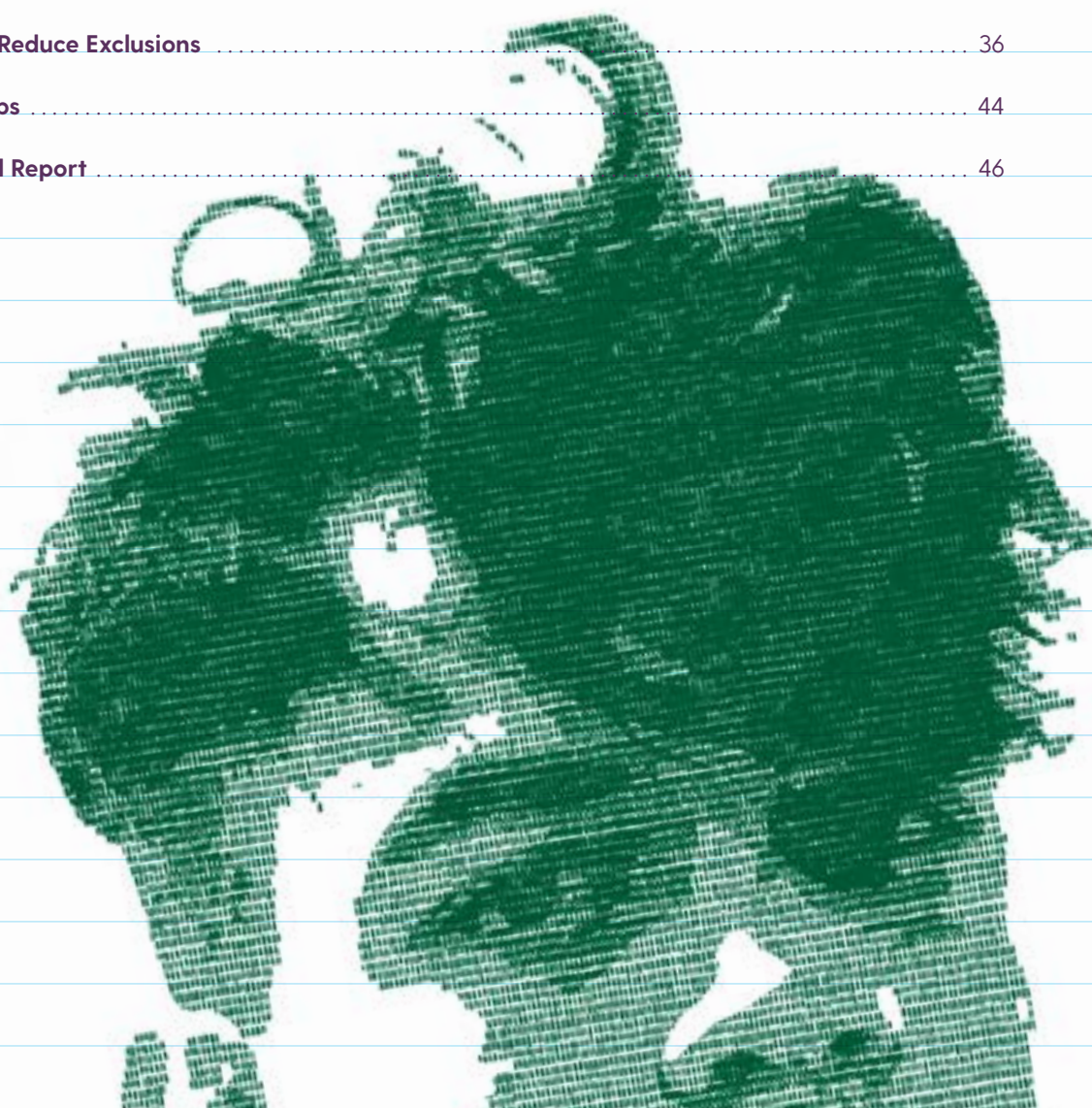South Australian
Commissioner
for Children and
Young People
2020

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The
Blame
Game

The perspectives of South Australian children and young people
on the causes and impacts of education exclusion and why
we need to stop blaming children for system failure

Commissioner
for Children &
Young People

Acknowledgements

Suggested Citation

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Commissioner's Foreword

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People my mandate is to promote the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people living in our State. I advocate for the views, aspirations and rights of children and young people to be affirmed, promoted and protected, working to give children and young people a 'voice' across our society.

I seek to influence and identify the responsibilities and roles that public, civic and commercial sectors of our communities have in relation to children and young people's needs, advocating for them to be positioned 'front and centre' in policy practice and service delivery. This includes advocating for the involvement of children and young people in co-designing services relevant to them, wherever this is feasible.

Children and young people are the experts in their own lives and want to have their opinions heard, taken seriously and acted upon; in fact it is their right. I have heard firsthand how many children and young people in South Australia lead happy active lives and feel respected by adults. They value their family relationships, including those they have with family pets. They also value their friendships, school education and learning, their culture, including ethnicity, and the opportunities they have to participate in their communities in different ways.

I have also heard that children and young people in South Australia are very concerned for those they see as being less included, less mentally well, less financially secure and less well-prepared for their future. They have told me the areas in which they would like to see changes made to make life better for all children and young people in South Australia, particularly those they see who are 'doing it tough'.

Children and young people told me they're concerned about who is excluded from school and what support excluded students receive to remain engaged with their education. In fact, doing something to 'help everyone get an education' was one of the top five issues South Australian children and young people identified as a priority for my work.

This report focuses on school exclusion through suspensions and exclusions, as well as more informal processes removing children from the classroom. Its contents align with the recognition under the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2016* that 'the future of the State is inextricably bound to the wellbeing of all its children and young people'.

A good education and relevant qualifications are critical to the future of every young person and the vital ingredients to setting them up for success. Access to education is enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and within the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* is included as a fundamental human right. Yet despite this, I continue to hear from children and young people and their families that our education system is failing them. Young people report how formal and informal processes make them feel unwelcome and actively exclude them from the mainstream schooling system. They tell me that a focus on symptoms means the causes of young people's disengagement from school often go ignored.

Behind every child who is excluded from school is a story of loss and pain, both for the child and their loved ones. Our response as a State should never be to impose a sanction that further excludes. Instead it should be a response that is inclusive with a view to eliminating exclusion as an option or tool for punishment.

Suspension and exclusion are punitive processes that can have long-term effects on children's educational attainment and treatment within the school system. Anything with the potential for such a substantive impact on a child's wellbeing and their future attainment must be subject to the most rigorous examination of what standards of justice and representation are being applied.

Many young people said exclusion from education was caused by the system's failure to support their attendance in the context of their lives, needs and circumstances. The language they used reflected a perception that exclusion was often meted out on young people due to external factors and decision-making that was beyond their control.

Consistently, young people said they felt they were not being heard, and were misunderstood by schools and many of the teachers who taught them. Young people also told me that they were 'dropping out' because the barriers to their attendance were so great they could not see another alternative.

Parents and carers have spoken to me about their desperation with the types of behaviour management practices that are being used in schools and how adversely they are affecting the wellbeing of their children. This includes how they impact on their ability to work and support their family, and how they fail to take into account their child's disability, medical condition, developmental or other needs.

Advocates, therapists and support workers describe their frustration with the apparent unwillingness there is of schools to acknowledge that behaviour management practices are simply not working, and are in fact causing harm in many cases.

They, like me, despair that children just starting their education are being excluded in their Preschool and Reception years, because there is a lack of adequate support to help them regulate their emotions in the 'new' school environment they find themselves in.

No young person should be launched into adulthood without the support of an education. The consequences of such an approach are all too foreseeable. We must remember that the purpose of our education system is to deliver on the needs of South Australian children and young people. Where this isn't being achieved, we must change the system to meet those needs – not blame the child or young person for the education system's shortfalls.

This report focuses on children and young peoples' lived experience of school exclusion. It examines the devastating effects exclusion can have for those children and young people still in the process of developing. It looks at the major causes and experiences surrounding exclusion, using this as a means of examining how exclusions can be reduced and avoided altogether. Finally, it explores some much-needed ideas for how change can be brought about, informed by young people with lived experience of school exclusion themselves.

Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People

Context

Strategies to reduce educational exclusion must be part of a bigger ambition in South Australia to address cycles of disadvantage in the lives of our State's children and young people. South Australia has the highest rate of poverty in Australia, with 1 in 6 children aged 0-14 years living below the poverty line, and with some areas of the State recording child poverty as high as 50%.[1]

Defining exclusion

'Exclusion' as defined within the South Australian school system is used as a behaviour management strategy.

Suspension is a period of exclusion ranging from one to five days, which a school principal may impose if they believe a student has been: threatening or perpetrating violence; acting in a way that threatens the safety or wellbeing of students, staff, or others associated with the school; acting illegally; interfering with a teacher's ability to instruct students or a student's ability to benefit from teaching; acting in a way that threatens good order through persistent failure to comply with behaviour rules; or showing persistent and wilful inattention or indifference to school work.

Exclusion is a level up from suspension. It results in a period of absence from school that can be anywhere between 4-10 weeks, or the remainder of a semester, dependent upon a student's age. It's a response to a student's 'behavioural and learning problems' and may result from a student persisting with behaviours that led to prior suspension, or more serious behaviour. Students may be required to enrol in an alternative facility during a period of exclusion. Exclusion may be a precursor to expulsion.

In this report 'exclusion' is also used in its plain English form to refer to other processes undertaken at the direction of the school to remove a child from the classroom or the school campus. Based on the reports CCYP received, these include: restricted access to play areas; being sent to the school's front office, to a classroom to sit with a teacher or counsellor, or into a confined space such as a courtyard; being sent home early for the day; and being encouraged to stay home on significant dates such as sports days and school excursions.

On top of these worrying figures, 25% of children and young people are living in the State's most disadvantaged economic circumstances, as compared with 18% Australia wide.[2] This means South Australian children are already a step behind their interstate counterparts.

We already know that growing up in poverty affects a child's development and has a negative impact on their health, education, family relationships, and aspirations into adulthood. We also know that we must develop more sophisticated ways to measure children's wellbeing at school, so it can be adequately addressed. This includes investing in inclusion strategies that can ensure the State delivers on its promise to all children and young people that they will have the opportunity to thrive.

These sophisticated ways to measure children's wellbeing must extend to including the voices of children and young people themselves. It is their adversity and feelings of hopelessness and isolation that are both a symptom of exclusion, and a contributor to the challenges they face in finding a place to belong at school.

This report documents the perspectives of South Australian children and young people who have had a lived experience of either a school suspension, exclusion or expulsion. Using direct peer-based research, online survey-ing, one-on-one consultations and interviews with children and young people, their families, parents and care givers, as well as advocates working in this area, this project has sought to look at the human face of what is too often referred and reported upon as an everyday behaviour management strategy.

From the data collected from children and young people themselves, it is clear that education exclusions have impacts that extend far beyond those of not attending school. These are impacts that are felt by children and young people across multiple aspects of their lives, including physical, emotional, mental health and wellbeing domains, as well as those that school exclusion has on their aspirations and social mobility.

From adults who were suspended, excluded, or expelled as children, we have heard that in some cases these negative beliefs about education can last well into adulthood. They can also influence parenting styles and values.

Data that records the types and rates of education exclusion are impersonal measures that hide the significant impact state sanctioned rejection of individual children and young people has. When we listen to the voices of children and young people who have had lived experience of education exclusion we begin to appreciate the full impact of the experience.

Throughout this project, children and young people were encouraged to describe how they feel. They were invited to talk about the impact education exclusion has on them and their families, and to describe the process of educational exclusion from their point of view – a view that goes well beyond numbers.

What they also describe are examples of informal exclusion practices that include having restricted access to play areas, being sent to the school's front office, to a classroom to sit with a teacher or counsellor, or left in a confined space such as a courtyard or isolating room for hours on end. They talk about being sent home early and of being encouraged to stay home on significant school community days, such as sports days and school excursions.

From the perspective of children and young people these informal exclusionary practices and experiences are no less damaging than suspension, exclusion and expulsion. Many young people describe a long process of disconnection that started early in their education journey and

which ends up in exclusion that leads to many children and young people living lives that are deeply rooted in disadvantage and vulnerability due to not having had an opportunity to meet their educational milestones.

Many young people with a lived experience of education exclusion include in their perception 'any form of isolation or unequal treatment of a student' that occurs. This concept covers a broad a range of events and practices operating at the individual, interpersonal, teacher, school and societal levels. They describe a teacher's decision to exclude them from a specific program or activity through to the poor relationships they have with individual teachers, or the feelings they experience as a result of being left out in the classroom situation, due to the challenges with learning they face. While some young people acknowledged that some of the issues challenging their engagement with their education had their origins outside of the school setting, they felt that the responses being made within schools simply aren't working.

Young people are aware that suspension and expulsion exist as formal methods of school exclusion, however, many who reported having been formally excluded from school were largely unclear about what led to their exclusion. Overwhelmingly participants who had been excluded felt the event that resulted in their exclusion was assessed by the school without context, and that this resulted in an unfair and overly punitive response.

As part of this enquiry children and young people who had not personally experienced education exclusion were also asked to share their understanding of its impact on their peers, friends and family.

A majority of these children and young people reported that from their perspective, exclusion disproportionately impacts those children living with disability including those with health issues, learning difficulties or complex social, emotional and behavioural needs. Being bullied, having different learning styles, and 'not getting your turn

to speak when there is a problem' were also raised as common reasons for exclusion. Others wrote about their concerns that schools exclude students on the basis of their gender identity, sexuality and 'type' of disability.

Many young people stated that exclusions happen as a result of a teacher or a school being unable to understand and therefore being unable to meet students' individual needs. Others reflected that 'teachers don't help students enough' and that they 'just want the bad kids to go away'.

Others said the reasons for their peers being excluded were unfair or inconsistent. They described school rules as 'one-sided', 'unreasonable' and 'unfair' and exclusions as 'too harsh' and 'discriminatory'. Many expressed a sense of injustice when different children and young people received different punishments for the same behaviour. They talked about schools suspending the 'wrong' student as a result of only hearing 'one side of the story' or of 'having one rule for one student and another rule for others'. Others described seeing other students being excluded 'for no reason', 'for nothing', or for something 'ridiculous'.

Although many young people thought that exclusions happened too frequently, others drew on their experiences of being disrupted by other students, and therefore considered that in some cases school exclusions were justifiable and fair. These students view exclusions as 'the only way everyone gets a break'.

However, most children and young people who felt this way, also acknowledged that exclusions are 'not ideal' nor did they consider them to be 'the best way to deal with a problem'. Their reflections were nuanced and showed an awareness of the significance an exclusion event can have on the student involved, and on their family.

The significant majority (83%) of young people surveyed who had not had a personal experience of exclusion, consistently said that exclusion was more likely to lead to 'worse behaviour' and 'would rarely if ever' have a positive outcome, with this view supported by years of academic research.

They described a cycle of exclusion that is very hard to break, and which impacts a student's self-confidence, ability to keep up with learning, and capacity to maintain positive relationships with friends and family. They associated exclusions with increased family stress and with long term negative impacts on how a child views themselves, as well as their school, future education potential or employment prospects.

Even when they were not directly asked about solutions, young people offered ideas that focused on ways schools could provide inclusive alternatives to teaching and managing difficult behaviours in learning environments.

It is well-known that the outlook for children who don't receive a solid education is poor. It is for this reason that the State has a responsibility to ensure every child, no matter what their circumstances, receives the education to which they are entitled.

For families and carers, exclusion is associated with tension and disruption in the home, feelings of guilt, and in some cases partial or total loss of employment and family income.[3] These significant impacts at home, are rarely considered when decisions about a child or young person's education exclusion is being made. For South Australia as a whole, this results in increased costs and burdens on government systems, particularly those of health and justice.

