealth funds AERO) · Government response (Apr 2024): Support in principle

"As an initial step in the broader school refusal research agenda, the committee recommends that Education Ministers task the Australian Education Research Organisation with research into: the drivers and prevalence of school refusal in Australia; and the use, cost, and effectiveness of school refusal interventions used in Australia and overseas, including flexible approaches to school education."

PARTIAL

AERO published its school-attendance work in January 2025, but what it delivered is a rapid literature review — an evidence synthesis of existing studies — rather than the new research into drivers, prevalence and intervention cost and effectiveness the recommendation asked for, and it did not engage the students and families with lived experience of school refusal. On the public record, that research has not been done. The note below sets out exactly what was published and why the distinction matters.

Why Recommendation 1 counts as "partial," not "delivered"

What AERO delivered, in January 2025, was two documents each titled *Rapid Literature Review — Barriers to School Attendance and Reasons for Student Absence* and *Interventions to Promote School Attendance and Address Student Absence* — plus an explainer, *School attendance: New insights from AERO*. A rapid literature review scans what existing studies already say. It is genuinely useful, but it is not new research measuring Australian prevalence or evaluating intervention effectiveness, and it did not engage the students, families and schools living school refusal — the very people the inquiry centred. That is why we record Recommendation 1 as **partial**, not delivered: on the public record, the research it asked for has not been done.

Recommendation 2 — Develop and promote national resources on school refusal for parents, teachers and school leaders

Responsible: Australian Government, with states/territories and the non-government sector · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector to develop and promote resources about school refusal, once a nationally agreed definition has been established, for parents, teachers and school leaders."

PARTIAL

The Commonwealth said it would continue to add resources to the national Student Wellbeing Hub. But this recommendation is conditional on "a nationally agreed definition" of school refusal being established first — and there is no public sign that a single agreed definition has been settled across jurisdictions, which limits how far consistent national resources can go.

Recommendation 3 — Review child health and development screening to identify autism, ADHD, learning disorders and anxiety earlier

Responsible: State and territory governments · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that state and territory governments review their child health and development screening programs to identify opportunities to improve early identification of autism, ADHD, specific learning disorders, and anxiety disorders, in order to provide the classroom support these students might need."

NOT KNOWN NATIONALLY

The Commonwealth noted this as a state and territory responsibility. Child-health screening is run separately by each jurisdiction, and there is no national tracker of whether these reviews have been carried out. On the public record we cannot say where this stands — it would need to be checked state by state.

Recommendation 4 — Identify students at risk of school withdrawal earlier, especially at transition points

Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector identify opportunities for earlier identification of students at risk of school withdrawal, particularly at key school transition points."

PARTIAL / UNEVEN

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034 commits jurisdictions to better use of attendance data and to a Unique Student Identifier that follows a student between schools — both of which support earlier identification. But how systematically each system flags at-risk students at transition points is not consistently reported, so progress is real in mechanism but uneven and hard to verify in practice.

Recommendation 5 — Increase the flexibility of education delivery — mainstream, distance, home schooling and alternative settings

Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector investigate ways to increase the flexibility of education delivery, including by: identifying ways to enhance flexibility in mainstream school settings for children going through school refusal; facilitating easier access to distance education and home schooling for students experiencing school refusal; and facilitating the provision of more alternative and specialist school settings that cater for students experiencing school refusal."

NOT KNOWN NATIONALLY

This is squarely a state and territory matter, and one where practice differs a great deal between systems. There is no national account of what has changed since the inquiry, so we cannot give a reliable status — it varies by jurisdiction and would need to be examined locally.

Recommendation 6 — Develop a national action plan on school refusal, informed by the AERO research

Responsible: Education Ministers · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that Education Ministers develop a national action plan on school refusal (national action plan), informed by research that has been conducted by the Australian Education Research Organisation."

PARTIAL

The Commonwealth said it would "explore the feasibility" of a national plan through the Education Ministers Meeting. On the public record, no standalone national action plan on school refusal has been published. Instead, related pieces have been absorbed into the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034 — a national Student Attendance Rate target of 91.4% by 2030, reforms to the in-school wellbeing workforce, and the Unique Student Identifier. That is meaningful, but it is a general schools agreement, not the dedicated, school-refusal-specific plan this recommendation asked for.

Recommendation 7 — Improve awareness of school refusal in the health sector and embed it in training

Responsible: Australian Government, with states and territories · Government response (Apr 2024): Support in principle

"The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to identify ways to improve awareness and understanding of school refusal—once a nationally agreed definition has been established—within the health sector, with a particular focus on general practice, psychiatry, psychology and other relevant allied health fields."

PARTIAL

The Commonwealth supported this in principle and said it would refer proposed amendments to the accreditation standards to the Education Ministers Meeting for discussion. A concrete change to health-sector or teacher training is not confirmed on the public record, and like Recommendation 2 it is gated on the "nationally agreed definition" that has not yet been settled.

Recommendation 8 — Review and soften attendance messaging so it does not alienate families

Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector review and update current messaging about the importance of school attendance to ensure that it: reflects a nuanced view of attendance that does not further alienate families dealing with school refusal; and provides information about how to access support for attendance difficulties such as school refusal; and recognises that for some students, where attendance is not possible, that delivering tailored educational outcomes through an alternative method of schooling is the priority."

NOT KNOWN NATIONALLY

Attendance messaging sits with each education system, and the Commonwealth noted it as such. Some jurisdictions and campaigns (and advocacy groups such as School Can't Australia) have shifted the language toward "school can't" rather than "won't," but there is no consolidated national picture of official messaging changes, so we cannot give a reliable status.

