The Social and Economic Impact of Independent Special Assistance Schools in Queensland

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Independent Schools Queensland
choice & diversity

mccrindle



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About this research

Independent Schools Queensland engaged McCrindle, a social research advisory firm, to conduct this research exploring the social and economic benefits of independent Special Assistance Schools in Queensland. This report includes the following primary research conducted as part of this study:

- An online survey of alumni (n=271) and parents of alumni (n=410) from independent Special Assistance Schools in Queensland. For brevity, these are collectively referred to as stakeholders at times within the report.
- Three focus groups and seven interviews with alumni from QLD independent Special Assistance Schools (n=23).
- Three focus groups with staff from QLD independent Special Assistance Schools (n=23).

The report also includes economic modelling by McCrindle using a variety of secondary datasets as referenced in the report body, research methodology, and appendix.

A full research methodology is included on page 26.







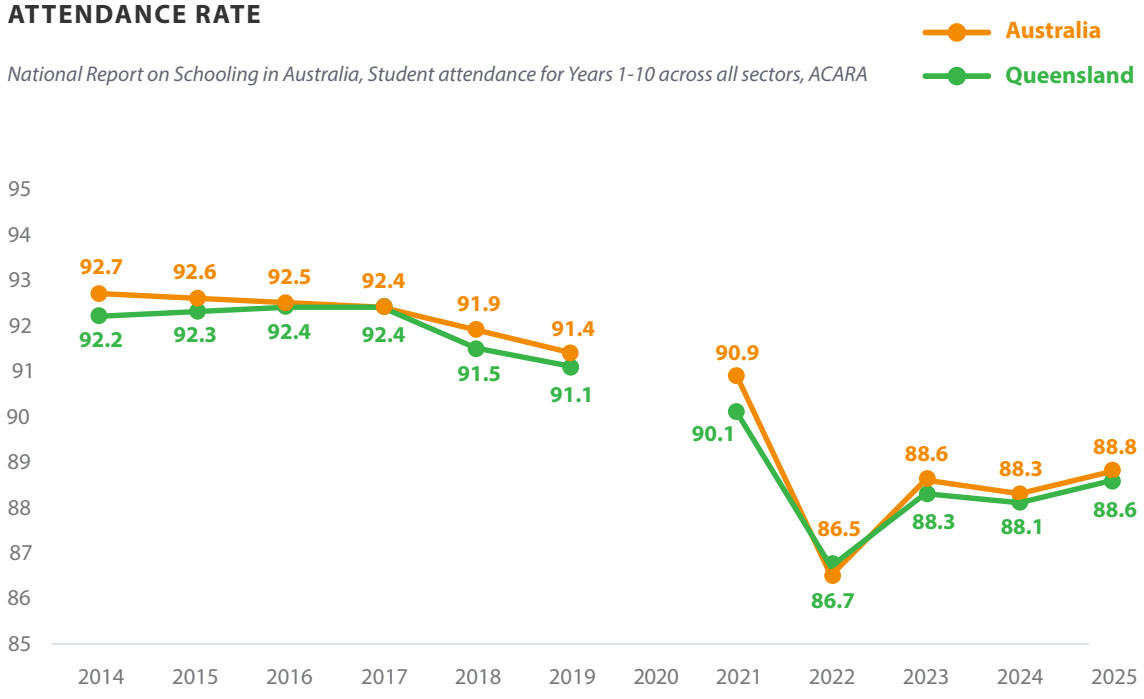
Introduction

THE GROWING CHALLENGE OF STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT

Education is the foundation for individual flourishing and social prosperity. Yet, across Australia, student disengagement from schooling is a growing challenge. On any given day, 1 in 9 students across Australia (11%) are absent from their school. A decade ago, this figure was closer to 1 in 14 (7%). School refusal and disengagement are no longer fringe issues, but represent a systemic challenge that impacts individuals, families, and society at large.

ATTENDANCE RATE

National Report on Schooling in Australia, Student attendance for Years 1-10 across all sectors, ACARA



THE RAPID GROWTH OF SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

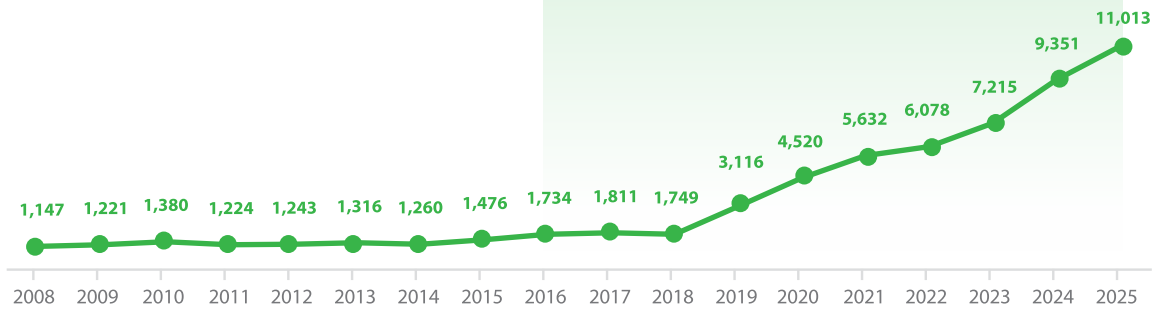
Independent Special Assistance Schools (SAS) provide specialised environments for students who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream schooling. Since 2016, enrolment in Queensland's independent Special Assistance Schools have increased seven-fold, and the number of schools has grown from 14 to 31. This rapid expansion highlights a growing community need as families seek alternatives to mainstream schooling that can accommodate students' complex social and personal challenges.

Despite this rapid growth, demand for places continues to outstrip supply. Principals report extensive waitlists, leaving many vulnerable young people without immediate support at a critical juncture in their lives.

This report examines the social and economic impact of independent Special Assistance Schools in Queensland. Every student that re-engages in education and completes their schooling provides an average fiscal benefit to society of at least $7,500 per year. By studying the experiences of alumni before and after enrolment at a Special Assistance School, this report also uncovers the harder-to-quantify transformative impacts these schools are having in the lives of students and their families.

FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT ENROLMENT IN QUEENSLAND'S INDEPENDENT SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

7x Enrolment growth over the past ten years for Special Assistance Schools



> *"We could probably fill another junior campus or another six year 10 classes tomorrow"*
> **PRINCIPAL**

> *"We could certainly add… another 50% of our students"*
> **PRINCIPAL**

Executive summary

The cost of inaction: life without Special Assistance Schools

Without the intervention of a Special Assistance School, the growing number of students currently enrolled in the sector would face a precarious future. For most of these students, the only alternative is an early exit from schooling. Special Assistance School alumni describe their lives before as characterised by mental health crises, social isolation, and in some cases, substance abuse and crime involvement. For most students, this disengagement results in a significant loss of future opportunities. On average, the earning capacity of early school leavers is 40% less than that of students who complete Year 12.

Removing the barriers to learning for students and their families

Special Assistance Schools provide the immediate stability students require to re-engage with education. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of SAS students come from the bottom two quartiles of socio-educational advantage. By meeting foundational needs such as nutrition, agency, transport, and access to school supplies, these schools remove the primary barriers to participation. This focus on psychological safety allows students to thrive. Additionally, nearly four in five parents (78%) report that changing to a SAS took pressure off their family, allowing some parents to return to the workforce.

Building a foundation for independence

The long-term outcomes for SAS alumni demonstrate the effectiveness of the model. Three in five parents and alumni believe their Special Assistance School has had an extremely or very positive impact on student wellbeing based on the Personal Wellbeing Index.

This stability translates into high rates of post-school participation, with nearly nine in ten alumni (87%) currently working, studying, or involved with other meaningful engagements.

Special Assistance Schools also empower students with opportunities that might have previously been beyond their reach. Two in three alumni (66%) are currently employed, with many directly crediting their employment to their time at school. One in three alumni (32%) are engaging in further study, demonstrating the capacity of SAS to rekindle students' love of learning.