Perhaps worst of all, education exclusion also affects how a child or young person sees themselves. Many young people internalise the message that they are inherently 'bad' and 'unwanted' when they are told they are no longer welcome at their school, or indeed any school. This can result in severe feelings of isolation and disengagement from education and the school community. It is also likely to contribute to 'deep exclusion' – exclusion across 'more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being and future life chances'.[4]

The focus of schools must be on providing a learning environment that is capable of adapting to the diverse and substantive needs of the children and young people who it is the State's duty to educate. If as a community we are unable to find a way of ensuring South Australian schools provide an inclusive, safe and nurturing environment for all children and young people across the State, we risk creating a group of children who will be deemed uneducable by an education system of our own making, with all that this inevitably bleak state of affairs encompasses.

Taking an optimistic view, early identification of the children and young people in our school communities who face challenges and issues that may be leading them toward an experience of school exclusions can be improved. Through proactive intervention approaches that keep them connected over the long-term, we can reduce the incidence and impact of school exclusions overall. This requires a system willing to adapt to children's needs, rather than requiring children to adapt to a school education system that is not placing their best interests front and centre at all times, as mandated to do.

Key Insights From Young People

1   Poor relationships with teachers, problems at home, a learning difficulty, living with disability, a lack of support, being sick and not understanding instructions, can all lead to being excluded.

2   Repeating tried and failed exclusionary approaches to behaviour management is unlikely to achieve a different outcome.

3   Adults, particularly teachers, should look for signs and be trained to notice when something is going wrong, proactively helping rather than waiting for young people to tell them they're not coping.

4   If school is not a place where you feel supported, it is unlikely that you will disclose when there is trouble at home.

5   Actions that single out young people in front of their peers are humiliating and create more isolation and disconnection for that student.

6   Schools must be better prepared to deliver the kind of mental health support young people need and develop more tailored support for general student learning and wellbeing.

Key Messages

1   Every child, no matter their circumstances, have a right to receive their education.

2   One of the most serious sanctions a State can place on a child is to deny them an education.

3   Managing behaviour through exclusion fails to reduce problem behaviour, and may create further behavioural issues.

4   Suspension and exclusion are punitive actions that can have long-term negative effects on all areas of a child's or young person's life.

5   Education exclusion can have a sustained impact on a child or young person's attitude toward, and future engagement with, their education.

6   Children and young people say health and learning difficulties, financial insecurity, family dynamics, and lack of teacher support, are all causes of exclusion.

7   Groups of children most likely to be excluded are those experiencing disconnection with family and in child protection, illness and disability, poverty, experiencing homelessness and cultural disconnection.

8   School culture and environments significantly influence exclusionary practices.

Key Recommendations

'I recommend that the Department for Education ensure decisions to exclude children from education really are only used as a measure of 'last possible resort'. Before any decision regarding a school exclusion is made the process must be able to demonstrate how it has afforded paramount consideration as to whether it is in the best interests of each individual child, and have taken into account the child or young person's background and circumstances, as well as their individual developmental, social, mental and physical needs.'

– Commissioner Helen Connolly

School exclusion is a punitive process that can have long-term effects on a child or young person's educational attainment and treatment within the school system. Any practice that has the potential for such a substantive impact on children and young people's wellbeing and future attainment must be subject to the most rigorous standards and oversight.

– Exclusion from school should not be an exclusion from education. Schools must provide offline and/or online learning instruction and resources for a child who spends a school day at home, along with a key teacher who is allocated to that child and who must maintain daily contact with them, just as though they were physically attending school.

– Procedural fairness must be improved by ensuring that if a school is considering excluding a child or young person they, or a member of their family, must be provided with an opportunity for direct involvement in any decision being made about them.

– The child or young person must be included, informed and supported to participate in the discussions and decision-making about exclusions and alternative arrangements that are not exclusionary, in consultation with family and carers. Decisions should always consider what is in the child's best interests, while also allowing for repercussions in relation to child safety, family employment, and/or carer responsibilities.

– Public reporting of the numbers of suspensions and exclusions needs to be disaggregated into school, age, sex, gender, disability status, Aboriginal and Torrens Strait Islander, CALD, health status, other relevant identity and background factors, and incorporate data from the Catholic and independent school sectors.

– Introduction of school level incentives for teachers and school leaders who reduce the number of formal and informal education exclusions at their school.

Current Situation

Recent Australian and international research, highlights a clear relationship between exclusion from school and 'a range of behaviours detrimental to the health and wellbeing of young people'. It also shows that excluded and marginalised young people are at higher risk of exposure to, and involvement with, the youth justice system.[5]

Within the Education sector suspensions and exclusions are often referred to as 'behaviour management' or 'behaviour support' strategies. These are terms that understate the significance of exclusionary practices. To temporarily remove a student from school is one of the most serious sanctions a state institution can place on a young person, and it can have lifelong negative impacts.

Furthermore, when our education system excludes a child, the State is failing in its international obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In particular Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC recognise the right of every child to an education which 'supports the development of their personality and talents', 'develops their mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' and 'takes all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity'.

Under the *South Australian Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017 (Safety Act)* the State has made a further promise to support all children to live safe from harm; to do well at all levels of learning; to have skills for life; and to be active citizens who have a voice and influence. The Safety Act also makes a promise to protect the wellbeing of all children, particularly those who are at risk.[6]

This means there is a general duty of care for every person in the State to ensure that this promise to children is kept. The Department for Education's Behaviour Support Policy requires departmental staff to use the 'least exclusionary methods to prevent, reduce or redirect behaviours of concern' and to 'understand the environmental, social and family context of a child or young person's behaviour'. The policy principles acknowledge that behaviour can change over time and that 'behaviours of concern' can be an indicator of a child or young person's need for support.

Although the Department claims that 'exclusionary responses are used as a last resort', a review of annual data from the Department for Education and the evidence gathered through focus groups, workshops, surveys and interviews, demonstrate an over-reliance on exclusionary responses that are used inconsistently, excessively and, at times, in an ad hoc manner.

This is consistent with recent interstate-based inquiries into school exclusions conducted by the Ombudsman's office in both New South Wales and Victoria, which found that exclusionary practices are widespread and that the use of positive behaviour support practices is limited.[7]

In part, this is because the legislation largely frames individual students as 'the problem' and disregards the broader systemic and contextual factors inside and outside of the classroom that contribute to and influence behaviour and engagement.

Further, it does not address whether exclusions are proportionate to behaviour, or the impact the disruption to the student's learning and relationships causes. Neither does it adequately address the support needed for students to reconnect or stay engaged with their education following their exclusion. There are also very few opportunities for the student to have their say, or provide information and documentation to support their case for not being excluded.

In Victoria, by contrast, a Ministerial Order outlines the procedures for suspension, including that principals are obliged to ensure that the student 'has had the opportunity to be heard' prior to implementing a suspension. Principals must also give consideration as to whether a suspension is 'appropriate to' the behaviour, educational needs, age, any disability, and the residential and social circumstances of the student.[8] This appears to be working with numbers of exclusions in Victorian schools now appearing to be decreasing.

According to the SA Department for Education Suspension and Exclusion Information for Parents and Carers Fact Sheet, suspensions and exclusions are 'not used as punishment'. Instead they are described as part of a 'problem-solving process' that 'helps students,

parents, carers and the school work out how to support a student to behave safely and positively in the future'. The fact sheet also states that suspensions and exclusions are only used when 'other things have not helped'.[9]

The Department's data on the frequency of suspensions, however, shows that almost one quarter of students suspended in Term 2 of 2018 were suspended more than once.[10] This cycle of multiple exclusion incidents was a common theme that emerged throughout this project. Young people and their families often spoke about returning to the same conditions that led to their exclusion in the first place, while many reported receiving inadequate schoolwork during their exclusion, if any at all.

While Department policy describes families and carers as 'key partners in supporting positive behavioural change', many children and their families or carers describe feeling ignored, isolated and unsupported throughout the period of suspension or exclusion. This is contrary to the policy which states they are part of 'problem solving processes'. The suspensions and exclusions applied to the South Australian children and families consulted with, appeared to exacerbate existing issues and create more problems than they solved.

The Department for Education collects data on suspensions and exclusions in Term 2 of each year.[11] These figures may not, therefore, be representative of the full academic year. It is reasonable to assume that the annual figures are higher than the numbers reported. Furthermore, this data only captures students in South Australian government schools. Data is not available on the nature and extent of exclusions in Catholic or Independent schools.

Nevertheless, the Department's datasets do provide a snapshot of recent trends in suspensions and exclusions as defined by the department. This data includes the age and gender of suspended and excluded students, as well as the frequency and reasons for the suspensions.

Figure 1 (below) shows an overall upward trend in the number of students who experienced a suspension incident between Term 2, 2014 and Term 2, 2019. This is despite a decrease in suspensions reported between 2015 and 2016 and between 2017 and 2018.

The proportion of the total government school population in South Australia who have been suspended or excluded has remained relatively steady since 2012, with the rate of suspensions sitting just above 2% and the rate of exclusions at 0.13-0.17%.[12] There have been no school expulsions recorded during the data collection periods.

However, these raw figures mask the fact there are certain groups of children who are more likely to be excluded from school than others. Concerns about the disproportionate impact of school exclusions on particular groups of young people are not new, and have been highlighted in research in Australia and overseas for as long as data on exclusions has been collected.[13]

Evidence suggests that the children who are most likely to be excluded may already be facing significant challenges outside of school. They include children in out of home care, children living with disability or with learning difficulties, children living in poverty, or experiencing homelessness, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children and young people living with chronic physical and/or mental health issues.

Despite legislative protections in the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the Disability Standards for Education 2005, recent evidence suggests that exclusionary practices systematically discriminate against children with disability, as well as those with complex social, emotional and behavioural needs.

Figure 1: Number of students suspended and number of suspension incidents, Term 2, 2014 – Term 2, 2019

In 2017, the South Australian Legislative Council tabled a report on access to the South Australian education system for students with disability. While students with disability made up 9% of the student population, they accounted for more than 23% of all suspensions.[14]

Out of the 22 interviews undertaken for this report, 18 related to children or young people with one or more diagnosed medical condition that could be expected to have an impact on their behaviour or learning capabilities. Eight had a confirmed diagnosis of autism, while another four children were diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Many other children were experiencing conditions that included anxiety, learning delays, processing disorders, developmental trauma, and depression. There were children and young people who were actively experiencing issues within or outside of school such as bullying, family violence, homelessness, or involvement with child protection.

Others had histories of experiences that could reasonably be expected to impact their emotional state and behaviour, or indeed their school's interpretation of their behaviour.

A 2020 report by the Guardian for Children and Young People in South Australia reported that children and young people in state care are four times more likely to be suspended and eight times more likely to be excluded than broader government school students.[15] Boys are also over-represented in the data. For example, in Term 2 of 2018, data showed male students were three times more likely to be suspended than female students.

The most recent data from the Department for Education shows a concerning trend in the young age at which children are being excluded from school. Almost one quarter (24%) of students suspended from government school in Term 2, 2018 were aged between 4 and 9 years. The number of students suspended from school who were aged 4 to 6 years increased overall by 66% between 2012 and 2018, despite a 10% decrease in suspensions for this age group between 2015 and 2016.

Where age was specified by the families who were interviewed for this report, the youngest child was first formally excluded at just four years of age and the oldest at 17 years. The average age of first exclusion was around eight and a half years and the median age of first exclusion was ten and a half years, with at least one instance of a child being excluded in their very first year of school.

Almost half were formally excluded from school via suspension before they had even completed Year 2. This does not take into account the age at which informal exclusions commenced. Of those who participated in the consultations, there were more male than female children and young people with lived experience of education exclusion. This reflects the gender split in the data from both South Australia and other jurisdictions, which shows that boys are more likely to be excluded than girls.

Many children and young people described being subject to frequent informal exclusions, which commonly began before their first formal exclusion and which also continued after it. These ad-hoc exclusionary practices, which remove a child from the classroom but not from the school campus, make it difficult to identify the true extent of exclusions. This is made even more complicated by the inconsistent communication around exclusions that leaves many children and their families confused about the nature of their child's exclusion, including whether or why an exclusion has actually occurred.

This highlights a systemic failure to understand, support, and meet the diverse needs of all children and young people, particularly those who are the most vulnerable.
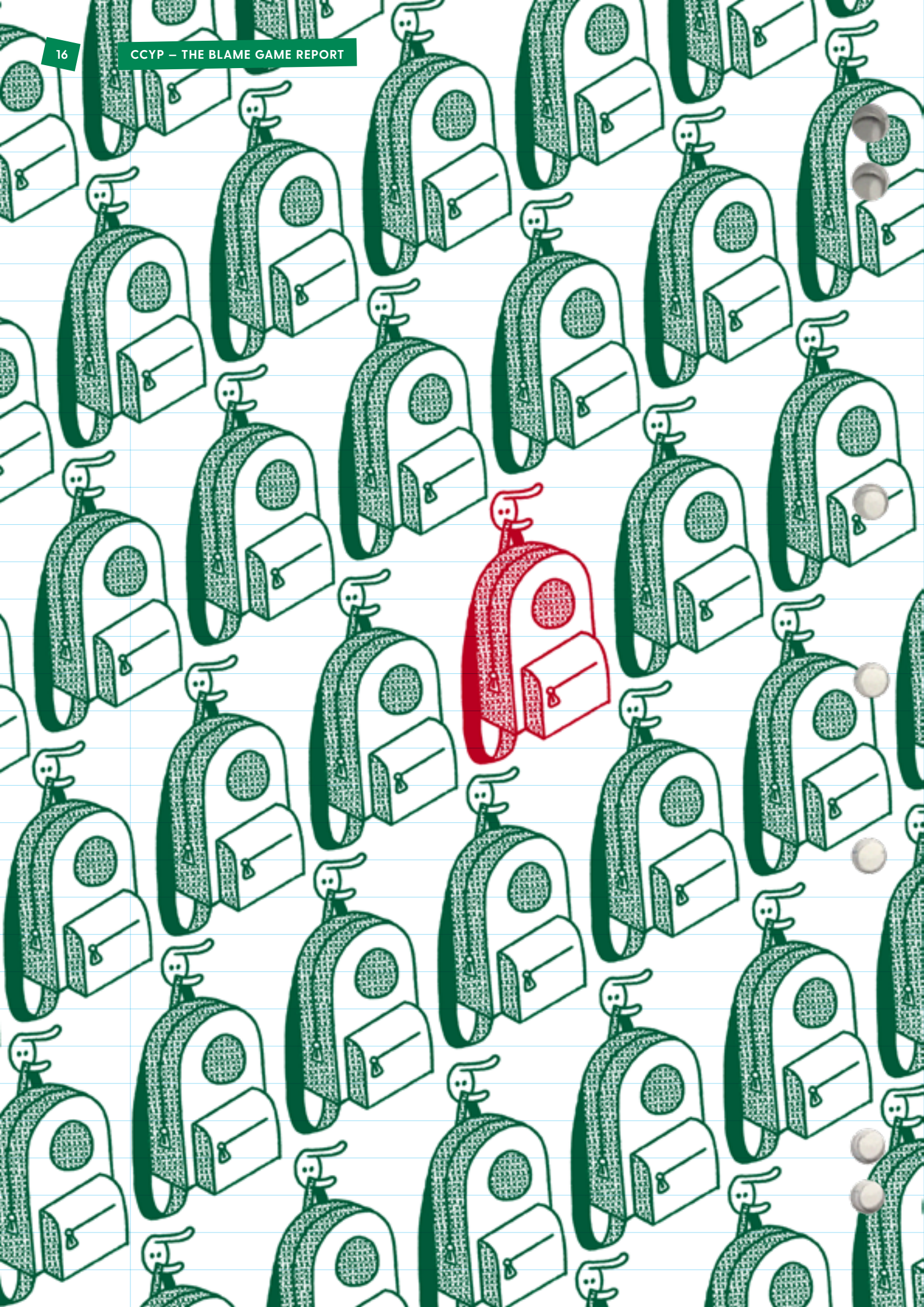
Causes of Exclusion as Identified by Children and Young People

Children and young people conceptualise exclusion from school in many different ways. Very few focus on exclusion as defined by the school system. Instead, they see education exclusion operating as a continuum of behaviours, practices, events and experiences which might, in some instances, culminate in a student's withdrawal or removal from their school.