Recommendation 9 — Develop resources to support trauma-informed practice in schools

Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector work together to develop resources to support the use of trauma-informed practices in schools, so they can implement best-practice methods to support students to continue with their education."

NOT KNOWN NATIONALLY

The Commonwealth said it would "explore opportunities to support" states and territories. The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement's investment in school counsellors, psychologists and wellbeing staff is related, but a specific, shared body of trauma-informed practice resources is not clearly evident nationally, so the status is unclear.

Recommendation 10 — Develop family-engagement resources and specialist family-engagement staff

Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector work together to develop and promote stable and ongoing resources to support effective family engagement. This should include the provision of specialist family engagement support staff in schools."

NOT KNOWN NATIONALLY

This was referred to state and territory education authorities. Whether schools are being resourced with dedicated family-engagement staff is a local staffing question, and there is no national reporting on it, so we cannot give a reliable status.

Recommendation 11 — Build schools' capacity to provide reasonable adjustments under the Disability Standards

Responsible: State and territory education authorities and the non-government sector · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee acknowledges that the process of receiving a formal disability diagnosis is expensive and can have extended wait times. To this end, the committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector work together to identify and implement measures to build the capacity of schools to provide reasonable adjustments for students in line with the requirements of the Disability Standards for Education 2005."

PARTIAL — OUR LIVE GAP

This recommendation — including its acknowledgement that a formal diagnosis is "expensive and can have extended wait times" — sits right at the centre of Helen's Way's work. It is the same reasonable-adjustments capacity gap raised by the NSW Auditor-General and addressed (partially) in the Interim DIAP. The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement commits to "better measures for student engagement and learning gain and outcomes for students with disability," which is welcome, but building actual adjustment capacity in every classroom is the live, unfinished task — and the reason our Priority 3 exists.

Recommendation 12 — Identify and promote effective education–health collaboration models

Responsible: Australian Government, with states and territories · Government response (Apr 2024):
Noted

"The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to identify and promote effective models for collaboration between the education and health sectors in relation to school refusal."

PARTIAL

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement includes a direction to strengthen "links between schools and non-school services, such as health services," which is the right idea. But specific, evaluated models for education–health collaboration on school refusal have not been identified and promoted publicly, so this is underway in intent rather than delivered.

Recommendation 13 — Explore funding for an independent peer-support network / "one-stop shop" for families

Responsible: Australian Government, with states and territories · Government response (Apr 2024):
Noted

"The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to explore funding sources for an independent peer support network for families and schools going through school refusal to receive resources and support."

NOT EVIDENT

The Commonwealth noted it would "explore" funding sources with states and territories. We can find no evidence that a funded, independent national peer-support network or "one-stop shop" has been established. In practice, families continue to rely on volunteer-run peer communities such as School Can't Australia. This is a Commonwealth-clear ask with no visible action — if funding has been provided, it is not public.

Recommendation 14 — Increase subsidised mental-health visits for students experiencing school refusal

Responsible: Australian Government · Government response (Apr 2024): Noted

"The committee recommends that the Australian Government investigate increasing the number of subsidised mental health care visits for students experiencing school refusal."

NOT ACTIONED

This is a purely Commonwealth lever, and it is the clearest not-actioned item. The Government pointed to the existing Better Access initiative rather than committing to any increase. Better Access remains capped at 10 subsidised sessions per year (the temporary 20-session cap ended in December 2022 and was not restored), and no school-refusal-specific increase has been made.

What this means — and what we're asking

An inquiry heard from families across the country, agreed the problem is real and growing, and made 14 practical recommendations. The Government agreed with almost none of them outright — not because it disputed the problem, but because responsibility is split. That split is the accountability gap: when everyone is partly responsible, no one is answerable for the whole. And on the one item most often called "done," a rapid literature review has stood in for the research — and the lived experience — the inquiry actually asked for.

Helen's Way asks that the pieces already moving — the AERO evidence, the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, the wellbeing workforce — be joined up into a dedicated, dated national plan on school refusal (Recommendation 6), built on research that genuinely engages students and families, so the evidence translates into practice. We ask that the two Commonwealth-clear gaps be closed: fund the independent family support network (Recommendation 13) and increase subsidised mental-health visits for these students (Recommendation 14). And we note that Recommendation 11 — building schools' capacity for reasonable adjustments — is the same reform we pursue through our Priority 3 and our response to the NSW Interim DIAP.

Sources. Senate Education and Employment References Committee, *The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters* (August 2023): the 14 recommendations (verbatim). Australian Government response to the report, 11 April 2024: dispositions (12 noted; Recommendations 1 and 7 supported in principle) and the state/territory-responsibility framing. Australian Education Research Organisation (2025): *School attendance: New insights from AERO; Interventions to Promote School Attendance and Address Student Absence — Rapid*

Literature Review; Barriers to School Attendance and Reasons for Student Absence — Rapid Literature Review. Australian Government, *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034* (fact sheet): attendance target, wellbeing workforce, Unique Student Identifier, students-with-disability measures, school–health links. Better Access initiative (Department of Health): 10 subsidised sessions per year. Verified against these sources, July 2026; recommendation wording taken from the Government's response document, which restates each recommendation in full.

Helen's Way — turning shared lived experience into meaningful change for neurodivergent learners. Prepared July 2026. This is an advocacy resource, not legal advice, and is offered in a spirit of partnership with governments.