Every student re-engaged delivers a social benefit of $226,100

Student disengagement creates a measurable and compounding economic cost for the state. When a young person leaves the education system early, the community bears the cost of reduced productivity and increased social support. Our modelling finds that for every student who leaves school at a Year 10 level, Australia loses a Net Present Value of $176,300 in potential tax revenue over an assumed 40-year working life. Over the same period, additional welfare costs also run to a sum of $23,500. When justice system involvement ($16,500) and healthcare system pressures ($9,900) are included, the total economic cost is significant. Re-engaging one single at-risk student delivers a benefit of $226,100 to Queensland. The social value of last year's graduating class of 2,000 independent Special Assistance School students alone is estimated at $452 million.

A specialised workforce driving student transformation

The success of Special Assistance Schools relies on a purpose-driven workforce of educator-support professionals. Many of these staff members navigate the dual roles of teacher and mentor, providing academic development while managing student trauma. Three in four parents (75%) identify supportive and caring staff as a key strength of the sector. However, funding constraints and the high intensity of the work create significant challenges for staff attraction and retention. Securing future policy and funding support for this specialised workforce is essential to ensure the continued flourishing of Queensland's at-risk youth.

The social value of last year's graduating class alone is estimated at



$452 Million



Almost nine in ten alumni (87%) are currently working, studying, or involved with other meaningful engagements.



Life without Special Assistance Schools

THE PERSONAL COST

When mainstream schooling isn't the right fit

Without suitable alternative education settings, the 11,000+ students currently enrolled in Queensland's independent Special Assistance Schools (SAS) would face a precarious future. For the majority, the only alternative is an early exit from education. The impact of this disengagement is significant, creating lasting consequences for the individual, their family and the community at large.

When students lack support in an environment that cannot provide for their needs, the negative impacts can be profound. Alumni describe their schooling experience prior to Special Assistance Schools as 'a struggle', 'horrible', 'terrible', 'difficult', 'challenging', and 'anxiety'. Parents and alumni's stories of traumatic bullying, poor attendance, mental health crises, and expulsion are all too common. Many were completely disengaged from school and learning before finally finding the SAS system.

> *"I was having panic attacks looking at my school uniform, driving past school, so I walked, I just refused to go back."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I ended up having a bit of a mental health crisis… I didn't attend for 6 months, and basically was extremely depressed."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I was bullied really badly, to the point that I was suffering some severe mental health issues, which then led on to me actually never really leaving the house and not really going to school."*
> ALUMNI



A confronting trajectory

Without the intervention of a Special Assistance School, students have limited future opportunities and long-term prospects. Many believe they would never have completed Year 12 without the specialised support they received. The common trajectories move from educational struggle to patterns of antisocial behaviour and withdrawal from society. For some, their life without the SAS intervention was headed for the worst possible ending.

> *"I definitely don't think I would have graduated."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I would have dropped out Year 9 and not went back."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I was engaging in criminal behaviour."*
> ALUMNI

> *"Everything would be different if I didn't go to [the school]. Don't know where I'd be, but it wouldn't be a good place."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I'd either be in prison or dead."*
> ALUMNI

> *"To put it quite bluntly, I would say I'm not sure I'd still be here."*
> ALUMNI

The financial impact on students' futures

The personal crises of learning disengagement create a cumulative financial burden for students and the wider community. Limited educational opportunities in youth lead to long-term economic disadvantages. While individual experiences vary, disengagement from learning often results in restricted career prospects and reduced lifetime earnings.

Reduced long-term employment opportunities

Higher levels of schooling correlate with stronger employment outcomes. More than four in five Australians (81%) who complete their schooling to a Year 12 level are employed throughout their typical working life (ages 20 to 60). In contrast, the employment rate for those who complete to a Year 10 level or below falls to an average of 69%. Completing those final two years of school significantly increases an individual's likelihood of consistent participation in the workforce.

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOME: RATE OF EMPLOYMENT

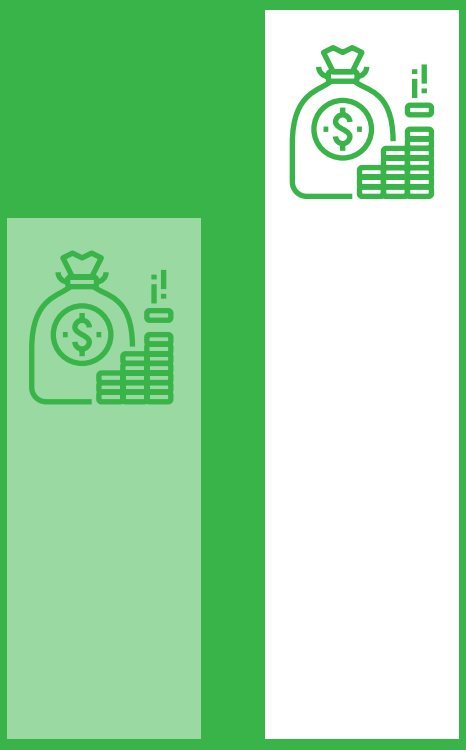
% 20-59 year-old population, Australian Census of Population and Housing, 2006-2021 by highest level of schooling completed.





MEDIAN ANNUAL EARNINGS

By highest level of schooling completed



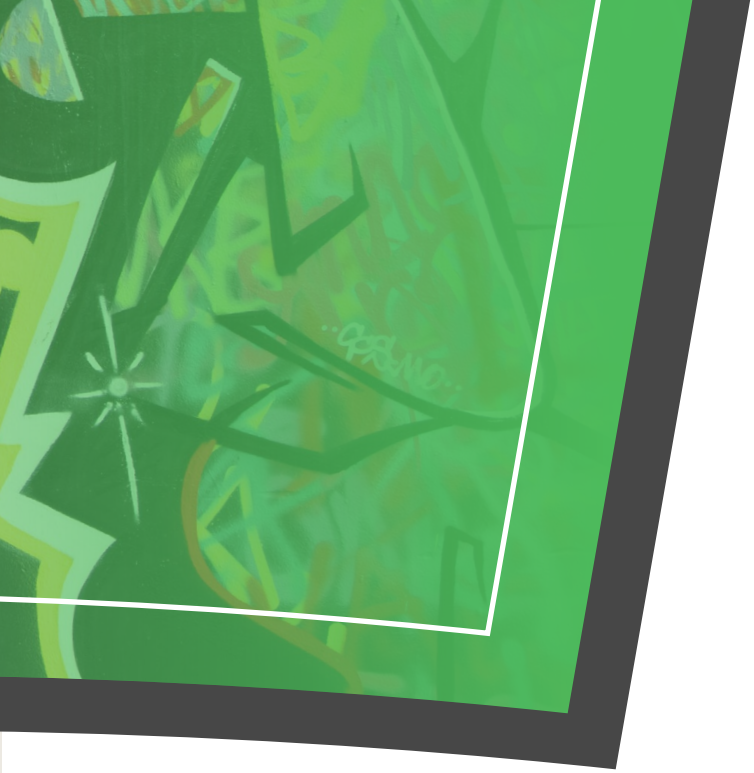
Diminished earning potential

Beyond lower employment rates, education levels are also correlated with earning capacity. Two fewer years of schooling can reduce an individual's earnings by $400 per week, equivalent to more than $20,000 in lost annual income.

The cost to society

Beyond the negative impact on individuals, student disengagement also creates significant long-term fiscal costs for the government. When a young person leaves school early, the resulting decrease in productivity generally reduces the state's tax revenue. At the same time, the community bears a higher cost for social support services. Over an assumed working-life of 40 years, from the age of 20 to 59, the difference is significant. This difference becomes even clearer when considering the impact of the 2025 graduating cohort of 2,000 students.

A detailed breakdown of modelling assumptions and calculations can be found in the Appendix.



Reduced revenue from income tax contributions

Lower earning capacity directly reduces an individual's tax contribution. Accounting for earning capacity and overall employment rate over the typical working-life, a Year 12 graduate will contribute a weighted average of $308,800 (Net Present Value) in income tax. In contrast, a Year 10 leaver will contribute only $132,500. For the 2025 graduating cohort, this represents a $353 million difference in income tax alone.