They see schools, teachers, parents and peers, other governmental agencies and associated social issues as part of a complex web of factors that impacts on their lives, and on their capacity to remain connected to the mainstream education system.

The young people who participated in focus groups identified four main issues that led to the behaviours, experiences, and/or events that resulted in their exclusion from school:

1   Physical and mental health, disability and learning difficulties
2   Poor relationships with teachers and a lack of support
3   Financial insecurity
4   Family dynamics.

These are issues that young people often do not have the resources to resolve on their own, and which can have long-term and far-reaching consequences if left unaddressed.

Young people spoke about these issues as factors that affect their motivation and participation in their education.

66   *'I feel like school should offer more support for their students and allow them to feel more welcomed.'*

In some cases, they led to a formal suspension or exclusion from school. In other cases, the issue and its effects, led the child or young person to disconnect and withdraw from mainstream schooling. Whichever way it occurs, the effect is still the same – children and young people are being excluded from education before their educational goals have been met.

Physical and mental health, disability and learning difficulties

Young people consistently raised issues relating to their disability or learning difficulties, and how teachers did or did not respond to their needs. Many students explained that their 'poor' behaviour was usually due to a lack of understanding on their part, or because boredom had impacted their ability to engage with the lesson or lessons. They reported being labelled, judged, treated poorly and 'ignored' by teachers who thought they were 'dumb', 'lazy' or 'disinterested' rather than in need of support.

> *'Felt like the teachers always thought I was dumb, not [that I had] a disability.'*

> *'Just because I have autism shouldn't mean school should be a 'too hard' place. Teachers just tell me I'm difficult or lazy.'*

Others reported that medium-term or extended periods of absence due to illness or temporary disability would put them substantially behind, causing them to struggle in the classroom as other students moved on through new work, which then also became unfamiliar to them.

> *'I just couldn't concentrate on my work because I was dealing with so many other issues. People would just think I was lazy.'*

On the whole young people said they felt schools simply aren't prepared to deliver the kind of mental health support they need and that this often contributes to their feelings of alienation, self-doubt and disconnection.

> *'I was an A grade student and then started having mental health issues. All I was told was '[it] sucks to be younger, get yourself fixed, because year 11 and 12 are important.*

> *'You don't want to **** that up.' Like I could just control my mental health like that.'*

Poor relationships with teachers and a lack of support

Young people know that a positive support network at school is vital to their participation and level of overall engagement. While most young people reported positive relationships with one or more individual teachers, they also spoke about teachers who they felt made judgments about students out of context, and how this often led to mistaken assumptions and discrimination.

They described regularly being singled out in front of their peers. While some acknowledged this strategy may have been well-meaning and applied with the intention of trying to increase their focus, it largely caused deeper feelings of isolation, disconnection and humiliation in front of their peers.

> *'[Teachers] should not call [students] out in class. Maybe take them aside and deal with it outside of class. It's very confronting.'*

> *'Learning difficulties [are] crippling in terms of fitting in. You become undesirable with your peers, especially in group work. [There's] stigma from teachers as well as peers.'*

Financial insecurity

Young people consistently raised financial issues as either sometimes or frequently being the cause of their exclusion from school. Every young person who participated in focus group consultations reported difficulties paying for uniforms at some point in their education. Many explained that not wearing the right uniform was a common reason for their formal exclusion from a particular class or series of classes.

'Couldn't afford PE uniform ... by not having the right uniform I would be excluded and get into trouble'

Others mentioned the struggle to afford the cost of transport, food and other basic items necessary for school and life, and how this contributed to their exclusion from key opportunities to learn, be active, and socialise, including missing out on school sporting activities, camps or excursions.

Young people frequently reported that they face many obstacles and factors that make them feel as though they do not belong at school. This sense of not belonging impacts on their connection with the school and on their ability to develop friendships and their sense of self-worth.

Many young people spoke about feeling 'embarrassed' and 'ashamed' about not having enough money to participate in the full learning experience. When the cost of various school-based practices and initiatives requires 'extra money' that other students always seem to have access to, this can leave students feeling isolated and disadvantaged. Lacking these basic requirements which are considered essential to enabling students to do their best work, achieve results and participate in education, means that those who cannot afford them are much more likely to struggle with school work and their goal of achieving good results.

Family dynamics

Young people spoke about a range of factors at home that had a significant impact on their ability to participate in a standard school day, and which lead to feelings of fatigue, anxiety, emotional distress or concern about what they will do once the school day is over.

At home issues ranged from parental abuse or neglect to living in home environments characterised by family violence or drug use. Children and young people described an absence of family interest or care in their participation at school, as well as issues that included poor health and a sibling or parent with a disability that placed extra demands and responsibilities on them or other members of their

family. Many had to get themselves to and from school without parental support or involvement, often struggling to afford transport fares on their own.

> *'I had to learn how to take care of myself. I didn't get a chance to concentrate on school because I was struggling so much to cope with just looking after myself.'*

> *'My sister has Down Syndrome, so my mum paid more attention to my sister's schooling than mine. I have PTSD and I think my mum didn't realise how much that was affecting my schooling.'*

Not every young person wants to disclose trouble at home with their teacher or school. Reasons for not doing so are often due to high parental loyalty, exacerbated when environments outside the home do not make them feel safe or supported.

> *'Due to my relationships with my parents, it affected my ability to confide in my teachers. If I was more comfortable talking with my teachers I would have been able to identify and work on issues.'*

Rather than working with the child or young person to try and identify what are often complex and diverse challenges faced outside the classroom, schools often only focus on the symptoms being exhibited through behaviour in the classroom.

Once a student has been excluded it can prove extraordinarily difficult for that child or young person to break the cycle of exclusion and equally difficult for them to find a pathway back to their education. Instead, the problems perpetuate. This constitutes a systemic failure that has immediate and sustained impact on that child or young person's health and wellbeing. It can also affect the attitude they have towards themselves, and this in turn can affect their relationships with friends and family. Perhaps worst of all, it can seriously diminish their hopes and dreams for their own future.

> *'I was telling people but ... I was getting advice, but it wasn't told to me in the right way. It was more demands ... So I just responded, exploding.'*

Case Study

Gary was first excluded from school when he was 17 and in Year 11. He was living in short-term crisis accommodation and was struggling to remain engaged with his studies due to his insecure housing and family breakdown. He had also suffered traumatic experiences in his childhood, which had led to mental health issues and homelessness.

The incident that led to Gary's exclusion was the day he brought lighter fluid and a novelty miniature replica of a handgun to school. Gary didn't intend to use either of the items at school and didn't. Neither did he intend to harm anyone with them, but stated that he was carrying them as items of interest. He was excluded on the grounds that he had threatened the safety and wellbeing of other students and teachers at the school. The school's principal provided a letter of notification to his parents outlining the reasons for Gary's exclusion and offering him a re-entry interview in one week's time.

Gary wasn't offered an opportunity to query the accusation for his exclusion at the time or respond to the school principal's letter outlining the grounds for his exclusion. Neither was he able to request that the school consider alternative measures to exclusion before it was applied.

A youth worker who had been supporting Gary with his need for crisis accommodation, tried to advocate to the school on his behalf, reporting that there was no indication the school had considered any other options for Gary's behaviour management other than total exclusion.

Whilst Gary was excluded from school his Centrelink payments ceased, adding to the complexity of his situation. Due to his absence from classes his schooling suffered. The combination of having been excluded and having to live in crisis accommodation, meant Gary was unable to have any contact with his friends or peers.

Gary also felt ashamed at having to provide explanations to workers and others as to why he wasn't attending school. Gary's exclusion, and the school's unwillingness to engage in or identify alternative responses, left him feeling rejected. Without the daily structure of school he felt purposeless, and his mental health began to deteriorate.

The school gave Gary no support, either to understand the risks associated with his actions, or how these should or could be managed more appropriately. Given the magnitude of the school's response, he found this extremely confusing.

The youth worker supporting Gary felt the school had given no consideration to the additional impact exclusion would have on Gary and his circumstances at that time. Neither had any effort been made by the school to support Gary, engaging him in more appropriate approaches that responded directly to his behavior, with a view to creating positive change. This experience left Gary both reluctant to return to school, and critically aware that his long-term educational outcomes and options were now adversely affected.
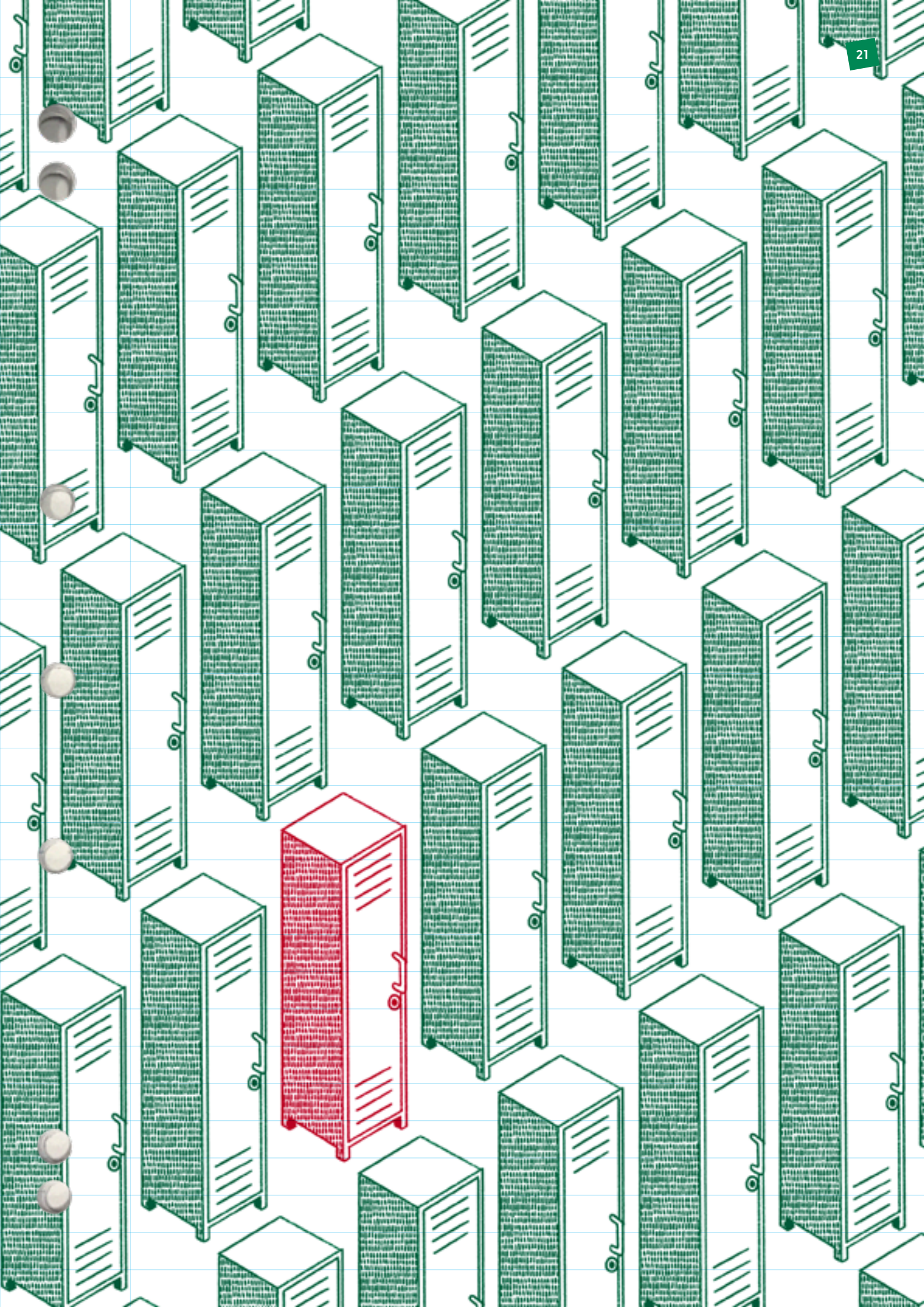
Impacts of Exclusion

Impact on how children see themselves

Children and young people report high levels of social withdrawal and disconnection during periods of exclusion. These symptoms are the result of the shame they feel, as well as the practical effects of not having daily contact with peers and friends.

The longer a child or young person spends on their own at home, the more they feel the impact of the exclusion.. For many children and young people, exclusion from school can amplify the underlying causes that led to it.

Children and young people who struggle to regulate their emotions or who cannot remain focused in the classroom, spoke about being labelled as 'bad' and 'hopeless'. Many quickly internalise this messaging from an early age and start to believe they are 'bad' or 'naughty', or 'beyond help'. One mother reported that her six-year-old child had told her he was 'a bad person, I can't be good... I am the naughty kid.' Children with experience of family violence and trauma had similar responses. They spoke about the impact their experience of exclusion from school had on who they are now.

Many older children and teenagers said they had developed anxiety and depression as a result of their exclusion from school. They reflected on the impact of the humiliation, the isolation, and of not being heard, or of being misunderstood. Many described the constant fear they have of getting into trouble for anything they do, along with an overriding distrust in systems, and a lack of confidence to ask for help or maintain relationships.

" *'If a student is suspended they should have to attend school still but they should not be put in a room with large windows where others can see them. It's horrifying and really impacts on your mental health. This has happened to me and it was a bad experience I'll never forget. There is no respect for privacy.'*

Some young people said that they worried about the impact school exclusion would have on their educational and social disengagement, and how this would damage their future prospects, particularly in relation to finding places in other schools, or gaining employment.

" *'It made me question my future. I thought I was going nowhere.'*

" *'Being expelled from school is very bad and can cause you some problems in the future. The problems you can face when expelled from school are: 1. Not able to find a job in the future [and] 2. Not being able to attend other schools, etc.'*

Parents of younger children expressed similar concerns – that the stigma of exclusion would follow their child throughout their schooling and beyond. Many parents said they felt that when their child's exclusion had started they became an easy target for blame when future incidents occurred.

Young people can experience feelings of injustice, despair and helplessness as a result of school exclusion. This compounds its negative effects and magnifies the challenges children and young people are already grappling with. It leaves them feeling that life is beyond their control, or that their lives are out of control in comparison to others.

Often the factors that constrain and impact on young people's choices and behaviours following exclusion, are the very same, or closely related to, the factors that contributed to the reasons for their exclusion originally.

Case Study

Tom and Jake are brothers, aged 9 and 6. They live in a foster care arrangement with their carer, and their carer's daughter and granddaughter. They visit their maternal grandparents for one weekend each fortnight and have individual monthly visits with their birth mum.

Tom and Jake grew up in a household with domestic violence and parental drug use. This resulted in their neglect and subsequent removal. As a result of these early childhood experiences, Tom has been diagnosed with Global Developmental Delay and learning disabilities. He experiences trauma-based behaviours and has difficulty with his communication. His younger brother, Jake, can at times, struggle to regulate his emotions.

Earlier this year, social workers from the Department for Child Protection told Tom he wouldn't be able to move home to live with his mum. The school were advised, along with the need for the two brothers to have extra supervision. Tom struggled in the aftermath of this situation and became violent with another child at school. Jake lashed out at the school's counsellor, hitting and biting in frustration. Both children were immediately suspended and their foster carer was contacted and instructed to immediately arrange for their collection and departure from the school.

There was no discussion or negotiation about the exclusion decision, or when they would be able to re-enter. The carer felt the two children had been blamed for what was a foreseeable outcome to their trauma and distress. They were given no opportunity to express their views, or to describe their situations or needs throughout the process. Neither were either of the children

provided with any schoolwork to complete during their exclusion. Jake did receive some support around his emotional regulation.

