Dear Hon Grace Grace MP

Minister for Education

INSERT DATE

*Delivered via email:* *education@ministerial.qld.gov.au*

Dear Minister,

**Call for parliamentary inquiry into the use of school disciplinary absences in Queensland schools**

I/we write to you in support of the need for a parliamentary inquiry into the use of school disciplinary absences in Queensland state schools.

In February 2022, Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion (QAI) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service Limited (ATSILS) wrote to the Queensland Human Rights Commissioner, publicly calling for an inquiry into the use of school disciplinary absences in Queensland state schools. They provided a detailed report outlining longstanding concern that students with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are being suspended and excluded from school more frequently than their peers.

The report included statistics obtained via a Right to Information request that showed an unjustifiable and disproportionate use of school disciplinary absences among certain groups of students. The data revealed that students with a disability received between 46%-48% of all short-term suspensions and between 41%-47% of all long-term suspensions between 2016 and 2020. This is despite the fact that students with disability only make up about 17% of the total Queensland school population. It also showed that despite only constituting approximately 10% of the school population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receive approximately one quarter of all suspensions and exclusions.

Since this report was published, QAI has obtained data from a second Right to Information request. Preliminary analyses show even further alarming trends. For example, in 2019, students with disability, Indigenous students and/or students in out of home care received 61.5% of all short-term suspensions, yet they accounted for only 26.1% of enrolments in Queensland state schools. In contrast, the other 38.5% of short-term suspensions went to the 73.9% of enrolled students who were *not* in any of these priority groups. In other words, only 38.5% of short-term suspensions went to students who did not have a disability, did not identify as Indigenous and were not in out of home care.

The 2019 data also shows that:

* Indigenous students have **2.5 times** the risk of being suspended compared to non-Indigenous students;
* Students with disability have **3.0 times** the risk of being suspended compared to students without a disability; and
* Students living in out of home care have **3.7 times** the risk of being suspended compared to students who are not.

It should be borne in mind that many students identify with more than one of these attributes, thereby increasing their risk of suspension even further.

While the Department of Education may highlight slightly reduced overall numbers of school disciplinary absences in 2021, this occurred during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic at a time when school attendance was dramatically reduced. The data on school disciplinary absences for 2021 also fails to demonstrate the disproportionate number of suspensions and exclusions being given to vulnerable students with backgrounds of disadvantage. In other words, students with a disability, First Nations students and students in out of home care.

Many other organisations share these concerns, including the Youth Advocacy Centre (YAC), PeakCare and the Centre for Inclusive Education (C4IE). The campaign has also attracted widespread media coverage. For example, the Courier Mail published a series of articles documenting the issue, including an article that reported an interview with yourself in which you purportedly confirmed that a broader review, such as a parliamentary inquiry, was “*a live option.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

The high number of school disciplinary absences among students with backgrounds of disadvantage is deeply concerning. Not because it reflects student behaviour, but because it reflects a range of systemic issues that culminate in large numbers of suspensions and exclusions. For example, the inability to seek a review of a short-term suspension, and the difficulties that some students with disability experience trying to get reasonable adjustments at school. This is made worse by inadequate accountability of decision-making and complex review and appeals processes.

The consequences of excessive school disciplinary absences are profound. Students are denied essential learning opportunities, go on to experience poorer mental health and are at an increased risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

The failure of the Queensland education system to ensure that every student with a disability would be welcomed and included in mainstream schooling was demonstrated at the Inclusion NOW! rally held by the Queensland Collective for Inclusive Education (QCIE) on Wednesday 26th October 2022.

We need alternative, evidenced-based solutions to discipline that will successfully reduce behaviours of concern, whilst keeping students safe and engaged at school. When school disciplinary absences are used sparingly alongside supportive interventions, there are better outcomes for students, families, and teachers.

We therefore need a parliamentary inquiry to shine a light on the number of school disciplinary absences issued to some students enrolled at Queensland state schools, as well as to understand the complex and convoluted review and appeal mechanisms in place. Every day that goes by, another child with a disability or First Nations student is excluded or suspended from school and is unwittingly placed onto the ‘school to prison’ pipeline.

This is vital if Queensland is to successfully ensure that all students have access to an education that meets their needs and to ensure that certain students are not unfairly and disproportionately disadvantaged in the realisation of this most fundamental of human rights.

Yours sincerely,

INSERT NAME OF INDIVIDUAL/ORGANISATION

1. ‘*School banning policy rethink’*, Courier Mail, 20 April 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)