Increased reliance on social support systems

Working-age Australians who leave school at Year 10 are twice as likely to be disengaged from both education and employment compared to Year 12 graduates (29% cf. 13%). This high risk of disengagement is likely associated with a greater and more prolonged reliance on government income support.

The financial cost of this reliance is measurable. On average, an individual requires the JobSeeker payment for 172 weeks (3 years and 4 months). This duration increases to 261 weeks (5 years) when accounting for transitions between different support types. While approximately half (53%) of JobSeeker recipients exit the system within 12 months, a sizeable cohort remains dependent on long-term assistance.

Our modelling finds that early school leavers require a weighted average of $44,800 in JobSeeker support. For a Year 12 graduate this drops to $21,300. Completing Year 12 results in a conservative lifetime saving of $23,500 in welfare costs per student, or a projected welfare saving of $47 million for 2025's graduating cohort. In reality, the complexities of long-term disengagement likely widen this gap further, making the Special Assistance School intervention even more valuable for the state.



INCOME TAX CONTRIBUTION

Year 12 graduate

$308,800

Year 10 graduate

$132,500



INCOME SUPPORT

Year 12 graduate

$21,300

Year 10 graduate

$44,800

Higher rates of criminal justice involvement

There are many factors that influence a person's likelihood of criminal offence and incarceration. Educational disengagement is one such factor, with early school leavers disproportionately represented in Australia's prison population. Approximately 69% of the prison population have completed schooling to a Year 10 level or below. This rate is more than 2.5 times higher than the general Australian population (27%).

The fiscal impact on the prison system is substantial. When weighted by incarceration rates, the cost to the state is $18,500 across the working life of every early school leaver, compared to just $2,000 for a Year 12 graduate. This represents a difference of $33 million for 2025's graduating cohort alone.

Increased pressure on the healthcare system

Education is a key determinant of long-term health and wellbeing. Lower levels of schooling correlate with a higher incidence of chronic health conditions. This is influenced by the interaction between education, employment stability and access to health services.

Government health spending is significantly higher for individuals who do not complete schooling to a Year 12 level. An early school leaver requires an average of $31,800 in health system spending, all before the age of 60 when health conditions typically worsen with age. In contrast, a Year 12 graduate incurs an average of $22,000. For every student who is able to re-engage to complete Year 12, the government saves $9,800 in health system costs across their working life. This equates to a saving of $20 million in healthcare system costs for the graduating cohort of 2025.

AVERAGE COSTS THROUGH INCARCERATION EXPENDITURE



Year 12 graduate

$2,000

Year 10 graduate

$18,500

COSTS THROUGH HEALTH SPENDING ON LONG-TERM HEALTH CONDITIONS



Year 12 graduate

$22,000

Year 10 graduate

$31,800

SAS STORIES

"There were some [students from juvenile justice]…Their families didn't believe that they were going to succeed or amount to anything, because no schools would take them…So when we started the [school] pilot program, they became interested in working with the community…They did their Cert II in business…They became a part of the community…They became young men that succeeded."

STAFF



The $452 million benefit of re-engagement

Completing Year 12 generates a measurable economic return through increased tax revenue and reduced government spending. Reduced income tax, higher welfare reliance, and increased justice and health costs create a significant financial burden. For every student who re-engages and completes their schooling to a Year 12 level, the community recaptures at least $226,100.

Based on the 2025 graduating cohort of 2,000 students from Queensland's independent Special Assistance Schools, this represents a benefit of $452 million for the duration of their working life. As enrolment in the sector grows, this economic return continues to compound.

This estimate is inherently conservative. It also does not account for the 32% of alumni who pursue further study, which will likely increase their income-earning capacity and fiscal contribution to society. Nor does the modelling capture the indirect positive impacts on families and local communities. Re-engaging at-risk young people is both a social priority and an economic opportunity for Queensland.

THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

Average financial contribution to Australian society from the age of 20 to 59, Net Present Value.

Lifetime cost / contribution	Year 12 graduate	Year 10 or below	Net benefit per individual	Net benefit for 2025 cohort
Income tax revenue	$308,807	$132,533	$176,274	$353 million
Income support	-$21,305	-$44,799	$23,494	$47 million
Cost of incarceration	-$2,001	-$18,458	$16,453	$33 million
Cost of long-term health conditions	-$21,962	-$31,816	$9,854	$20 million
TOTAL	**$263,539**	**$37,460**	**$226,079**	**$452 million**



More than re-engagement

MEETING FOUNDATIONAL NEEDS TO REMOVE BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Establishing the safety required for learning

Special Assistance Schools support students who often face significant social and economic disadvantages. Nearly three-quarters of the sector's student population (74%) are in the bottom two quartiles of socio-educational advantage. These students navigate systemic barriers which hinder their participation in schooling.

> *"I didn't have stable housing at the time."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I didn't have access to a laptop… How was a young person in Year 7 meant to buy themselves a laptop when their family wasn't able to provide one?"*
> ALUMNI

Special Assistance Schools act as an important safety net by helping address fundamental student needs. Nine in ten alumni and parents of alumni (89%) agree that their SAS helps students meet their basic needs. By providing this foundational support, schools create the stability necessary for educational engagement.

> *"They helped us with groceries, clothes…they helped me get my license, which was really, really helpful, because we weren't in a financial situation to be able to do that. It helped us a lot."*
> ALUMNI

> *"They helped me find the Department of Housing and put in an application for my own place, and sorting through external youth workers to help me out with my personal life…"*
> ALUMNI

"I was struggling a lot with personal and family issues and I didn't have any money to even afford to go see a psychologist. So I was able to…see the counsellor there at my campus, and it just really helped me a lot through the tough times."
ALUMNI

"At my campus, breakfasts were provided, lunches were provided…In terms of uniforms, they were all free; we didn't have to bring books."
ALUMNI

"I suffered from an eating disorder, so it's actually really good to not have to worry about taking food in the mornings, because I could just go to the cafeteria and just get whatever I felt like that day."
ALUMNI

"We're about removing the barriers to education first. So, our school provides breakfast and lunch… It provides money on go-cards that they can get to and from school…We have a charity who comes and helps with meals for families and clothes and things like that. So removing the barriers of getting to school in the first place is probably our first priority."
STAFF

Empowering students' voice and wellbeing

A defining characteristic of the SAS environment is the prioritisation of student health and wellbeing. More than four in five stakeholders believe their school empowers students to express their views (82%) and equips them to prioritise their wellbeing (81%).

When assessed against the six domains of *The Nest Wellbeing Framework (The Nest)*[1], four in five stakeholders (81%) believe their school is meeting the criteria for young people to thrive. This holistic approach ensures students feel heard and respected, sometimes for the first time in their schooling journey. This sense of belonging is a primary catalyst for the physical and emotional changes observed in students during their time at a SAS.

"You can actually see the change, the actual impact and the physical change that happens in people. Sometimes within days, sometimes within weeks… because you start to feel like you're actually being heard, that you're a person, not a number."
ALUMNI

"My parents, my family, my teachers noticed a huge change in me. They noticed I was happier, more motivated to go, and just excited for the future."
ALUMNI

The Nest Wellbeing Framework[1]

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING?

Strongly/somewhat agree (n=681)





TRANSFORMING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Fostering academic engagement through flexibility

Special Assistance Schools achieve academic success by adapting the curriculum to the individual student. More than three in four parents (77%) believe flexible learning and curriculum is a key strength of the sector. Additionally, a similar proportion of stakeholders believe their school helps students to develop a love of learning (76% strongly/somewhat agree). These educational transformations display themselves in student performance and confidence.

> *"I went from D's in maths to an A in my first term and I got a special acceptance into uni."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I had never gotten an A before, or a B, a C was an achievement, and then… it was all B's and A's, and I would constantly come home feeling like had achieved something."*
> ALUMNI

Equipping students for success with practical pathways

The flexible approach at Special Assistance Schools provides students with more than just one pathway to success. Almost two in three parents (64%) believe their school's focus on practical learning and career readiness is a key strength. This includes support for completing certificates and diplomas alongside traditional schooling.