The first re-entry meeting for Tom and Jake went poorly. The carer felt the attitude expressed by the school was punitive, with no acknowledgement of the children's needs, or of their emotional distress in relation to their situation.

The second re-entry meeting, which was managed by the school's principal, went significantly better. However, after his initial exclusion, Tom went on to experience a cluster of exclusions within the following fortnight. He was also aggressive with the carer's children at home. Jake was placed on part-time school attendance.

Jake missed his brother when he wasn't at school and Tom felt blame for this. He internalised these messages, questioning who he was and saying, 'I am bad ... I am a violent person, I am like my Dad.' The carer felt the school should have been more focused on listening to the children and looking out for the non-verbal cues that would have been there, and which should have flagged the need for early intervention. This would have supported the children and perhaps helped prevent the challenging behavior that subsequently emerged.

Fortunately, their exclusion experiences haven't affected the way Tom and Jake feel about school, which they both continue to enjoy. Jake has been allocated a full-time Student Support Officer Assistant for the rest of the year and this is helping him better manage being in the classroom. Tom is doing much better overall.
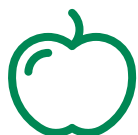
Impact on how children and young people view learning

'I didn't know that I was supposed to ask for help. Adults at the school were not looking to help me either. I felt like teachers should have been able to notice that something was wrong for me. I don't think anyone was looking for the signs or to help me.'

In almost all instances, children and young people reported that exclusion directly impacted their motivation to learn. They spoke about how exclusion not only impacted on their capacity to learn in the classroom, but also on their broader engagement with school and participation in the wider community. It also had impacts on their ability to stay focused in class and on how they viewed school and their teachers overall.

❝ *'I feel like many young people are disengaged and overlooked. It happens more often than people think. But some kids don't want to speak up or seek other options to gain an education, because it has been drilled into our brains that we need to finish school and we need to do it a certain way.'*

Children and young people described many different experiences of exclusion. There was missing out on a 'normal' recess and lunch time spent with friends, being unable to attend school excursions or camps, or go to 'special' or 'fun' school-based activities and events such as sports days or swimming carnivals. For these children and young people, exclusion meant missing opportunities to be active, to connect with peers, to 'join in' and to engage with the school community in ways that would have enabled them to learn new things and acquire practical skills that come with being 'in the real world'. Many children and young people explained that at the time of their exclusion, they were already struggling to keep pace with their peers academically. Most reported that they fell further behind as a result of exclusion, losing ground that they never managed to regain upon their return to school.

❝ *'I used to act out when I couldn't do the work, which then annoyed other people further. My brain would shut down and I couldn't do work and people would just think I was lazy.'*

Students who did not have safe and suitable environments in which to study outside of school, described the impact exclusion had on their academic performance as profound. Many reported that despite seeking help both within and outside of the school environment, in most cases no support was ever received.

*'No agencies ever helped,
even beyond school. We went
to the police to get them to
help us with our parents...
they wouldn't.'*

*'When suspended or excluded
you choose not to do any work
that might have been set because
you feel like you are being
unfairly punished.'*

Being excluded often began or escalated a process of disengagement from a child or young person's education altogether. Some young people explained that their inability to understand and keep up with their schoolwork was itself a cause for repeated exclusions.

66 *'When you ask a teacher a question but you don't fully understand, you say you understand so you don't feel stupid. You then ask for help again, but they get angry because you supposedly 'weren't listening.'*

Where an exclusion involved not attending school for multiple weeks at a time, most students were either immediately or eventually enrolled in another school or centre, through which they then received additional education support services. Others with shorter exclusion times reported they had had little or no contact from the school during the exclusion period, and were given no homework, or inadequate amounts of it, to ensure they would not fall behind their peers.

Those families that did receive homework for their excluded child said they had to ask for it specifically. Some children and young people said the homework seemed different to what they would normally do at school, and felt it was some kind of punishment on top of being excluded.

Whilst a number of children already had Negotiated Education Plans (One Plan or Individual Learning Plan) very few families could point to evidence of the implementation of student development plans following their child's exclusion. Some observed that pre-existing education and learning plans were not being used, and that these were only reviewed after an exclusion event had occurred. Others noted that post-exclusion, their child's school would consistently delay or defer follow-up activities for which they were responsible.

Young people described the boredom associated with being sent home or being restricted to one area of the school without support, and without anything to do other than 'look at walls'. Many recognised that the impact of this boredom would then 'get you into trouble', increase depression and encourage risk-taking behaviour. They said they were 'only learning about punishment' rather than about subject knowledge.

66 *'They take you out of school and wonder why you're not learning.'*

Many young people expressed a belief that 'no one helps you catch up'. Although some acknowledged that their 'mates might help'. This exacerbated negative feelings towards the school and their teachers, with many describing their inability to connect with teachers when 'you don't trust they are on your side'.

Case Study

Toby is seven and was first excluded from school when he was four years old. He has been excluded at least eight times since. Toby changed schools in the last year and has recently been excluded on a regular basis – 'around once every three to six weeks'.

Toby has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and work is currently being done to identify whether he has Autism Spectrum Disorder. Toby struggles to regulate his emotions, which at times result in outbreaks that can amplify to threats and violence.

Toby's Mum has become familiar with the exclusion process at the school. There will be a meeting generally with the Principal and his Teacher, where they will let her know how long Toby is to be excluded for. Later she'll receive a call telling her when his re-entry meeting has been scheduled for. Every time this process is repeated, there's less discussion about what has happened, and how Toby might be supported.

Whenever Toby is excluded, the school provides him with a five page worksheet which he finishes quickly, leaving the rest of his time unoccupied. Toby often joins his mum on her volunteering work, where he gets involved in activities and spends time in imaginative play. The staff where his mum volunteers, say they've never seen Toby behave as he's reported to behave at school.

Toby's Mum would love to get regular work, however, the frequency of Toby's exclusions means she can't. This also means she's dependent on support from Centrelink. Toby's exclusions also place stress on his mother's relationship with his sister, who feels he gets special treatment over her when he gets to stay at home.

Toby doesn't always mind being sent home from school. He struggles with writing and sitting still. While he misses classes like cooking and gardening, Toby doesn't quite fit in with the other children, and home feels safe for him in a way that school doesn't. By now, Toby has been excluded so often that the process has become rote for him. However, Toby does know that he is falling behind the other children in his learning, and this upsets him.

Toby's Mum says being sent home has become an incentive for Toby to be naughty and she worries about this. She feels Toby needs an environment with more hands-on learning. One that will support his positive behavioural development through a rewards-based approach. She says his school is trying to understand what will work best in the classroom situation, but that he still isn't getting the support he needs.

Impact on how children and families see school

Universally, children, young people and their families were confused about how decisions to exclude a student were made. They were frustrated by inadequate explanations, a lack of negotiation, and a perceived lack of fairness around exclusion decisions. When young people were asked whether they had the reason for their exclusion explained to them, responses varied considerably, with many reporting that 'you sometimes know why, but not all the time'.

Many young people felt that their voices were sidelined during the decision to exclude them, and that schools did not listen to 'both sides of the story'. Not having their experience reflected in the decision-making process left them with strong feelings of injustice.

❝ *'When I got suspended the other person should of too.'*

Sometimes parents sought further conversations with the school as to whether their child's exclusion was the most appropriate response to the behaviour in question. They requested that their child also have an opportunity to be represented in the process. They also saw themselves as able to provide further context for their child's behaviour.

In most cases, schools are reported to have advised that suspension/exclusion was non-negotiable and/or a matter of policy. In other cases, the proposed period of suspension was reduced, but not waived. Others also talked about their suspension being extended 'randomly'.

There was notable inconsistency in how and when children, young people and their families were notified about an exclusion. Sometimes this came verbally and sometimes in writing. Sometimes it came on the day of the exclusion and sometimes it came the day following enforcement, after the child arrived back home and had to explain to their parent why they had been sent home.

In the case of informal exclusions, advice would often arrive through a phone call from the teacher simply requesting a parent collect their child from school immediately. Alternatively, a parent may find out about their child's informal exclusion when picking them up at the end of the school day.

Very few of the cases of exclusion CCYP reviewed reflected the type of collaborative negotiation and discussion outlined in Department for Education policies. A few families reported high levels of engagement and support from support staff at the school. However, many children and families felt a loss of faith with the school, and a strong sense of rejection and isolation as they went through the exclusion process.

When reflecting on the 're-entry' meetings that occurred at the end of an exclusion, children and young people and their families almost exclusively reported being given pre-prepared agreements to sign by the school, rather than be involved in negotiating them. Children and young people didn't always understand these agreements, and parents felt unable to refuse them.

❝ *'Big meetings with people who don't even really do anything to help, just sit and do meetings.'*

While some of the families discussed additional support that would be provided to assist with their child's re-entry to school, none felt confident that the issues that led to the earlier exclusion had been sufficiently addressed. Most families felt that their children were returning to the same situation that had led to their exclusion in the first place, without any restoration or redress.

As a result of the lack of negotiation and due process, many children and young people felt anxious about their re-entry to their school. They also worried about responses they would receive from their friendship groups, due either to the reasons for their exclusion, or as a result of the associated social stigma of having been excluded. Many children and young people struggled with what they saw as the school's unfair treatment of them compared to other students, and this affected their ongoing relationship with the school.

As a result of previous bullying or adverse experiences, some children and young people simply felt school was an unsafe place for them to be, with a handful who actively avoided returning. Others did not want to be somewhere they felt they were no longer wanted. Some preferred to stay at home because they felt safer there, while those without a safe and supportive home environment felt they were left to work things out on their own.

Case Study

Janie lives with her mum and two siblings. She has Autism as well as difficulties with sensory and auditory processing, along with high levels of anxiety. Janie was six years old when she first told her mum that the school she was at couldn't meet her needs. She suggested that she go to school elsewhere. The next time this happened, Janie was nine.

One school recommended she only study part-time, which Janie's Mum says is a common experience for children with Autism. Janie's Mum was asked to keep Janie at home at other times too, like during NAPLAN testing, or on class excursion days.

When Janie was 12, her school formally excluded her for two days for hitting another child in her friendship group. Whilst the other child said he had provoked Janie, and asked her not to be excluded, the school said it was policy and that she would have to be suspended.

Janie told her mum about her exclusion as soon as she got home. The school notified her mum over the phone the following day. No support staff were included in the discussion about Janie's exclusion, and no alternatives to exclusion were canvassed. Nor was any educational or other support provided to Janie or her family while she was excluded from school.

Janie's Mum had to take leave to stay at home and care for Janie during her exclusion. Previously, Janie's Mum has had to forego income in order to stay at home with Janie on school days. She says that Janie's exclusion, and other requests to keep her home from school, place stress on her and the family, and make her worry she may not be able to continue to work.

After Janie's exclusion, the school's wellbeing team had more regular meetings with the family. Janie's Mum feels this process wasn't helpful, as it didn't focus on identifying ideas for how the school might help Janie in the future. Janie's exclusion wasn't discussed, and Janie's Mum feels that the many suggestions she made to help Janie to remain calm at school were ignored. Shortly after Janie's exclusion, her mum was told she needed to find somewhere else for Janie to go to school.

Janie and her mum are working on strategies that will help Janie to regulate her behaviour, but it still feels unfair to them that Janie was excluded. They believe she was blamed for something that she didn't mean to do, and that the school failed to help Janie learn from the experience, and cope with school better in the future.

Janie was embarrassed by her exclusion and found going back to school hard. She felt depressed and this led to self-harming. Whilst Janie is now at a specialist school, which provides her with a consistency and routine she finds helpful, Janie and her Mum know that her exclusion experience has put her behind with her education.

Impact on relationships and home life

Children and young people emphasised that the impacts of their exclusion extended far beyond their individual lives and wellbeing. They described how exclusions added emotional, social and financial pressures to their families and their home lives.

Young people also spoke about 'not seeing mates' and 'losing friends' as a result of being excluded from 'the people you want to be with' – whether by moving classrooms, being restricted to certain play areas during recess and lunch, or having different break times entirely.

> '[Being] suspended is an act of punishment in which students are forced to sit out of school for a period of time, and to feel embarrassed upon their return, and feel excluded from their friends during that period of time'

There was a sense that exclusion further isolated those who were already struggling to make friends, or were being bullied prior to their exclusion.

> 'I have autism and I get really stressed at school. How will sending me away and taking me from the few friends I have make me calm and be able to do flexible thinking and expected behaviour? I hate my principal and my teacher because they hate me. If they liked me it would be easier for me to like them. But even though I hate them I don't want to be taken away from my friends. I'll never be able to make new friends.'

Others focused on the loneliness and disconnection they felt from missing out on the social and extracurricular aspects of school life. In many cases, being banned from the school grounds entirely, even outside of school hours, meant being excluded from key opportunities to connect with friends and peers at school sports and community events.

Young people talked about how their exclusion also led the parents of their friends to think of them as a 'bad influence'. This not only changed how they related to their friends, but also had a negative impact on how they saw themselves and their future.

Some young people described how school was safe for them in a way that their home environments were not. Exclusion left these children and young people particularly vulnerable. Others talked about home being safe in ways that school wasn't. Many of those with safe home environments felt that extra time at home was more of a reward than a punishment.

Exclusion would also result in resentment and conflict between siblings when those of school age also wanted to stay home but were required to attend school. Even for those children and young people who preferred to be out of school, boredom was common in the absence of adequate educational engagement.

66 *'Could get excluded for stuff you didn't even do. Sent home. Time out. Humiliation. Go home and do nothing. Thinking it's a reward. Not doing your work.'*

While some young people described 'not really having a family' or that their parents 'didn't care', others focused on how their school exclusion impacted trust between them and their families. It was common for young people to say that their families were angry, disappointed or 'let down' by events and processes that children and young people did not always fully understand. Many children and young people reported that their family 'treated them differently' after they were excluded and that often their school exclusion increased tensions and arguments between parents, carers and siblings.

66 *'They seem alright at first. It seems like a fair punishment, but you don't realise that the parent may be unhappy and that the tests that can't be done later may be missed, resulting in that child failing.'*

Children and young people often reflected on how their parents did not know how to help. Parents themselves reported feeling ill-informed and ill-equipped to respond to their child's concerns about their sense of justice in relation to their treatment. They also reported confusion with school decisions and processes. Even where parents understood that their child may have done something wrong, they were concerned that overly punitive responses were applied and inadequately explained and ultimately proved counterproductive.

Case Study

Scotty is six and lives with his parents. He has a strong and supportive family network, including grandparents who live nearby and who have taken care of Scotty after school ever since he started. Scotty's parents are both well-educated and work in professional roles.

In reception, Scotty was diagnosed with level 2 Autism Spectrum Disorder. A Negotiated Education Plan was developed and he was provided with six hours a week of School Support Officer (SSO) assistance. He also participates in programs that support the development of his social and literacy skills. No educational psychological assessment was done to identify whether Scotty's ASD might be affecting his learning. In year 1, Scotty's SSO support was reduced to 45 minutes a week.

Despite his support, the school started excluding Scotty from a range of activities when he was in Reception. He would be sent to the office for parts of the day, sometimes for periods of up to five hours, or he would be given restricted play that prevented him from going to the oval at recess or lunch. Scotty's family would be asked to pick him up from school early so often that they have lost count. At times, they believe that the decisions to exclude Scotty from school activities were made by teachers who were unaware of his diagnosis.

Scotty received his first formal exclusion in the second half of Reception. It came after he and another student got physical in the schoolyard. Scotty was the only one of the two involved to be suspended. During Scotty's three day exclusion, he received no school work.

After the exclusion, he was required to sign an agreement in front of a group of staff. Scotty's Mum thinks Scotty didn't really understand what the document was, or its purpose.

Scotty's parents said they were confused about the processes being used for decisions to exclude Scotty, and how this was discussed with him. They feel unclear as to the role they might play, and would like the school to communicate better and seek more collaborative solutions. They're at a loss to know what to do to help Scotty remain within the school in the future.

