

Making Queensland Safer Bill 2024

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Inquiry into Making Queensland Safer Bill 2024

Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee.

Submission by Arethusa College

The purpose of Arethusa College's submission is to express our deep concerns about the Making Queensland Safer Bill, and to urge the Committee to reconsider the legislation, in favour of increased investment in integrated education, early intervention and prevention services.

Our concerns are informed by 15 years' experience in the education sector, re-engaging some of the state's most vulnerable and hard-to-reach young people – including those who have come into contact with the youth justice system. We do this by addressing the underlying issues that lead them to non-constructive pathways. We do it in a school community, where they feel safe and valued, so they can pay it forward and do the same for others.

We have heard, over and over again, from our young people, their families, carers, and researchers, that punishment, blame and shame are not motivators to change youth offending. On the contrary they perpetuate generational trauma and disadvantage and reinforce negative community perceptions of young people. They also dim and distort how young people see themselves, eroding their self-worth and belief.

There is another way – a better way to create safe and healthy communities. It takes reframing how we view young people. It requires shifting legacy mindsets about how we deliver education, and challenging siloed funding and delivery of community services.

"As a community, we don't want to believe the horrors that some young people are exposed to or endure during their short lives. We don't want to believe as a society that this is possible within our communities, happening right under our noses. Instead of throwing all our efforts into protecting and caring for young people in ways research tell us work, we take the easy route and blame young people when they act out and lash out, labelling them 'the problem' that needs to be fixed. There is a better way. Our College is living proof of it." Lisa Coles, CEO and Executive Principal Arethusa College.

We hope by sharing our College's story, that Committee members will see what's possible; that our student-centred "educare" delivery model is changing the lives of young people, their families and the communities around them.

We extend an open invitation to the Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee and all members of the Queensland Parliament to visit our campuses to see what is possible and to meet our incredible young people.

About Arethusa College

By definition, we are an independent Special Assistance School.

According to the *Australian Education Act 2013* schools like ours cater "for students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties".

Both are limiting descriptions that fail to capture our role as much more than a school, or recognise the complexities faced by our young people, or acknowledge their immense potential.

In 2025 we will have 10 south-east Queensland campuses with more than 1,900 students in Years 7-12, supported by 500 teachers and support staff (including social workers, welfare workers, pathway officers, chaplains, inclusive education and educational support officers).

We are a Registered Training Organisation approved to teach six nationally recognised vocational qualifications on campus. We also have a mobile Anywhere Learning Team that delivers education programs in the community to about 250 young people annually, with the aim of encouraging them back to school.

The majority of Arethusa students present with literacy challenges including speech, language, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Many young people also come to us with stories of trauma, complex social backgrounds and unmet health and mental health needs. As a result, many of our young people have experienced long periods of non-attendance at school, sometimes up to several years. This is because our traditional rigid model of schooling has not worked for them. This in itself creates trauma because the child then questions, “is there something wrong with me? Am I broken? Am I not good enough?”.

At Arethusa College, our dedicated staff very quickly flip the narrative to show young people that education is here for them; to support them, and to help them realise their inherent potential.

We do this in a number of ways.

1. We recognise the critical protective role education plays in a young person’s life, particularly in limiting their potential exposure to the youth justice system.

This is supported by 2023-34 Youth Justice data that shows almost 50 percent of young offenders are disengaged from education, training or employment¹.

Our College not only strives to create high quality learning environments and opportunities that keep young people engaged in learning and on the right path, but we also support young people from detention to continue and complete their education upon their release.

Over the past six years, we have developed strong relationships with Youth Justice and Child Protection. Two of our familiar and trusted staff members, including our Senior Indigenous Liaison Officer, visit the Wacol Youth Detention Centres weekly to establish and maintain relationships with young people and their families. In many cases, Arethusa College is their only option because they have been excluded from the State Education system.

Young people who enrol at Arethusa upon their release, in most cases, are taught initially at home, or in a safe community setting, by our pioneering mobile Anywhere Learning Team, which comprises about 50 teaching and support staff. Students are then able to safely transfer to an Arethusa campus to continue and complete their studies, on a flexible, supported program.

Over the past three years our Anywhere Learning Team has identified and engaged with more than 700 young people, some of whom have been justice-involved, or young people who have disconnected from school, due to complex life and health challenges. The team has successfully re-engaged almost 90 per of these young people in education, whether it be at Arethusa or another school, or in training or employment.

¹ [Data | Department of Youth Justice and Victim Support](#)

“Staff at Arethusa want to be here. You have to come here wanting to turn up and give 100 per cent of yourself every day because of the nature of our students — they need so much from us. For some young people we are the only constant reliable, caring adults in their life. And they learn quickly that we won’t give up on them. They may have a bad day, a bad month, or a bad year, but we turn up every single day for them, with no judgment and only acceptance and belief in their worth and potential.” Arethusa College teacher.