Almost three in five (58%) parents agree that SAS effectively prepare students for life after graduation. By removing the barriers of the traditional classroom, these schools enable students to gain tangible qualifications that lead directly to employment.

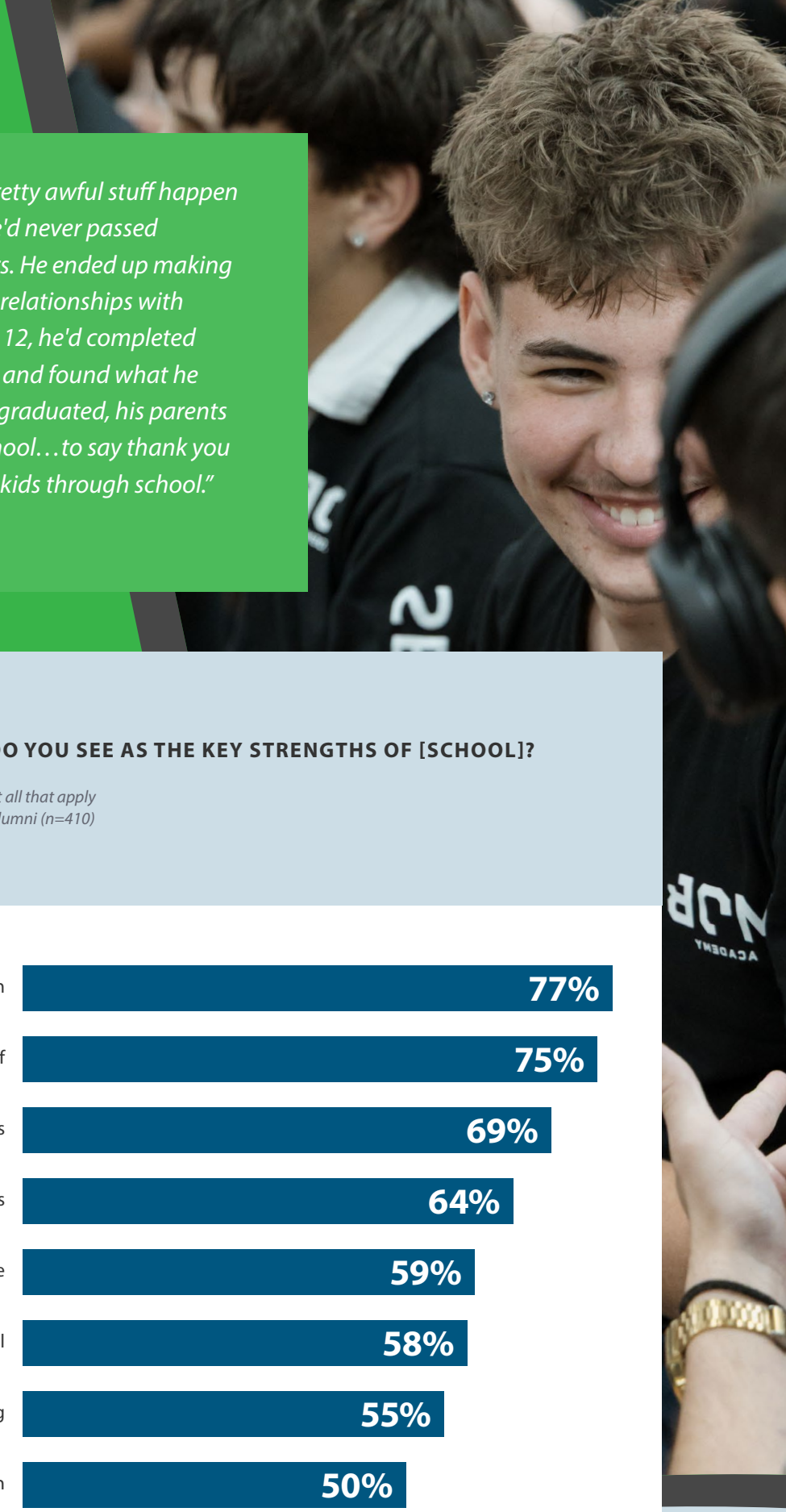
> *"They offered to get you into those courses, to pay for it. That's how I got into [working in] security."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I graduated with 13 certificates and 2 qualifications. If I didn't come to [the school] I wouldn't have finished school. No one else would take me. [The school] saved me."*
> ALUMNI

SAS STORIES

"[One student] had some pretty awful stuff happen at his previous schools…He'd never passed anything for years and years. He ended up making good friendships and good relationships with teachers. By the end of year 12, he'd completed everything… got his QCE…and found what he wanted to do… [When] he graduated, his parents then threw us a party at school…to say thank you for us actually getting their kids through school."

STAFF



WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE KEY STRENGTHS OF [SCHOOL]?

Please select all that apply
Parents of alumni (n=410)

STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY ECOSYSTEM

Alleviating the pressure of disengagement

Student disengagement can place profound stress on the family unit. National research identifies a link between school refusal and an increased risk of family breakdown.[2] Special Assistance Schools act as an important support system for these families, providing a community characterised by respect and understanding.

More than four in five parents (82%) feel respected and understood by SAS staff. Further, 78% of parents agree that enrolling their child in a Special Assistance School took pressure off their family. By supporting the student's wellbeing, the school acts as a stabilising force in the entire family environment.

> ***"Staff not only supported [her] education, health and wellbeing but supported the health and wellbeing of us as [her] parents."***
> PARENT

> ***"As a struggling single parent, with a child that engaged in self-harm, this school literally saved our lives."***
> PARENT

Improved student attendance restores parent workforce participation

School refusal can also have a significant negative impact on parents' employment and financial security.2
The need to care for children who are unable to participate in schooling prevents some parents from participating in the workforce. Special Assistance Schools address this challenge by successfully re-engaging students in learning.

Many alumni report dramatic improvements to their school attendance during their time at SAS, and three in four parents (75%) agree that changing to a SAS made a big difference to their child's attendance. This improvement in attendance has a direct economic benefit, as it enables parents to return to work or increase their hours. Re-engaging at-risk students therefore provides educational success for the child and restored productivity for their parent.

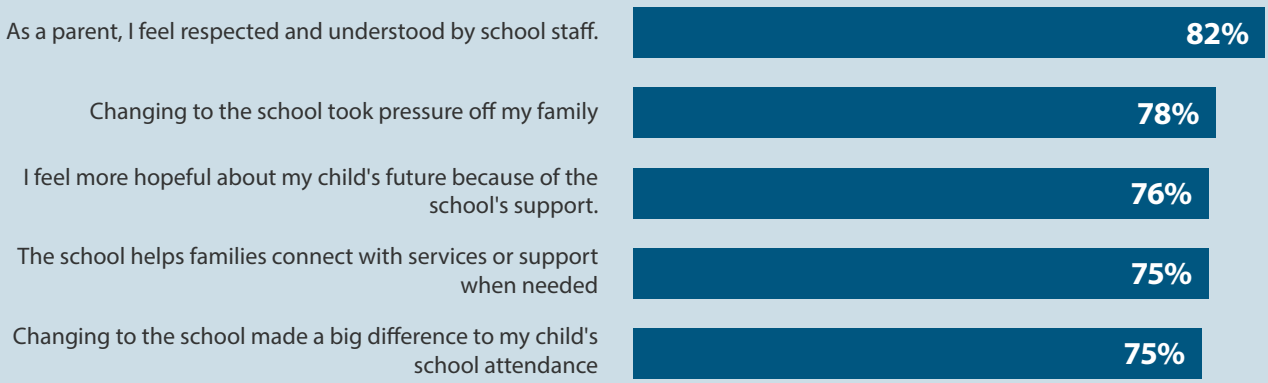
> ***"My mum wasn't able to work while I was unwell… since I started at [the school] she's now actively looking for a job, and that's just not something that we had thought would be possible."***
> ALUMNI



The difference SAS makes to families

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT [SCHOOL]?