The entire family has been affected by Scotty's ongoing informal and formal school exclusions. His mum has had to halve her hours at work to accommodate school requests to pick Scotty up early. This has had a financial toll on the family, but the emotional one is even more significant.

The experience has damaged Scotty's self-confidence, his ability to form friendships, and the way he believes he is seen within the school community. He feels anxious about attending, never knowing if he will be there all day, or be sent home early. This daily stress has led to Scotty daytime wetting.

Scotty's Mum says that he understands the need for consequences, but she feels heartbroken to hear her young child tell her, 'I am a bad person, I can't be good ... I am the naughty kid'.

Impact on parent's employment and income

Many parents thought that the practice of exclusion and its emotional effects on their child exacerbated existing behavioural challenges. This heightened behaviour would then be brought into the home environment for parents and siblings to deal with.

Parents reported being concerned about their child's learning future and success, but also about their own ability to maintain commitments if the school were to call in the future, and require them to remove their child from the campus. One parent described being 'on call' for the school to contact her about yet another exclusion of her child.

For many families, exclusions had a direct economic impact, reducing current and future work opportunities and income-earning potential for parents. This impact is particularly significant given a number of children and young people had identified financial insecurity as an underlying cause of their exclusion in the first place.

Every young person who participated in focus group consultations reported difficulties paying for uniforms, transport, food and other basic items necessary for school life. Their poverty contributed to their exclusion from key opportunities to learn, be active and socialise, or attend school sports, camps or excursions.

Many families reported having to give up work due to the need to pick their child up from school at short notice, and then remain at home during the day with them during their period of exclusion. Others indicated being unable to work as a result of their child's regular exclusion from school.

In every family, female carers were disproportionately impacted by their child's school exclusion, particularly in the short-term. They spoke about having to give up part-time work and study, or losing income as a result of taking unpaid leave, or of the need to reduce work hours from full-time to part-time to accommodate ongoing school exclusions.

Case Study

Sophie is 16 and lives with her foster parents and two biological siblings. Sophie has lived with her foster parents since being taken into care at age 5. She has been diagnosed with Attachment Disorder, Global Developmental Delay and an intellectual disability. Sophie finds it difficult to understand social cues and boundaries.

Despite being supported through a counsellor, tutor and in-home support staff, Sophie began falling behind academically in early primary school. In Year 7 these supports ceased on the basis that Sophie's disability was insufficiently severe, although she continues to receive some support through the Department for Child Protection.

Sophie's parents enrolled her in a local private high school that her friends were also attending. Her transition did not go well. Sophie struggled to adjust to the need to operate more independently. She could not keep up with her school work and became unfocussed and often made excuses to leave the classroom.

In Year 8, Sophie was the victim of severe bullying, as students across the school subjected her to physical and verbal harassment. The school provided counselling support, however the bullying became unrelenting and Sophie began to respond physically to other students. Following unsuccessful attempts by Sophie to develop a relationship with a boy, the school decided to expel her.

Sophie and her foster mum were at a loss to know where to go, and the school didn't provide them with any alternative options. Sophie felt purposeless and excluded when her siblings went to school each day. After a period in an alternative education program for children in care, Sophie began adopting rebellious and risk-taking behaviours. Sophie then spent another extended period at home.

Bored and spending every day at home with her foster mum, Sophie's frustrations manifested in poor and destructive behaviours. Her siblings resented having to go to school whilst Sophie stayed at home. Her foster mum had to give up work placing a heavy financial and emotional strain was placed on the family.

The following year, Sophie enrolled in a local school's Flexible Learning Options program, which supported her through provision of a flexible learning environment and a case manager who helped her identify and address barriers to learning.

Her teachers took the time to help Sophie adapt to her new classroom, while also suggesting ways that the classroom could adapt to her needs as well.

Sophie has made the best progress she can in the context of the limited courses currently available to her due to her young age. Her foster mother continues to invest significant time finding and transporting Sophie to external activities to keep her engaged in learning. Sophie is volunteering and continuing to work towards her South Australian Certificate of Education. She is looking forward to more courses becoming available to her in the future.
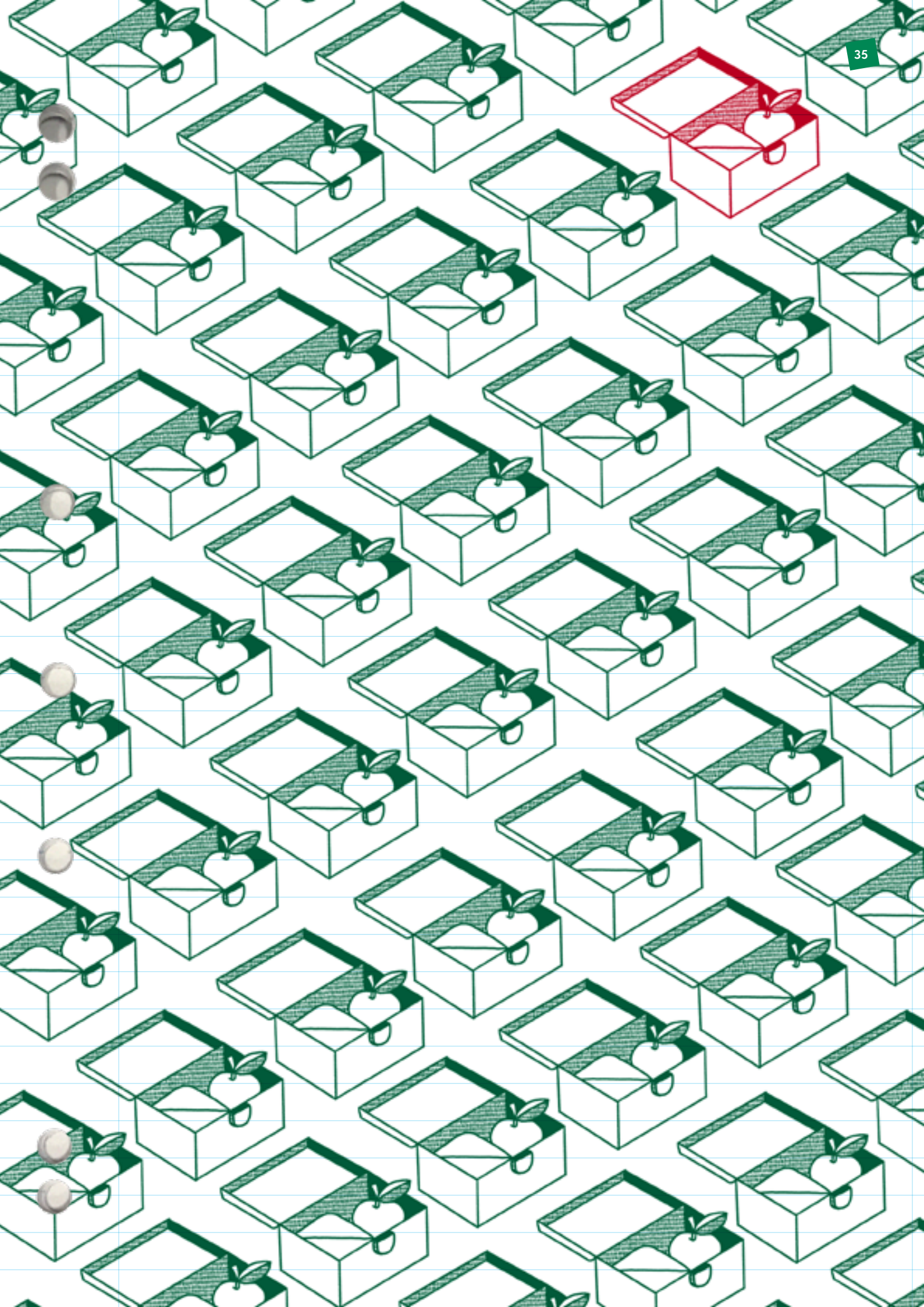
Ideas to Reduce Exclusions

Young people and their families who had experience of school exclusion reported that, during the exclusion process, the ideas they had to minimise the use of exclusions and to improve how schools respond to difficult behaviours, were not considered. Young people have a number of ideas for change that speak to the culture of schools rather than behaviour management policies.

Their ideas include the following:

1   **Create** greater awareness and understanding among teachers and other school staff about the issues children and young people face

2   **Improve** support for learning and wellbeing that is tailored to individual needs

3   **Offer** relevant and flexible education options that reflect the lives and needs of young people, which provide equal access to academic and vocational training opportunities

4   **Offer** more inclusive and comfortable learning environments

5   **Provide** financial support to help the families of disadvantaged children and young people cover the costs of school expenses.

At the core of the proposed solutions was a key message that was consistently raised – if exclusionary approaches to behaviour management have already been tried and have failed, simply repeating them is unlikely to achieve a different outcome.

'Instead of depriving a student you should be helping them so they don't make the same mistake, or see why what they did was wrong.'

Young people want to be part of solutions that address school exclusions. Often, they felt their exclusion was based on a school's misunderstanding of actual events, because they had no opportunity to provide important information or the context in which an incident occurred. They want their voices and experiences to be heard, valued and respected. They would like schools to ask young people what happened and why it might have happened, and to seriously consider their responses through a meaningful negotiation process.

There was a real sense that behaviour management would be fairer if there was better listening, respect and communication between students and teachers. Young people also said that 'if students were better supported to regulate their emotions', if 'the rules were enforced consistently', and if 'everyone was treated equally' there would be less exclusions. Young people emphasised the importance of hearing 'both sides of the story' and gathering 'proper evidence' before a decision is made to exclude any student. This was considered central to building trust between students and schools, and to ensuring exclusions are only ever used as a last possible resort.

❝ *'Expulsions, suspensions and exclusions should be discussed as a collective, and not one person should make the choice, because some teachers could have different views.'*

❝ *'There has been lots of students that I know have been suspended or excluded or have had unfair punishments. I don't understand why sometimes the most simple or harmless things will land you an office time out or several meetings at the office, when these things could have easily been sorted out with a classroom teacher, or [with] just a warning.'*

Many children and young people spoke about wanting a voice in the exclusion process. Parents and carers also reported that a genuine dialogue with their child, prior to their exclusion, would have helped build understanding between both the child, the child's family, and the school. Some felt this might help avoid what they saw as an over-willingness for children to be branded 'bad' or 'naughty' and a lack of effort spent to understand a child and the factors that may have influenced or contributed to their behaviour.

Those who reported positive engagement with their school wanted the opportunity for their child to have a genuine dialogue with school staff to be 'the norm'. Whether the positive support came through support staff, such as an Aboriginal support worker, a particular teacher or principal who made proactive efforts to engage with a child or family, they emphasised the importance of the child having an opportunity to put their position forward before the school made any decisions to exclude.

❝ *'My Mum moved me to a better school that doesn't do suspensions outside school. The new school listens. I get more help with my learning... My old school and teachers and head hated me and didn't understand me.'*

Understand the challenges in children and young people's lives

Young people are critically aware of the impact that good teachers have on their lives and on their educational success. Good teachers, in their experience, are the ones who genuinely care about their wellbeing. They take the time to understand the context and issues that an individual student is facing. Despite common negative experiences, young people said they enjoyed spending time with teachers who were 'open minded', who 'would listen if you were stressed', or who 'recognized you just needed someone'.

Young people told us they're more likely to contribute and work more effectively when teachers show empathy and compassion toward them. This creates an environment where students feel safe and don't need to worry about being judged for saying or doing the 'wrong' thing.

Young people want staff within schools, particularly teachers, to receive training that makes them more aware of the challenges young people might be facing. They discussed the need for better mental health awareness, but also want teachers and counsellors 'who aren't already part of the teaching staff' to be able to identify students who may be struggling with other issues, such as troubles at home, financial strain, or challenging relationships with peers or friends.

'People need to deal with students better instead of just suspending them. For example getting suspended for wearing the wrong uniform.'

Improve support for learning and wellbeing

Children and young people recognised that a school exclusion often indicated a need for more support. Some emphasised that they weren't always comfortable seeking help from adults. These young people suggested peer-based models of support as a potential solution. They recommended the 'buddy' system where children were paired with someone in the school that they could go to when they needed support for learning, or when they were on the cusp of emotions they needed help managing.

> *'Help 'bad' students instead of just giving up on them and sending them straight out. I have witnessed 'bad' students struggling and see them about to get into trouble, but then I assist the student and they actually end up listening to me, and I am able to get the student interested. This may be due to me being a student and understanding a student's interests more. Maybe it should be recommended that the struggling students get a peer to help them that is not struggling.'*

The young people we spoke with said the issues they face are often confusing, and that it can be hard for a young person to understand what's happening when they're going through them. This creates a barrier to finding help. They want teachers to be trained to pick up on key behaviours and characteristics that might signify problems emerging. That way they can establish support networks around students who need help. Stronger relationships with support agencies outside of school was also raised. These ideally would build in wrap around assistance to support young people to remain engaged with their education over the long term.

Ensuring that leaders who were making exclusion decisions were fully-informed of the child or young person's circumstances and history was also raised. A holistic understanding of the context of behaviour and its intention was considered essential to any effort to reduce the number of exclusions.

Offer more relevant and flexible education options

Young people want the education they receive to be more relevant to the lives they're living. For many, this included a need for more life skills to be taught in mainstream schools. These students struggle to feel motivated by what they are learning. To them, what they're learning seems unrelated to the 'real world'. They stressed that they saw learning applicable life skills as being the key to their success outside school and to their capacity to pursue vocational, rather than academic, careers.

There was a strong belief from participants in focus groups that the education system focuses exclusively on students who do well academically, and doesn't cater to the interests and abilities of anyone else.

> *'From my experience the education system puts more focus on the kids who are gifted and punishes the kids who are struggling. I was constantly given grief about my organizational ability to hand things in on time, but also had next to no support. I feel like if I did have the support ... I'd be a lot better with these things as an adult.'*

Young people discussed their perception that Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs operating in South Australia were only made 'available if you are struggling so bad you are close to failing.' These young people want VET programs to be available to students as mainstream options. They also suggested extending the Personal Learning Plan throughout the senior years of high school, adapting it to incorporate topics like financial readiness and life skills.

Many young people spoke about how the common 'one-size-fits-all' approach to teaching and behaviour management does not work. They want a more personalised approach to schooling; one in which educators take the time to listen and work with students one-on-one to create goals that align with a young person's preferences, individual strengths, and hopes for their future, thereby fulfilling their individual learning needs.

They suggested regular, individual check-ins regarding progress against goals, smaller class sizes, and flexible teaching styles. They also recommended more opportunities for 'hands on' work and greater freedom, far more choice and control given to students in relation to their subject choices, and greater willingness to cater to different learning styles. They believed this would not only motivate students, but would also build respect and common understandings of success between students and their teachers.

> *'They need to bend the rules so all kids have a chance to be included and be successful.'*

The most optimistic stories told were about a very small number of children and young people who were accessing Flexible Learning Options (FLO). These multi-disciplinary environments, which incorporate case management support focus on the context and learning needs of each child were working. Many young people who had struggled to fit into a mainstream school described positive learning outcomes through FLO programs.

Case Study

Antony is 16 and lives in Adelaide with his parents and older brother. Before his stepfather joined the family, Antony lived with his grandparents while his Mother got herself back on her feet following a violent marriage to Antony's Father. As a result of his childhood trauma, Antony sometimes struggles to regulate his temper. He also has a sleep disorder that often leaves him tired and overwhelmed during the day.

When Antony was in year three, he was bullied by other children in his school. In his frustration, he would fight back and then be penalised by being placed in a 'closet-like' room for the entire day 'to think about what he'd done wrong'. It didn't take long for Antony to start hating school.

In year seven, Antony's Grandfather died. He'd been Antony's main male role-model and Antony was devastated by the loss. When he went back to school, he was sent to see the school counsellor, but Antony recalled that not one of his teachers checked in to see how he was going.