2. We identify and treat the complexities young people face first. We never treat young people as “the problem”.

We work with every young person, their family/carer, or relevant government and community agencies to identify the underlying issues – whether they be trauma, family, domestic violence, abuse, health or mental-health related – that have impacted their attendance at school. We address these first in order to clear their path to learn.

We seek to ascertain what has been taken away from the young person and have it returned to them. For some young people, they see no future, they have no hope. We find ways to show them the potential that resides within them. This could involve listening to what is important to them, or assisting them to carve a path to positive outcomes. Our approach is far more powerful and transformative than a punitive one.

The data unequivocally reveals, young people who have been in contact with the youth justice system face enormous challenges and complexities.

According to 2023-24 Youth Justice data²:

- 53% have experienced or been impacted by domestic and family violence
- 44% have a mental health and/or behavioural disorder (diagnosed or suspected)
- 44% have a disability (assessed or suspected)
- 30% are in unstable and/or unsuitable accommodation
- 25% have at least one parent who has spent time in adult custody

Research also reveals the distressingly strong connection between young offenders and the child protection and out-of-home care systems.

According to Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) analysis of 10 years’ worth of national youth justice supervision data³:

- almost two-thirds of young people under youth justice supervision during 2022–23 had an interaction with the child protection system in the last 10 years
- about 1 in 2 young people were the subject of a substantiated notification for any type of abuse
- about 1 in 4 young people had at least one placement in out-of-home care at some point in the last 10 years; of these, about two-thirds had at least one placement in residential care.

² [Data | Department of Youth Justice and Victim Support](#)

³ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/young-people-youth-justice-supervision-2022-23/summary>

Further data also confirms the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in youth justice. According to AIHW, 57 per cent of the young people aged 10–17 under youth justice supervision on an average day in 2022–23 were First Nations Australians⁴.

About 20 per cent of our young people are from First Nations backgrounds. Child protection and housing insecurity are also issues we regularly face in our work with some of our young people. However, understanding the issues experienced by our young people and identifying their unmet needs, means we can assemble the right resources and support. We bring this together in an individualised learning and wellbeing plan shaped around their needs, from the length of their school day or week, to how their programs are structured and delivered.

We reduce, not compound the stigma of disadvantage. We do this by creating high quality environments that communicate to a young person, their value and worth. We reduce the shame associated with food insecurity by supplying breakfast and lunch at every campus for every young person. We also keep our doors open to students for about 50 weeks of the year to keep them connected to their school community.

We are constantly looking to the future, at new research, technologies and opportunities to support our young people, while adjusting and improving our shared service-campus delivery model, as our College expands. But what doesn't change is our core focus on what our young people need, and how we can best set them up for success – whatever that looks like for each individual.

SUPPORTING COMMENTARY FROM AN ARETHUSA COLLEGE PARENT

Comments from the parent of a 2024 Year 12 graduate

As a parent of a long-term student at Arethusa College who graduated this year, I cannot stress how critical it is that there are alternatives to schooling for young people who do not feel accepted or encouraged by mainstream schooling.

My son was excluded from mainstream high schools for a number of valid and non-valid reasons. This resulted in him going from a bright, happy kid with lots of friends to a sad, hurt, rejected, disengaged, struggling teenager. If it weren't for the option of him enrolling in an alternative school like Arethusa, his trajectory would have been vastly different. He went from not believing he would amount to anything in life to making career plans and enjoying the different options that await him post high school.

School refusal and avoidance, and school suspensions are at an all-time high in mainstream schools. This leads to disengagement from school and potentially long-term, life altering consequences. The community as a whole benefits every time a young person remains engaged in school. Particularly if that school makes it clear to the student that their priorities are student safety, acceptance, wellbeing, mental health AND education. This what Arethusa does and this has been our family's experience.

Students are supported at Arethusa for who they are, not what they do or have done. Students are held accountable for their actions but will not be excluded from school, thereby not jeopardising their education.

⁴ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-justice-in-australia-annual-report-2022-23/contents/characteristics-of-young-people-under-supervision>

Being at a school like Arethusa exposes students to diversity within our society all without judgement. This inclusivity is another real strength of Arethusa. Developing social skills, managing emotional wellbeing and being accepted for who you are is critical for teenagers. This is harder for students who have experienced trauma, are neurodiverse, have mental health and behavioural issues.

This is my son. He was diagnosed late with ADHD, autism, anxiety and developed OCD. Although he is extremely intelligent, he has struggled with social cues and skills that are expected and necessary to function in society.

He is a work in progress. But he is succeeding. And he is succeeding because of the added guidance, patience, perseverance and assistance from staff and teachers from Arethusa. Because of a different approach to schooling. His educational outcome would likely be very different if it weren't for them.