Strongly/somewhat agree
Parents of alumni (n=410)





SAS STORIES

"[One student's] mum had trouble getting him to school every day because he would vomit in the car on the way to school just because of severe anxiety. [But soon] he was coming to school every day, and she's like, we can't stop him from coming now, he wants to come all the time! And he still comes back now at least 2 or 3 times a year to visit us."

STAFF



Building a foundation for independence

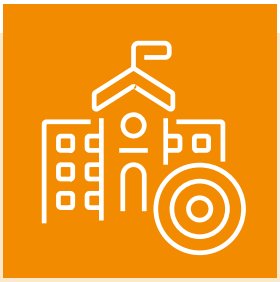
Restoring holistic wellbeing and hope

Special Assistance Schools have a lasting positive impact on student wellbeing. Three in five stakeholders (60%) believe their Special Assistance School has had an extremely or very positive impact based on the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI-A). This index measures the critical life domains of safety, security, relationships, and health.[3] For many students and their families, the transition to a SAS environment marks a shift from a state of crisis to one of stability and hope for the future.

> *"I'm very, very happy with where I am at the moment, and I don't even want to think about where I would be if it wasn't for them."*
> ALUMNI

> *"The school staff helped her survive from depression suicide and turned her into a happy, confident goer."*
> PARENT

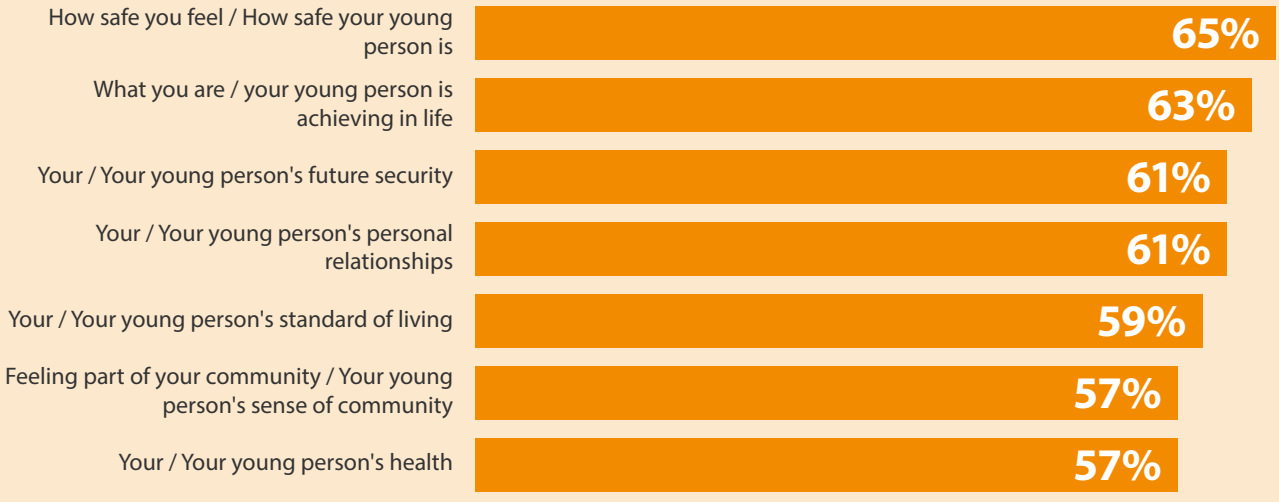
> *"[The school] gave her more than an education, it gave her back her joy, her confidence, and her hope."*
> PARENT



The Personal Wellbeing Index

WHAT IMPACT HAS ATTENDING [SCHOOL] HAD IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS?

Extremely/very positive impact (n=681)





Re-engaging the disengaged

The majority of SAS students successfully transition into meaningful activity after graduation. Nearly nine in ten SAS alumni (87%) are engaged in work, study, volunteering, or providing care for their children.

> *"[The school] helped me find my job, and the certificates and qualifications I needed to be in it."*
> ALUMNI

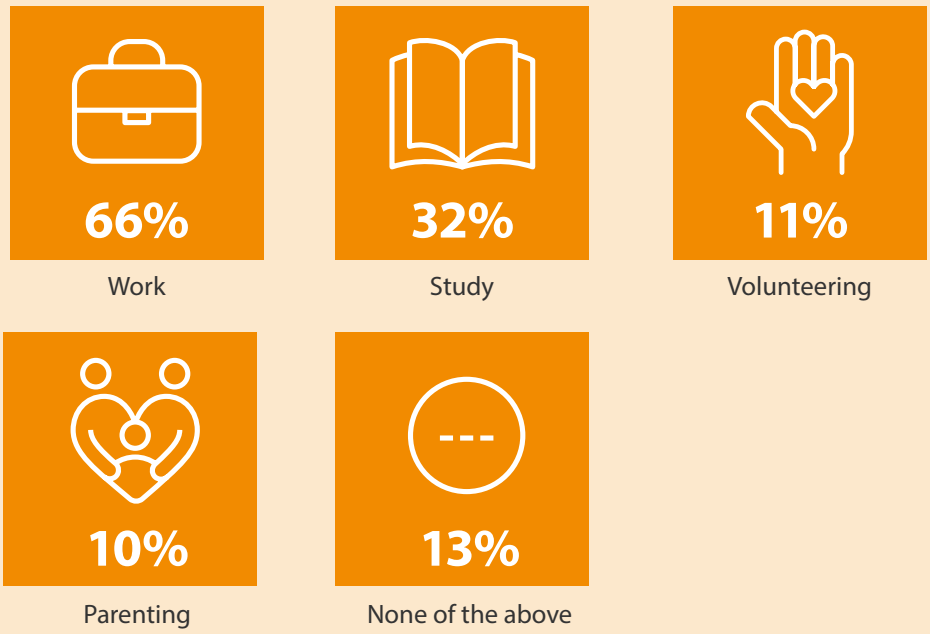
Transitioning into the workforce

Special Assistance Schools actively support students in the transition to work or further study. Two in three alumni (66%) are currently employed, with many directly crediting their career entry to the support they received at school. By integrating vocational qualifications with secondary education, SAS students are set up to be work-ready upon graduation.

> *"I got a full-time job…after finishing school…I bought my first car…I have moved into my own place."*
> ALUMNI

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES ARE YOU ENGAGED IN NOW?

Please select all that apply
Alumni (n=271)





Reviving a love for lifelong learning

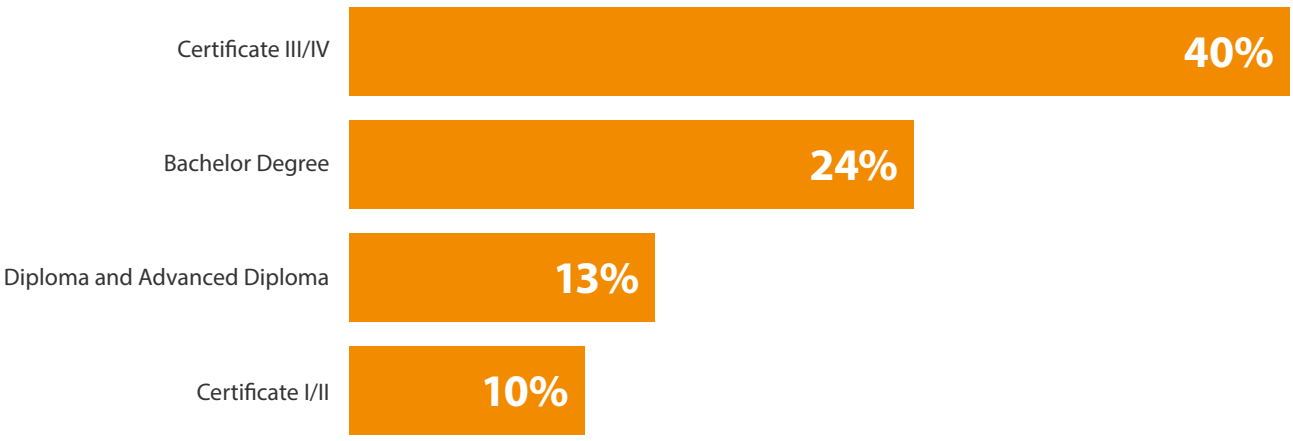
One in three SAS alumni (32%) are currently pursuing further education. Of this group, more than three in five (63%) are completing a certificate or diploma, while one in four (24%) are completing their bachelor's degree or higher. This upward trend in educational attainment demonstrates the sector's ability to re-ignite academic ambition in students who were previously disengaged.