Antony often struggled to concentrate in class because he was always so tired. One teacher would regularly send him out of class because of this, and this made Antony feel as though he'd been written off as a trouble-maker. When he was allowed to return to class he had missed too much to be able to follow the teacher's instruction, and received no help to catch up. By the time Antony got home from school, he was tired and angry. His mum felt powerless as she watched her son lose confidence and start turning away from schooling.

During the same year, Antony was suspended for a week, after getting into a fight with another boy over his disrespectful treatment of girls in their class. His mum had multiple meetings with the school leaders to discuss Antony's wellbeing and to seek support. However, none was forthcoming and the conflict and suspensions continued.

The next year, Antony's Mum enrolled him in a different school. His sleeping disruptions escalated and by the middle of the year he was struggling to get to school due to insomnia and depression. Antony's school didn't believe his absences were health-related and suggested he enrol in a different school.

Antony's Mum enrolled him in the local public school, and he looked forward to resuming his education. Unfortunately, because of previous disruptions, he found it difficult to keep up with his classmates. The school suggested Antony enrol in the local Flexible Learning Options program, where he could be supported by a case manager who could look at the broader issues surrounding his learning.

Things didn't go smoothly for Antony at the outset, with another suspension due to a fight. Antony was way behind with his assignments and whilst he received some support from his teachers, he was again left feeling frustrated that this wasn't enough.

Antony had started to feel convinced that the school didn't want him to succeed. However, weekly support from his case manager assisted him to re-engage. His case manager enrolled Antony in a construction course, which Antony loved straight away. It shifted his mindset and gave him a sense of purpose. Antony has decided to move into a trade as soon as he can.

Antony and his mum still have difficulties with the mainstream school environment, which they say has failed to listen to Antony, labelling him as an unmotivated student with behavioural issues. Antony wants schools to learn to deal with things better when students find themselves in trouble, and to make an effort to understand what's really going on for children who might be struggling.

'Some schools exclude 'cause they don't know how to handle kids learning disabilities or that their behavioural issues are from a specific condition or diagnosis - and they don't have the funds or staff to make adjustments for that kid to learn how that kid needs to learn, which might be different from the mainstream. So I think some schools discriminate and put the kid in a 'too hard basket' when in fact they need to just think outside the mainstream box and find other ways that kid can learn.'

Offer more inclusive and comfortable learning environments

Children, young people and their families, also had ideas to make classroom environments more suitable for students' communication and sensory needs. For some, the need to stay still for sustained periods, without breaks in which they could get active and blow off steam, simply didn't work. Others described how their different learning styles – particularly a need to engage 'through doing' – was incompatible with the listen-and-learn approach taken by the teachers and school.

They thought students should be empowered to move to a different environment when the classroom was becoming overwhelming, without being penalised. Other suggestions children and young people made for making safe, comfortable and inclusive learning environments included 'break hives', providing spaces where children can go for brief periods of respite when they need it, and introducing a positive rewards-based system for work completion and attendance. They also recommended engaging more Student Support Officer and/or Disability Support Workers.

Case Study

Caleb is nine years of age and lives with his parents and two younger sisters. He loves going fishing with his uncles and enjoys a large kinship network around the town where he lives in remote South Australia.

Caleb's Dad is currently working full-time. His mum cares for the children full-time and is active in local parenting groups and at the local community centre.

Caleb says the best thing about school is being able to order a pie for lunch. The thing he likes least is being asked to leave the classroom and wait in the courtyard. This is something that happens a lot. Caleb's Mum says he's asked to do this because he's disrupting the class and not focusing on his work.

When Caleb was seven, he received a formal suspension. His mum was called to pick Caleb up from school, where his teacher, the school principal, and an Aboriginal staff member told her that Caleb had been hanging out with the 'wrong crowd' of children who had been throwing rocks during lunch break. When Caleb's Mum questioned whether suspension was necessary, the school was firm in its decision.

Caleb became angry about his punishment. He was the only one of the group of children who was suspended, despite the fact that he hadn't been throwing rocks himself. He felt singled out. However, Caleb's version of events was different to the school's, and his mum is still confused about what actually happened.

Caleb enjoyed being out of school on suspension. He had no homework to complete and wasn't worried about missing lessons. He didn't enjoy the chores his mum made him do, and when it came time to return to school he begged to be transferred to the other local school.

Caleb's Mum attended the school meetings required for re-entry and filled out the paperwork. She felt supported by the Aboriginal staff members at the school who helped her talk with Caleb about his suspension, helping his transition to go smoothly. However, she believes that had a more proactive approach to helping Caleb remain calm and focused been taken, the school could have avoided his exclusion altogether.

Caleb's Mum gets anxious when she receives a call from the school, but does feel the school tries to involve her in decisions about Caleb. She would rather the school help him to reach positive behavioural goals, rather than wait to punish him after things go badly.

In the past, a young male Aboriginal staff member would break up Caleb's school day if he had focused and applied himself during lessons, spending one-on-one time with him on outside activities. At another time the school rewarded Caleb with fun activities in return for attendance and good behaviour. His mum says these strategies helped Caleb with his confidence and concentration.
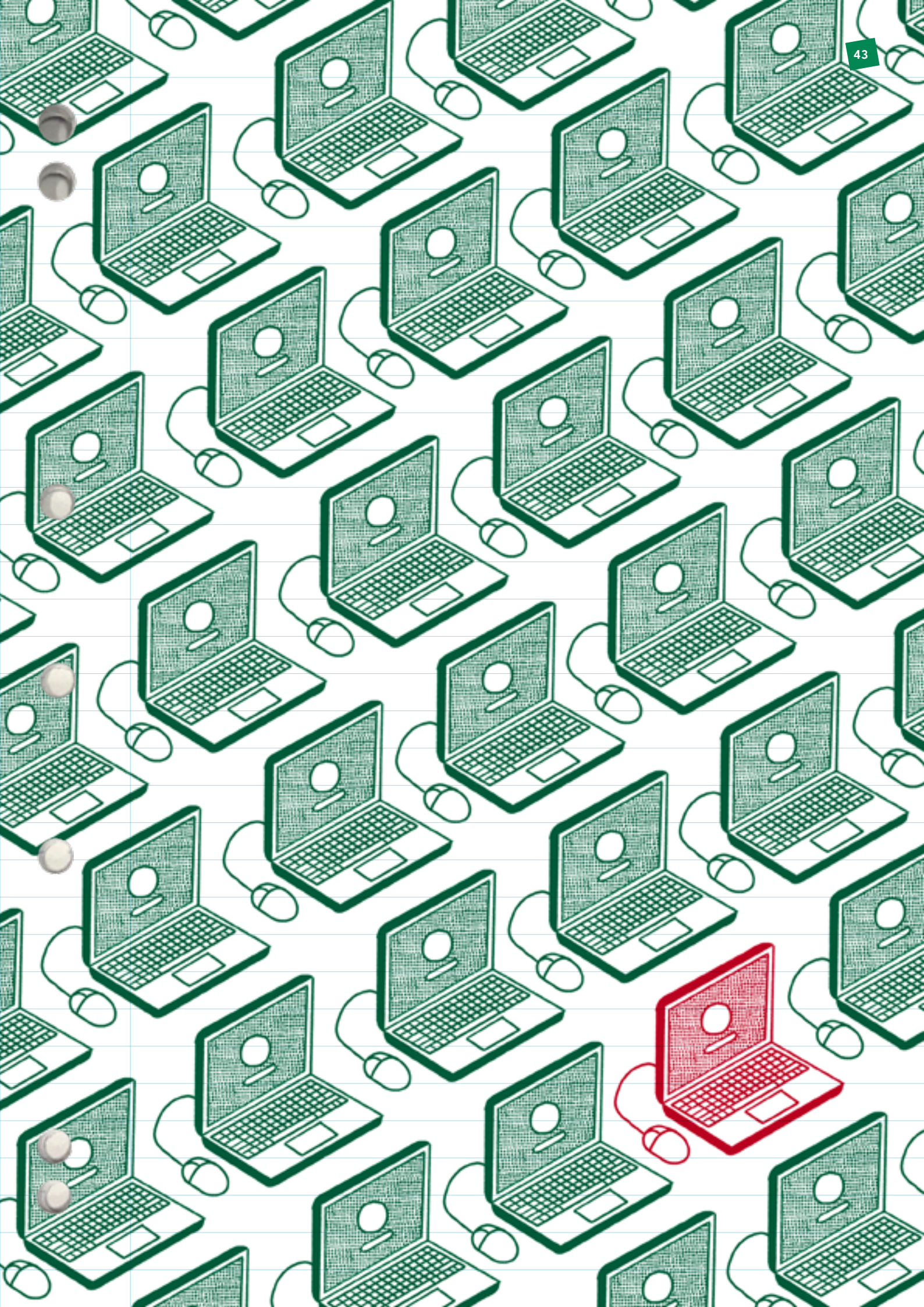
Next Steps

Too many children and young people are being excluded from South Australian schools before their educational goals are met. This must be addressed as a matter of urgency, and in a way that is fully informed by the voices of children and young people.

Children and young people and their families, have generously shared their lived experience of school exclusion, or their observations of its impact on others. They have thought about solutions and provided suggestions for how exclusions can be reduced in ways that engage and value students, and build their trust in systems and processes.

This report contains recommendations that are achievable, if we have the will to act upon them. By doing so, we would ensure that every South Australian child, no matter what their circumstances, is being supported to access the education they have a right to receive.

The new *Education and Children's Services Act (2019)* has been described by both sides of government as 'providing a contemporary framework for the delivery of high-quality children's services.'

The new Act embeds 'various principles that must be taken into account in relation to the operation and administration, with the best interests of children and students given paramount consideration.' The voices of children and students (and their caregivers) must be heard in decisions pertaining to the Act.

This is a good starting point. It sets an agenda to modernise and improve how to work with children who are 'at risk' of being excluded. It also shifts away from punitive approaches that simply do not work, and instead encourages a move toward more contemporary approaches built on student participation and support, kindness and respect.

South Australia has an opportunity to build a contemporary rights based framework around behaviour management that is inclusive. One that not only embeds children's rights and principles into policy, but more importantly into the practice and culture of its schools.

This will require more than a change of terminology from 'behaviour management' to 'behaviour support'. It requires changes to custom and practice, which in turn will change school culture. Schools need to both promote and model positive behavior. Schools also need to demonstrate positive behaviour and move away from concepts of 'controlling children'.

Control is punitive, and using it to address concerns about behavior, risks breaking down trust between schools and their students – a crucial element to cultivating positive relationships. Control is certainly not the way to engage children and young people with disability or additional needs.

Given the prevalence of children with ASD or ADHD amongst the stories of exclusion shared, it is essential that a different approach to accommodating diverse learning styles is provided. One that proactively and routinely offers children with learning difficulties or those students who are falling behind, the extra support they need, and in a timely way. It is not good enough to let these children and young people fall through the cracks, jeopardising their long term education outcomes and future opportunities, because we have decided to put them in the 'too hard basket' as they must be 'sacrificed for the sake of the majority'.

Further rollout of teacher training on de-escalation and trauma informed practices will support responses to the myriad of adverse experiences children and young people have. This is essential if school exclusions are to be reduced, or better still eliminated as a practice altogether.

We must ensure that within schools and across the broader community we put mechanisms and safeguards in place that protect against the targeting or discrimination of certain students, including indirect discrimination. This will protect those who we know are the most vulnerable, and who are therefore at greatest risk of being lost from the education system altogether.

As a first step we must ensure that suspension, exclusion or expulsion only ever occur as measures of last resort, and that before they are imposed, a child's background, circumstances and individual developmental, social, mental and physical needs have been given paramount consideration.

Furthermore, the voice of the child or young person concerned must be included in any decisions being made about them. They must be consulted, along with their family and carers, before final decisions relating to suspension, exclusion or expulsions are made.

Decision makers must consider the broader repercussions of any exclusion decision, including who will look after the child or young person when they are excluded and what impact their exclusion will have on their family's situation. Will the child be safe at home? How will the exclusion affect the family's chance to earn an income? How will it impact on siblings and on extended family carers?

A child's right to privacy within the school community must also be respected, and the family concerned must be provided with everything they need to ensure their child's learning is attended to if a suspension, exclusion or expulsion is imposed.

Exclusion from school should not be an exclusion from education, and all efforts must be taken to ensure all children and young people can manage their engagement with learning and are supported to have positive relationships within their school communities throughout their school years.

Technical Report

A mixed method approach was taken with respect to the collection of material. This included interviews, focus groups, consultations and surveys from children, young people and families.

Data Sources

Primary sourced material is informed by interviews with the families and advocates of 22 children and young people who have had a direct experience of school exclusion. The children and young people were aged 5 to 17 at the time the interviews were undertaken.

Participating families were identified through community services and via programs being delivered by community organisations. Interviews were conducted with parents or child advocates, against a consistent framework of questions.

In addition to one-on-one interviews with parents, children and advocates, two online surveys were conducted, along with a series of peer-to-peer focus groups with students who have had direct experience of school exclusion, including a group of young people accessing Flexible Learning Options programs.

The themes, experiences and issues covered, include a series of case studies that represent the most consistent stories heard across all children and young people interviewed.

The second source materials come from an online survey and series of focus groups using a peer-based model of research. The focus groups explored four key topics identified through analysis of survey responses and were undertaken with input from Youth Inc. interviewing students and peers who had first-hand experience of school exclusion. Participating students came from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations with 75% reporting they had had direct experience of school exclusion; 57% reporting they had been suspended or expelled; and 52% reporting they knew someone who had experienced education exclusion.

The third source of data came from focus groups undertaken with students attending four different Flexible Learning Option programs across metropolitan Adelaide. The groups included young people from diverse cultural backgrounds, diverse gender identities, differing abilities, and included young people in State Care as well as a number who had come into contact with youth justice.

The fourth data source was an online survey. – 'Understanding the Impact of Education Exclusions on Children and Young People.' A total of 319 South Australian children and young people aged 9–22 years responded to a range of questions about their understanding of exclusions. The children and young people were asked if they had ever been excluded from school, if they knew anyone who had been excluded from school, and what understanding they have of the reasons children and young people are excluded from school. They were also asked what impact they think school exclusion has on children and young people who are excluded.

The children and young people consulted conceptualised school exclusion in a wide variety of ways. Their responses demonstrated a gap between how 'exclusion' is defined within the school system and how it is understood and experienced by children and young people themselves.

Exclusions Project: Engagement and Participation Model

Engagement Method	Participants	Activity and Outputs
22 Interviews	Parents/Carers and Service Providers	Case Studies of the direct experience of families impacted by exclusion
Youth Inc. Survey and Focus Groups	60 Young people	Peer-based research project on school exclusion using online surveys and focus groups
Consultations with FLO students	35 young people in 4 metropolitan FLO programs	Participatory consultation on understanding the process of exclusion and its impacts
Exclusions Survey July –November 2019	319 SA children and young people	Participants completed 18 questions relating to the causes, impacts and responses to poverty

Exclusions Survey Analysis

A total of 319 South Australian children and young people participated in the 'School Exclusions Survey' undertaken between September and November 2019. The survey aimed to find out what children and young people view and understand school suspensions, exclusions and expulsions.

There were six survey questions about what it means when someone is suspended, excluded or expelled from school, including the behaviours, situations or experiences that can lead to a school exclusion. Two questions asked respondents about the prevalence and fairness of school exclusions and five questions asked about the impacts and consequences of exclusions.

Respondents were asked three self-identifying demographic questions and one question about whether they know anyone – themselves, a friend, family member, someone else or no-one – who has ever been suspended, excluded or expelled. A comparison between the perceptions and experiences of respondents who reported that they had experienced some form of school exclusion themselves, and those who reported no personal experience of school exclusion, was primarily used to understand the cluster of views.

The analysis of the survey uses a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. Simple responses and categorical data were analysed using online survey platform Survey Monkey and Microsoft Excel, while the open-ended text responses were analysed through a manual coding process in Microsoft Excel.

Qualitative analysis consisted of a coding process whereby codes were assigned to individual responses representing substantive themes or subjects. This consisted of an initial data immersion process to understand the naturally occurring themes and subjects mentioned by the respondents, followed by multiple cycles of coding.

Although the survey aimed to achieve a random sample of children and young people, the distribution of the survey through social media platforms and via stakeholder groups meant that only groups who had access to the internet or part of a stakeholder group were able to complete the survey.

How respondents understood the meaning of school exclusions was important to know and is particularly useful in highlighting the differences between how adults and education authorities define school exclusions, and how exclusions are understood and experienced by children and young people themselves. How respondents defined exclusions was also shown to influence their perceptions of the fairness, prevalence and impacts of exclusions. This was taken into account during the analysis of other responses.

Who were the respondents?

A total of 319 South Australian children and young people participated in the exclusions survey between September and November 2019. Most respondents completed the survey online, through Survey Monkey, while a smaller number completed a hard copy version of the survey.

The vast majority of respondents were aged between 9 and 17 years. Young people between the ages of 12 and 14 represented the largest group of respondents, making up 43% of the overall sample. Children and young people aged 9-11 years and 15-17 years were equally represented, each accounting for one quarter of respondents overall. A smaller group of 18-24 year olds made up the remaining sample.

Respondents came from 76 postcode areas across South Australia. Almost half were clustered into two postcode areas; City of Onkaparinga in southern Adelaide (29% of respondents) and City of Salisbury in northern Adelaide (17% of respondents). The remaining respondents came from 74 postcode areas across Southern, Northern and Western Adelaide as well as from the Barossa, Light and Lower North regions.

Over one quarter (28% of respondents) reported that they had experienced some form of school exclusion. Of those who had experienced school exclusion themselves, 57% were male, with most aged between 12 and 17 years. One in five of those who had experienced some form of school exclusion were aged 9 to 11 years old.

When asked about their understanding of exclusion, one in five responses focused on the emotional effects of what it means to be excluded or 'not included'. These effects included feeling 'left out', 'forgotten', 'left behind', 'not wanted', 'unwelcome', 'ignored' or 'disliked'.

" *It means someone is left out, in a school environment it can be because of behaviour issues (whether it's controllable or not). This can escalate from sitting in time out to being put in an isolated room for the entire school day, this can lessen the chance the child has to learn.'*

It appeared respondents had a better understanding of the meaning of expulsion, although there was some variation in responses. A majority of respondents understood expulsion to be when someone is removed from, 'kicked out' or 'forced to leave' a school and 'never come back'. Some mentioned that expelled students would be 'sent somewhere else', most commonly to another school. Others understood it to mean that a student was banned from 'every school' and that this sometimes meant a student would have to move to a new region entirely.

" *'They are kicked out of the school usually forced to move city as schools talk.'*

Respondents were asked to identify whether certain situations were cases of suspension, exclusion, expulsion or none of these. A majority (more than 90% of respondents) could identify a student being told not to attend school for two days as a case of suspension, and a student being told they can't return to school as a case of expulsion. However, in other situations the distinction between a suspension and an exclusion was less clear. Half (50%) of the respondents described a student being told not to come back to school until next term as a case of suspension, while one third (33%) identified this situation as a case of exclusion.

The variation in responses was greatest in response to 'informal' or 'internal' cases of exclusion. For example, where a student is allowed to attend school but is not allowed normal break times, is not allowed in their normal classrooms, is sent to the principal's office, or is required to spend 'time out' for 'reflection'. Although there was less consensus about these 'internal' cases of exclusion, 1 in 2 respondents nevertheless identified these cases as either suspension or exclusion.

What situations, experiences and behaviours can lead to school exclusions?

According to one third of respondents, a suspension meant that a student is 'in trouble' or 'being punished' for having done something 'bad' or 'wrong'. Some descriptions of what it means to be suspended, excluded or expelled indicated that students who had experienced some form of exclusion, particularly at a young age, were likely to internalise this as a message that they had not only 'done something bad' but that they were 'bad', 'hated' or 'unwanted'.

The top five things that respondents thought could lead to exclusion referred to specific behaviours that explicitly break school rules, or go against accepted behavioural norms. They included 'using bullying behaviour', 'damaging property' or 'acting violently'. Only a small minority were unsure about whether these behaviours could lead to exclusion.

The top five responses that respondents thought could lead to exclusion were:

1   Using bullying behaviour
2   Damaging property
3   Acting violently
4   Being disrespectful
5   Being disruptive

There was less certainty amongst respondents about whether other situations and experiences could lead to school exclusion. Whether or not a respondent themselves had experienced some form of school exclusion had an impact on which behaviours, situations or experiences they named. Compared to those who had no personal experience of exclusion, these respondents were also less likely to focus on the specific behaviours that could lead to exclusion, focusing instead on a student's life outside of school, including their health, relationships, learning needs, and levels of support.

A higher proportion of those who had personal experience of school exclusion thought that the following could lead to exclusion:

–   Having poor relationships with teachers
–   Having a learning difficulty
–   Living with a disability
–   Problems at home
–   Being sick
–   Not understanding instructions
–   Not getting enough or the right
    kind of support.

Those who had experienced some form of exclusion were also more likely to provide additional comments elaborating on other situations that could lead to exclusion, including being bullied, having autism, having different 'learning styles', having poor mental health or feeling isolated, 'poor engagement', not being listened to and 'not getting your turn to speak when there is a problem'.

Other specific behaviours that were mentioned as those that might lead to being excluded included swearing, visiting 'irresponsible websites' or 'missing too many days of school'. Other respondents raised concerns about the exclusion of students from certain schools based on their gender identity or sexuality.

Many respondents thought that school rules – particularly rules relating to school uniform – are often 'too strict' or applied 'inconsistently' or 'excessively'. These respondents explained that students can get suspended or excluded for 'anything' and 'everything' or for doing 'nothing'. Some responses listed some of the behaviours that could lead to exclusion and described them as 'minor' or 'ridiculous', from 'clicking a pen' to 'looking at the teacher slightly funny' or 'having fun'.

> 'They suspend everyone as an easy option. You don't even do anything and they suspend you'

> 'People are being suspended for what they wear or their hair or nails and that's a bit extreme.'

There was a view that the decision to exclude a student was ultimately up to the discretion of individual teachers. As one respondent put it, 'Kids don't get suspended unless they are doing the wrong thing, except if a teacher sets out to get them'.

While many respondents thought that students 'must have done something pretty bad to be kicked out of school', many of the same respondents also highlighted that exclusions can happen as a result of a teacher or a school being unable to understand and therefore unable to meet the needs of a particular student.

> 66 *'Teachers need to understand Autism more. My ASD is why I get suspended and I can't help that.'*

> 66 *'They get kicked out of the school - must have done something pretty bad to be kicked out of a school or that the school cannot deal with the needs of the child'*

Do you think the following situations or experiences can lead to children being suspended, excluded or expelled from school? All respondents
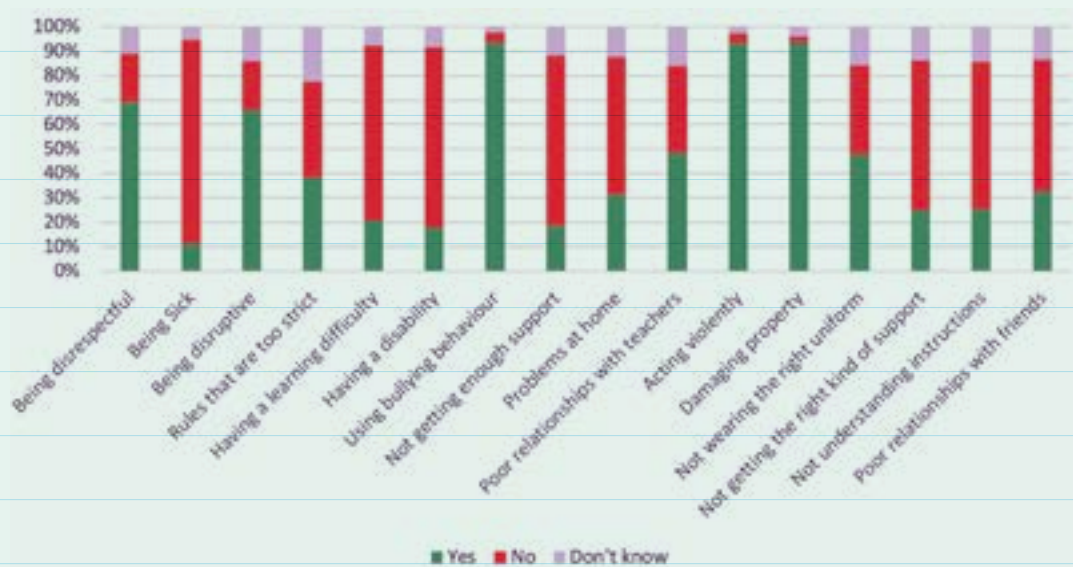
Do you think the following situations or experiences can lead to children being suspended, excluded or expelled from school? Respondents who reported personal experience of exclusion.
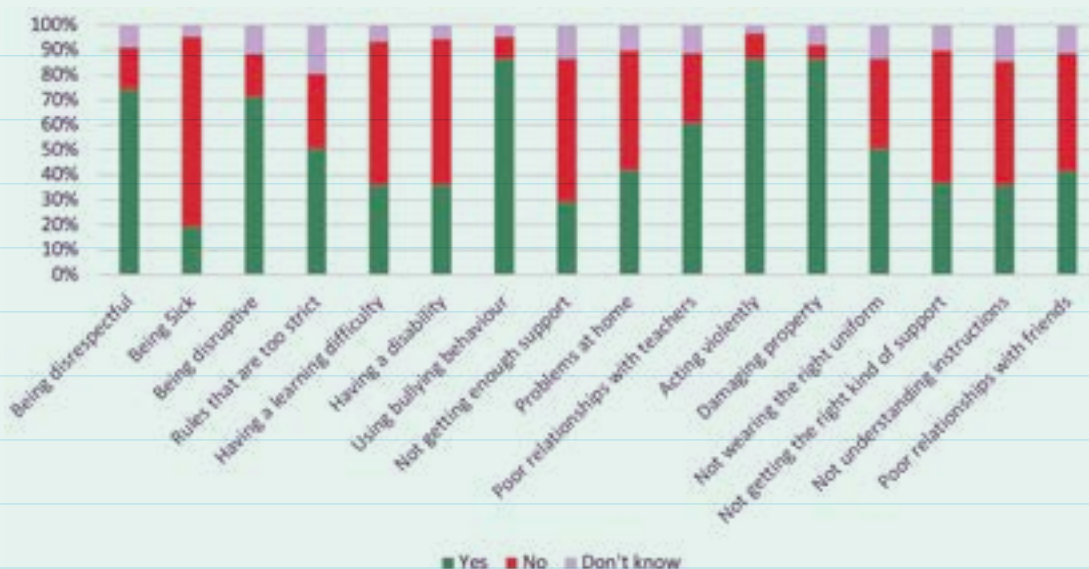
The fairness and prevalence of school exclusions

How respondents thought about the situations, experiences and behaviours that can lead to school exclusion shaped how they viewed the fairness of exclusions. Those who drew on their experiences of being disrupted by others, were more likely to consider the reasons behind school exclusions as justifiable and fair. They were also more likely to consider exclusions as effective or necessary, even if 'not ideal'.

> *'Kicking some students out is really the only way everyone else gets a break. Students who threaten others, take up teachers' time being stupid, stop everyone else from learning. We shouldn't suffer because another kid acts stupid. I got sick of not being able to learn because a few other kids made it impossible'*

Respondents who focused on the experiences of the student being excluded were more likely to consider other factors in the school environment that can lead to exclusions, including school rules and individual teachers. These respondents were more sceptical about the fairness and effectiveness of exclusions as a way to manage or deter certain behaviours.

> *'They are sent to one room of the school to do their work and they have different break times than the set times to avoid contact with other students (horrible for mental health and self-esteem). Or they are sent to stay home for the day, which is pointless because that's seen as fun, not a punishment.'*

Respondents were asked directly whether they think school exclusions are 'done fairly' at their school 'always', 'sometimes', 'rarely' or 'never'. They could also opt for a 'don't know' response. Thoughts about the fairness of exclusions varied significantly according to the respondent's personal experiences of exclusion. Most of those with no reported personal experience of exclusion thought that exclusions were 'sometimes' (55%) or 'always' (17%) done fairly. A smaller percentage (9%) of respondents thought that exclusions were 'rarely' done fairly, while a few (1%) thought exclusions were 'never' done fairly.

Responses from those who had personally experienced some form of exclusion reflect a different reality. Many from this cohort (41%) thought exclusions were 'sometimes' done fairly, while a much larger percentage thought exclusions were 'rarely' done fairly (28%) or 'never' done fairly (13%), while 6% thought exclusions were 'always' done fairly.

Respondents were asked whether the number of students suspended, excluded or expelled at their school is 'too many', 'about right' or 'not enough'. They also had the option to indicate that they did not know. Almost one in three thought the number was 'about right', one in five respondents thought the number was 'too many', while approximately 12% thought the number was 'not enough'. There were 40% of respondents who did not know.

The top three explanations for why respondents thought the number of school exclusions was 'too many':

1   Seeing students being excluded 'too often'
2   Unfair and inconsistent school rules and reasons for exclusion
3   Students are not being understood or adequately supported.

Among those who explained why they thought that 'too many' students are suspended, excluded or expelled, most referred to how often they see exclusions happen in their own classrooms. Some respondents described seeing someone at their school being suspended 'every day' or 'always', while others reported exclusions happening once 'every one to two weeks'.

While some respondents described 'someone new being suspended each week', it was more common for respondents to talk about a cycle of exclusion, whereby the same students are repeatedly excluded.

> 'People get suspended and excluded every week, some kids are suspended and get another suspension as soon as they come back.'

While some respondents said that school exclusions only happen to a student who does something 'really bad', 'stupid' or 'extreme' and 'without thinking of others' or 'the consequences of their actions', others explained that they thought the number of exclusions is 'too many' because the reasons for students being excluded are unfair or inconsistent.

These respondents described school rules as 'one-sided', 'unreasonable' and 'unfair' and exclusions as 'too harsh' and 'discriminatory'.

> 'They're not fair unless there's a hell of a good reason backing it up. Not some stupid discrimination shielded by big words, formal speaking and sugar-coating.'

Many described being excluded themselves or seeing others being excluded 'for no reason', 'for nothing' or for something 'ridiculous'. Others talked about schools suspending the 'wrong' student as a result of only hearing 'one side of the story' or of 'having one rule for one student, and another rule for others'.

> 'Sometimes the punishment is too hard for a little mistake. It's unfair. Most times it's really stupid.'

> 'I understand that it is meant to keep the school 'safe' but some people are doing the same things [yet] aren't being treated the same.'

Another common explanation for why respondents thought the number of excluded students is 'too many' was a view that schools do not provide appropriate support for students because they do not understand the needs of students, particularly those living with autism or with other disabilities. Many responses highlighted that 'teachers don't help students enough' and schools 'just want the bad kids to go away'.

> 'The way school wants kids to learn doesn't work for the kids. It's lonely and means my bedroom is my safe place. School is too noisy and too confusing. Just because I have autism shouldn't mean school should be a too hard place. Teachers just tell me I'm difficult or lazy. It's too hard to be around the other kids. I don't know what they're thinking about me. Then school tells my mum she's a bad mum, and the boss comes to my house. That makes me want to stay at home more.'

> 'Lots have autism that I know of.'

> 'People need to deal with students better instead of just suspending them. For example, getting suspended for wearing the wrong uniform!'