> *"I don't think that I would be in the same situation had I not gone to the school, because I don't think I would have gone to university at all."*
> ALUMNI

> *"[The school] supported me to get into university, so I was the first person from [the school] to get into university, which is such an amazing thing to be able to say… and now that's opened up so many other pathways for other young people"*
> ALUMNI

WHAT LEVEL OF QUALIFICATION ARE YOU CURRENTLY STUDYING FOR?

Alumni engaged in study (n=88)





CASE STUDY

Tiana's transformation

Before finding a flexible learning environment, Tiana felt "put in this box" by mainstream schools that prioritised grades over her personal circumstances. Lacking support at home, she faced significant barriers, including a three-hour daily commute and no access to a laptop. Eventually, she disengaged from schooling entirely.

During this period, Tiana faced increased social risks. She began associating with negative influences and engaged in criminal activity and substance use. Without the intervention of a SAS school, she likely would never have graduated. The mainstream schooling environment could not accommodate her domestic responsibilities, where she was "playing the role of mum" for children at home while trying to study and maintain her own life.

The turning point came when a SAS school met Tiana with support rather than disciplinary action. When her attendance faltered, the school identified the domestic barriers preventing her participation. They coordinated with youth workers to organise at-home support, allowing Tiana to reclaim her studies.

The school also addressed her immediate physical needs. By providing food and resources, the school removed the daily stress of survival. This holistic approach allowed Tiana to move from a defensive state of survival to being a focused student. She attended five days a week and became the first person from her school to enter university.

Now 20, Tiana is a homeowner and a dedicated Youth and Community Outreach Worker. Drawing on the leadership skills and confidence she developed at her SAS school, she now engages in professional public speaking. She aims to eventually enter politics or found a not-for-profit to support other vulnerable young people. Her journey from total disengagement to social advocacy highlights how Special Assistance Schools provide the tailored environment, support and flexible learning pathways to build a foundation for independence.

**Tiana's name has been changed to maintain anonymity.*



A specialised workforce is the foundation for student transformation

Special Assistance Schools rely on the expertise and dedication of a highly specialised workforce including teachers, but also other professions such as youth workers and counsellors. Three in four parents (75%) believe supportive and caring staff are a key strength of the sector. Both alumni and parents frequently cite the relationship with school staff as the most valuable aspect of the SAS experience. This relational connection often serves as the initial bridge for students returning to the education system.

> *"They [teachers] are actually the heart and soul of it… you can see when someone wants to be a teacher and does it for the right reasons."*
> ALUMNI

> *"The teachers and staff were amazing."*
> ALUMNI

> *"The youth workers were really good, like, even still [after graduating school], they still check-up. Occasionally, you reach out, and they're still always there, no matter what."*
> ALUMNI

> *"I was really close with the careers teacher, and she's the one that pushed me to get all the certificates…rather than just sitting at home doing nothing."*
> ALUMNI

> *"They constantly went above and beyond."*
> ALUMNI

> *"They could just tell that you weren't having a good day. They'd make sure that you were okay."*
> ALUMNI

> *"Staff are supportive, understanding and caring. My child feels heard and included."*
> PARENT

> *"They are the most incredible group of people and I will forever be so grateful for them."*
> PARENT

A purpose-driven commitment to student re-engagement

A purpose-driven workforce can create a stimulating and supportive environment for both students and school staff. Many educators choose to work in the SAS sector after identifying systemic gaps in mainstream education. Staff describe a desire to work in an environment where they can provide the necessary adjustments for students who require a different environmental fit.

> *"I felt [working in SAS] was more rewarding…with the filtered-down curriculum and attending to the needs of the students who would otherwise be rejected from mainstream and still giving them a place to thrive."*
> STAFF

> *"For some kids it just doesn't work… and they're good kids, their kids that should be educated, and I just didn't see that we were changing for the young people in front of us quickly enough."*
> STAFF

Navigating the complexities of trauma-informed education

Working in a Special Assistance School is as rewarding as it is professionally demanding. Staff navigate the dual roles of educator and support worker, often managing the complexities of student trauma while providing academic development.

School leaders identify the challenges in attracting and retaining staff with the specific skill sets and disposition required for this work. Funding constraints have placed additional pressure on schools' ability to provide the comprehensive wrap-around support that is central to the SAS model.

> *"When you get teachers that have come from mainstream or the department, it's a big shock for some. But…especially new teachers, they're not trained and equipped to support some of the issues and the barriers that [our students are] facing."*
> STAFF

> *"Running that line between making sure that we're providing everything we possibly can for these young people… then getting told you're getting funding cut, and you have to scale back somewhere… continues to be a challenge."*
> STAFF

> *"One of [our challenges] is funding cuts to special assistance schools and the impact it's had on us, knowing that we have to provide the wrap-around care that we do for these young people, and the well-being programs, and all the add-ons, and paying for things like go-cards and driver's licenses."*
> STAFF



Aligning policy with student outcomes

To best serve their students, SAS staff advocate for greater flexibility in curriculum delivery. Some current requirements, such as mandatory second-language instruction for students still struggling with basic literacy, can cause unnecessary friction. While schools can and do make internal adjustments, policy changes that allow for more relevant, practical curriculum alignment would further empower student flourishing.

> ***"We offer things different, we change and modify the curriculum to suit individual plans and needs, and we provide opportunities that, you know, other schools aren't doing."***
> STAFF

SAS STORIES

"One of our graduating kids last year Year 11, he [previously] averaged 23% attendance. I think we were his fourth school. We just focused on connection building with him, so sort of giving him that reason to want to come to school, and then he ended up getting over 90% attendance, and he got a university scholarship as well."

STAFF

An invitation to witness the impact

While data supports the positive impact of Special Assistance Schools, there's a shared recognition that numbers on a page cannot capture the full extent of the sector's impact. School staff invite policymakers to experience the SAS environment first-hand to see the tangible differences made in the lives of young people and their families.

> ***"[I'd love] for some of the people that make some of those decisions around curriculum, education, schooling… [to] come and engage with some of our young people and their families and see the tangible difference that it actually makes. It might not always be reflected in the data… we can't capture absolutely everything we do."***
> STAFF

> ***"Talk to the kids and the staff, and spend a week [here], absolutely. And just look at the outcomes, look at what we're doing."***
> STAFF

> ***"People imagine that it is chaotic [and there are] lots of behaviour issues. Yes, we do have our share, but, the fact [is] that the students feel safe. They're a lot calmer in our environment. Sometimes you can actually hear a pin drop."***
> STAFF



Research methodology

This report, commissioned by Independent Schools Queensland and produced by McCrindle, is the collation of data from an online survey, focus groups, in-depth interviews, data made available by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), and data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Department of Social Services, and the Productivity Commission.

Online survey

McCrindle conducted an online survey of alumni and parents of alumni from independent SAS schools in Queensland. The survey was in field from the 20th of October to the 13th of December 2025, yielding 271 responses from alumni and 410 responses from parents of alumni (681 responses total). The survey was distributed to alumni and parents of alumni from the following schools:

- Arcadia College
- Carinity Education
- Kairos Community College
- Ohana College
- The BUSY School
- Y Schools Queensland

Focus groups and interviews

Six focus groups and seven in-depth interviews were carried out in addition to the focus groups.