Other respondents thought that the number of excluded students was 'too many' because they thought there were better ways to 'deal with students' than excluding them. There was a sense among these responses that exclusions could be avoided, and that the issues behind exclusions could be 'sorted out' if students were better supported to regulate their emotions and understand the consequences of their behaviour. For some respondents, this depended on teachers having a better understanding of disability and skills to better communicate between themselves and students with disability; a culture where students can ask for what they need and are listened to rather than 'always being ignored'.

'Instead of depriving a student you should be helping them so they don't make the same mistake, or see why what they did was wrong.'

'Stupid big meetings with people who don't even really do anything to help just sit and do meetings. My Mum moved me to a better school that doesn't do suspensions outside school. The new school listens. I get more help with my learning... My old school and teachers and head hated me and didn't understand me.' (Male, 13)

While there was a sense amongst the whole set of responses that exclusions were considered unfair, many of the respondents expressed a view that exclusions would be more fair if the rules were enforced consistently; if there was more respect, and if 'everyone was treated equally, no exceptions'.

'They need to bend the rules so all kids have a chance to be included and be successful. Staff need to treat kids with respect if they want the same.'

'In my opinion, if it isn't already, expulsions, suspensions and exclusions should be discussed as a collective and not one person should make the choice because some teachers could have different views.'

Almost one third of respondents thought that the number of students suspended, excluded or expelled at their school was 'about right'. Most of these respondents explained that they 'haven't seen it much' or that they don't know anyone who has been suspended, excluded or expelled. Some of these respondents thought that it was 'about right' because it 'shouldn't happen more' or that the few cases they heard of 'is plenty'.

'Because there are very little amounts of students being suspended, excluded or expelled, which I believe is the correct amount because it shows the quality of students, teachers and rules in place.'

The second most common explanation for responding 'about right' to the survey question was a belief that in most cases, there is a good reason for a student being suspended, excluded or expelled. These respondents explained that an excluded student has 'most likely done something wrong' and that they therefore 'need to know right from wrong' or 'deserve' to 'be punished' or 'have a consequence'. As one explained, 'the kids that need to be have to be'.

Others explained that the number was 'about right' at their school because their school 'is good' or because their school does not exclude to 'punish the child' but rather 'for the benefit of other students'.

'Our school only does this when a student is disrupting the overall atmosphere/ability to learn of a class/cohort/school in a severely negative way. It isn't to punish the child, but is for the benefit of other students/staff.'

A minority of respondents (12%) thought the number of excluded students at their school was 'not enough'. The most common explanation for this response was a view that too many students 'get away with' certain 'bad' or 'unsafe' behaviours, including bullying and disrupting other students.

Some respondents explained that this was because of teachers or schools 'being too nice' or 'forgiving' while others attributed this to their parent's relationship with the school.

Overall, respondents expressed mixed feelings about the prevalence and the fairness of school exclusions. This was seen to vary on a case by case basis, reflecting that 1 in 2 respondents thought that exclusions were 'sometimes' done fairly.

'Not many people are suspended, excluded or expelled but when it does happen I think most of the time it's done when needed. But some suspensions are over the top and happen too often.'

Impacts on learning

More than three quarters of respondents (77%) believed that it was very likely or likely for a student to feel they are falling behind in their school work when they are suspended, excluded or expelled. Seven out of ten respondents also thought it 'likely' or 'very likely' that a student would feel scared to return to school after being suspended, excluded or expelled.

Respondents elaborated on the impacts of school exclusions on a student's feelings towards school, on their behaviour and on their motivation and ability to participate and learn in open-ended text responses. The respondent's personal experience had some influence on the way in which they responded to questions about the impacts of exclusion on a student's ability to learn.

Only some respondents expressed a view that those who are excluded often 'don't care about their work' anyway, with this sentiment more commonly expressed by respondents who had not had a personal experience of exclusion.

> 66 *'People who get suspended usually don't care about their work and by getting suspended they care even less because they have an excuse for not doing the work because they weren't in class.'*

An overwhelming majority of respondents felt that an exclusion more commonly led to 'less success learning' and 82% of respondents reported that exclusion 'always' or 'often' led to 'worse grades'. The majority felt that exclusions were more likely to lead to worse grades. Within the minority who felt exclusions didn't always lead to worse grades the majority (82%) said that 'always' or 'often' lead to 'worse grades'. This compared to the smaller number (9%) who felt that exclusions 'always' or 'often' lead to 'better grades'. Only one third of respondents overall felt that exclusions could 'sometimes' lead to 'worse grades' and 'sometimes' lead to 'better grades'.

Generally, respondents felt that the situations most likely to impact on a student's ability to learn were 'being made to miss school' and 'being sent out of class', including 'being sent to another classroom' or 'to the principal's office', and 'missing out on excursions'.

Missing out on recess and lunch, having an after school detention or picking up rubbish were seen as less likely to impact on a student's ability to learn. However, these situations were perceived to have a greater impact on a student's relationships with other students.

Situations most likely to impact a student's ability to learn:

1 Being made to miss school
2 Being sent out of class (eg. to the principal's office, a quiet room, etc.)
3 Missing out on excursions.

Situations most likely to impact a student's relationship with other students:

1 Missing out on recess and lunch
2 Being made to miss school
3 Being placed in another class.

Impacts on relationships with friends and family

In the open-ended text responses of the survey, many respondents elaborated on the impacts of exclusion on their ability to make and maintain friendships. 'Missing out on recess and lunch' was perceived to have the biggest impact on a student's relationship with other students, closely followed by 'being made to miss school entirely' or 'being placed in another class'.

The overwhelming majority (93%) of respondents felt that school exclusions can result in 'more family stress', with a vast majority stating that this was 'always' or 'often' the case (70%). The majority of respondents thought that it would be 'very difficult' or 'somewhat difficult' for an excluded student to 'feel good about themselves' (65%) and to keep positive relationships with both friends (60%) and with parents or carers (64%).

Many respondents took the open-ended text questions as an opportunity to highlight that the impacts of exclusion extended beyond the individual student. These responses focused on what exclusions mean for a student's family in terms of stress and emotional impacts, but also how exclusions impact on a family member's capacity to meet work commitments or remain in work when their child is either expelled altogether or repeatedly excluded from school.

❝ *'People, not just kids, but parents or guardians, will also be put down resulting in family stress.'*

❝ *'Impacts on my mum's work'*

Impacts on mental health and wellbeing

Seven in 10 respondents thought it 'likely' or 'very likely' for a student who is suspended, excluded or expelled to 'feel rejected' and 'lose their confidence'. Almost three quarters of survey participants (73%) thought that it was 'likely' or 'very likely' that being excluded in some form would lead a student to feel discriminated against.

These feelings were also raised in more detail in the open-ended responses where respondents talked about how they felt during the experience of a school exclusion, or their 'heightened anxiety and depression' following their school exclusion.

66 *'If a student is suspended they should have to attend school still. They should not be put in a room with large windows where others can see them, it's horrifying and really impacts on your mental health. This has happened to me and it was a bad experience I'll never forget. There is no respect for privacy.'*

66 *'I believe that sometimes it is necessary, but I also know that my family members who are in public schools have been unfairly discriminated against by the school using suspensions/exclusions, directly causing heightened anxiety and depression, causing two cases of dropping out of school within my family alone.'*

The majority of respondents (83%) felt that it was more likely for a school exclusion to lead to 'worse behaviour' with most reporting that this was 'always' or 'often' the case. Further, while a large number (43%) of respondents felt that being suspended, excluded or expelled can 'sometimes' lead to 'better behaviour' the same percentage felt that this was 'rarely' or 'never' the case.

66 *'Also these punishments are just threats, they're not giving any incentive to stop because at the end of the day a reflection is just a punishment, which will make the student more upset and angry.'*

While most respondents were focused on the immediate impacts when describing what it means for a student to be suspended, excluded or expelled, others were also concerned about the longer-term impacts of exclusion on a student's education and employment opportunities well into the future.

66 *'Being expelled from school is very bad and can cause you some problems in the future. The problems you can face when expelled from school are:*
1 *Not able to find a job in future*
2 *Not being able to attend other school, etc..'*
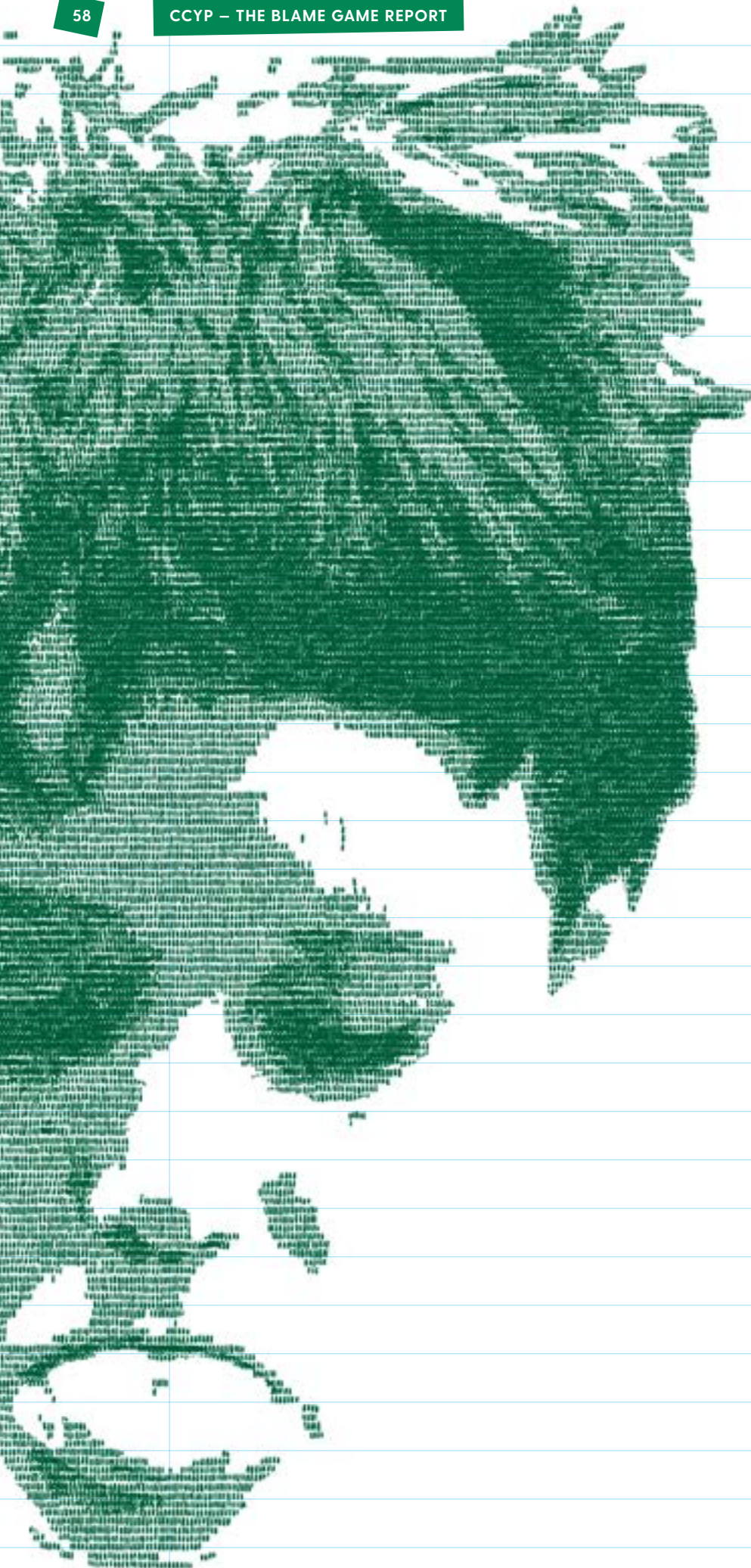
Endnotes

1   Miranti, Riyana et al, 2018. "Child Social Exclusion, Poverty and Disadvantage in Australia," National Centre for Economic Modelling, University of Canberra, p. 32, p. 80-83. In South Australia, 17.3% of children aged 0-14 years are living in poverty (the national average is 17.2%). Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) and University of New South Wales, "Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 2, Who is Affected?" Available at http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty/

2   How are they Faring 2020 Report, SA Child Development Council. Available at https://childrensa.sa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/How-are-they-faring-SAs-2020-Report-Card-FINAL-2020-08-05.pdf

3   Parker, C, Paget, A, Ford, T & Gwernan-Jones, R. 2016, 'He was excluded for the kind of behaviour that we thought he needed support with…' A qualitative analysis of the experiences and perspectives of parents whose children have been excluded from school.' Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 133-151.

4   Levitas, R., Pantazis, C., Fahmy, E., Gordon, D., Lloyd, E. and Patsios, D. 2007, 'The Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion,' Available at https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6853/1/multidimensional.pdf.

5   Hemphill, S., Broderick, D. and Heerde, J. 2017, 'Positive associations between school suspension and student problem behaviour: Recent Australian findings' - Australian Institute of Criminology: Trends & Issues in Crime & Criminal Justice, p. 9.

6   Section 4(2) of the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* as well as the Section 9, 'Without limiting a provision of this or any other Act or law, State authorities whose functions and powers include matters relating to the safety and welfare of children and young people must have regard to the fact that early intervention in matters where children and young people may be at risk is a priority.'

7   New South Wales Ombudsman, 2017, NSW Ombudsman Inquiry into behaviour management in schools. https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/47241/NSW-Ombudsman-Inquiry-into-behaviour-management-in-schools.pdf; Victorian Ombudsman 2017, Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions. Available at https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/our-impact/investigation-reports/investigation-into-victorian-government-school-expulsions/

8   Department for Education and Training Victoria, Education and *Training Reform Act 2006*, Ministerial Order No. 1125, Procedures for Suspension and Expulsion of students in government schools, p. 7. Available at https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/studentmanagement/MinisterialOrder1125SIGNED.PDF

9   Department for Education, Government of South Australia, 'Suspension and Exclusion Information for Parents and Carers,' Available at https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/suspension-exclusion-info-for-parents-carers.pdf?v=1592789098.

10 South Australian Government Data Directory, Department for Education, 'Frequency of suspensions per student in SA government schools during Term 2,' DataSA, https://data.sa.gov.au/data/dataset/frequency-of-suspensions-per-student-in-sa-government-schools.

11 All of the Department data referred to in this section comes from the South Australian Government Data Directory Department for Education datasets. Available at https://data.sa.gov.au/data/organization/dept-for-education.

12 South Australian Government Data Directory, Department for Education, 'Proportion of student population suspended, excluded or expelled in SA government schools during Term 2,' DataSA, https://data.sa.gov.au/data/dataset/proportion-of-student-population-suspended-excluded-or-expelled-in-sa-government-schools

13 Timpson Review of School Exclusions, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education, 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf; Office of the Children's Commissioner, England, 2012, 'They Never Give Up On You': Office of the Children's Commissioner School Exclusions Inquiry, Available at https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/they-never-give-up-on-you

14 2017 Parliament of South Australia, *Report on the Access to the South Australian Education System for Students With a Disability*, p. 16.

15 Government of South Australia, Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People, 2020, 'Children and Young People in State Care in South Australian Government Schools, 2009-2019'.

Who are we?

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act').

The Commissioner promotes and advocates for the rights, development and well-being of all children and young people in South Australia. The Commissioner is committed to advocating for children and young people's involvement in decision-making that affects them, giving particular consideration to the needs of vulnerable and at-risk children and young people.

A key objective of The Commissioner for Children and Young People is to position children and young people's interests, development and wellbeing front and centre in public policy and community life and to advocate to decision makers to change laws, policy, systems and practice in favour of children and young people.

In the Commissioner's work she listens to the views of children and young people, collaborates with them and represents their diverse voices in the public arena with a special focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard. Much of her advocacy is directed by the experiences and issues that children and young people talk about and have asked her to focus on.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) says that every child has the right to have a say on all issues that affect them and for their views to be taken seriously. By improving our children and young people's participation in decisions that impact on them, we can strengthen our democratic institutions and structures and build a strong state for the future of all children and young people.