- Three focus groups and seven interviews were conducted with a total of 23 alumni of independent QLD SAS schools.
- Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 23 staff of independent QLD SAS schools.

Alumni participants were recruited through a survey distributed through participating SAS schools' alumni networks. Staff were recruited directly through participating SAS schools. The focus groups and interviews were conducted online on Zoom, and in-person between the 3rd of February and the 19th of February 2026.

ACARA data

A collection of public access data and data under application has been analysed for the report. These include

- School Profile 2008-2025
- School Location 2025
- Enrolments by Grade 2008-2025
- Student attendance 2014-2024
- VET in schools 2008-2023
- Senior secondary outcomes 2008-2023
- Finance 2009-2023

ABS data

- Census of Population and Housing 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021
- National Health Survey, 2022
- Employee earnings, 2025
- Characteristics of Employment, Australia, 2025

AIHW

- Health expenditure Australia 2023–24
- Health system spending on disease and injury in Australia 2023–24
- AIHW disease expenditure database; Australian Burden of Disease Study 2024; Kirby Institute. Health system spending per case of disease and for certain risk factors
- The health of Australia's prisoners: 2015, AIHW.
- The health of people in Australia's prisons: 2022, AIHW.

Department of Social Services

- DSS JobSeeker Payment and Youth Allowance - monthly profile - November 2025

Productivity Commission

- Report on Government Services 2026, Data table 8 Corrective services

Graphs and Rounding

Data labels on the graphs in this report have been rounded for simplicity. Some graphs, may, therefore sum to 99% or 101%. Any calculations where two data points have been added are based on raw data (not the rounded data labels on the graph) which have been rounded once combined.

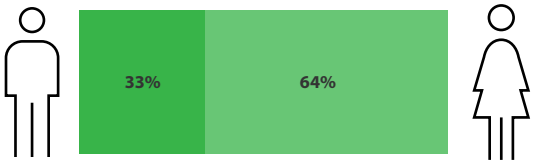
Terminology

Throughout the report, Special Assistance School alumni and parents are at times collectively referred to as stakeholders. While the study is conducted with Queensland's independent Special Assistance Schools, in the report, they have been referred to as Special Assistance Schools or SAS for brevity.

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

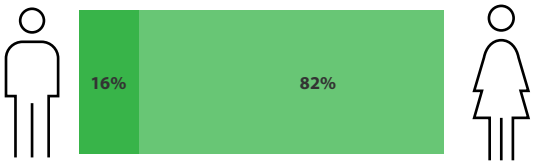
ARE YOU MALE OR FEMALE?

Alumni n=271



ARE YOU MALE OR FEMALE?

Parents n=410



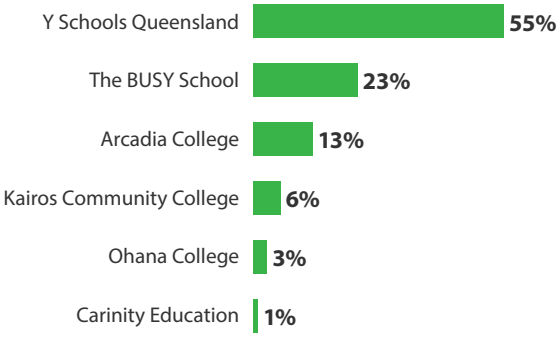
AVERAGE YEAR OF BIRTH

Alumni n=271

2006

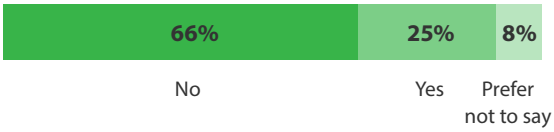
SCHOOL ATTENDED

Alumni n=271



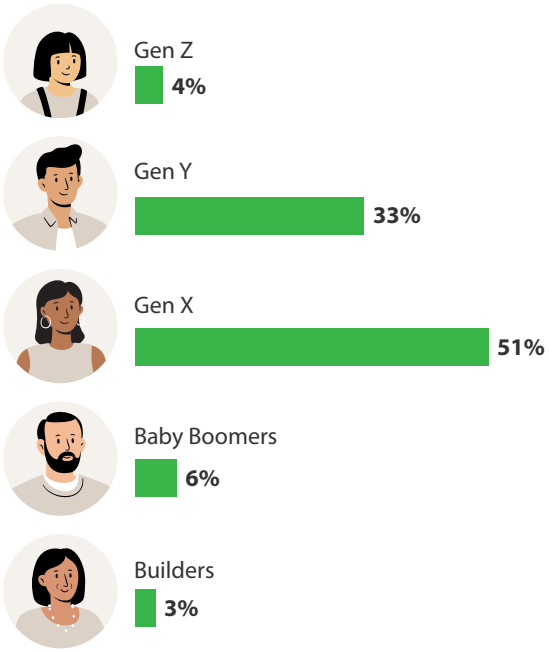
ARE YOU LIVING WITH A DISABILITY?

Alumni n=271



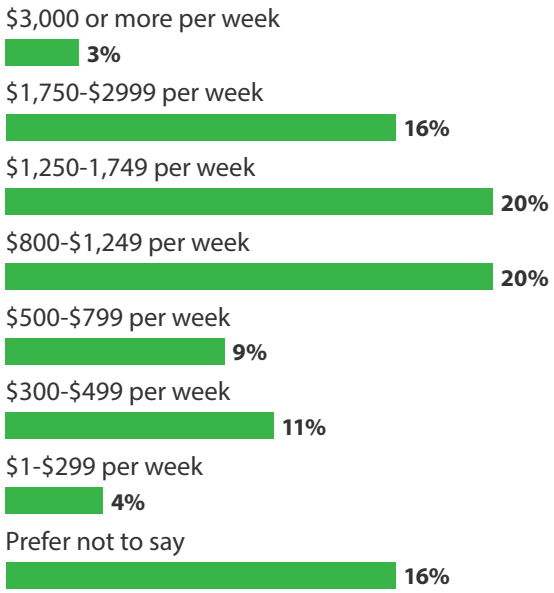
WHAT AGE WILL YOU BE IN 2025?

Parents n=410



WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST REPRESENTS YOUR USUAL PERSONAL GROSS INCOME? (I.E. BEFORE TAXES)?

Parents n=410



Appendix: Economic modelling and assumptions

Acknowledging the complex nature of long-term post-school outcomes and the high degree of variation, the following is an estimate that evaluates the fiscal benefit associated with students who, with the support of Special Assistance Schools, are able to re-engage and complete their schooling up to a Year 12 level or equivalent. While a range of factors, both known and unknown, are likely to impact the fiscal outcome of completing schooling to a Year 12 level, the present study has limited the evaluation domain to the following:

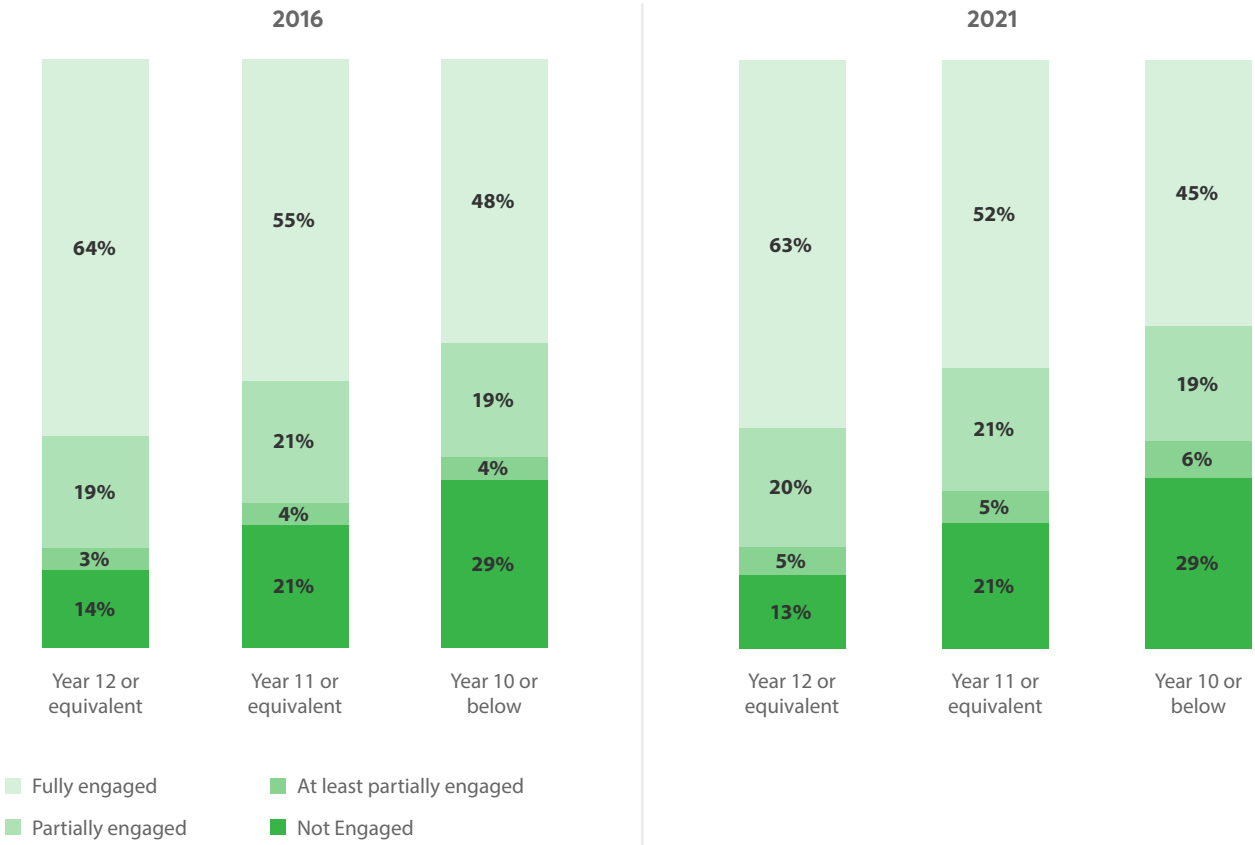
- Income tax contribution
- Cost to the Australian Government through income support in the form of JobSeeker payment
- Cost to the Australian Government through expenditure of Australia's prisons
- Cost to the Australian Government through health care expenditure

THE OPPORTUNITY AND ENGAGEMENT GAP

Disengagement in school tends to have compound long-term effects. Australians who complete their schooling up to a Year 12 level or equivalent are more likely to be engaged in employment or education throughout their typical working life (aged 20 to 59). Just over 13% are not engaged in employment or education, less than half the rate of those who completed schooling to a Year 10 level or below (29%).

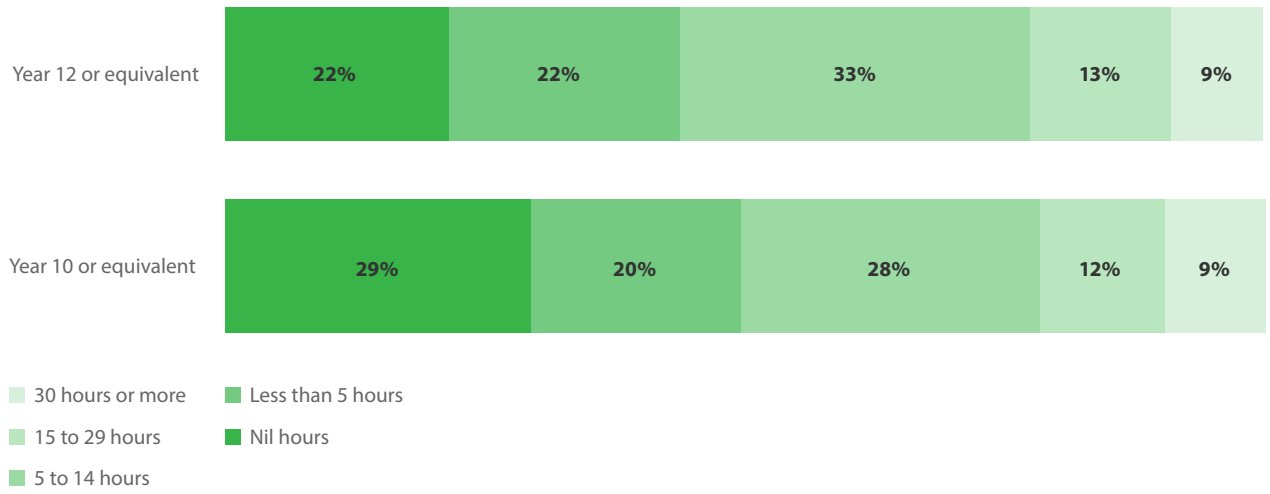
While the purpose of life is not solely to engage in employment and education, engagement in other pursuits differs only slightly when comparing early school leavers and those who complete all 13 years of schooling. Time spent on domestic work, volunteering, providing health care, aged care, and child care are not markedly different between the two groups. As such, these areas are not pursued further in this modelling.

ENGAGEMENT IN EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING



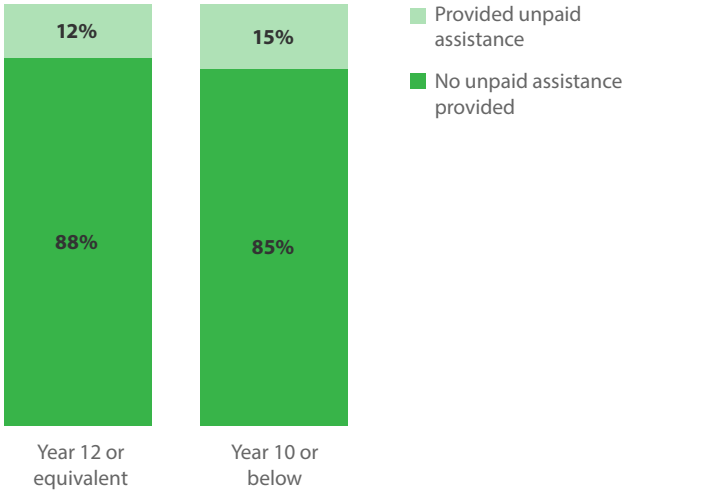
UNPAID DOMESTIC WORK: NUMBER OF HOURS (2021 CENSUS, 20-59 YEAR OLDS)

Number of hours people spent in the previous week doing domestic work without pay.



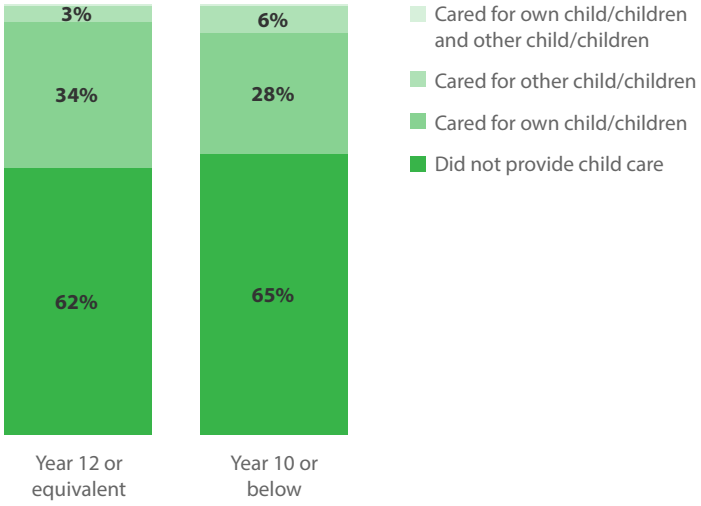
UNPAID ASSISTANCE TO A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, HEALTH CONDITION, OR DUE TO OLD AGE (2021 CENSUS, 20-59 YEAR OLDS)

In the two weeks prior to Census Night spent time providing unpaid care, help or assistance to family members or others because of a disability, a long-term health condition, or problems related to old age.



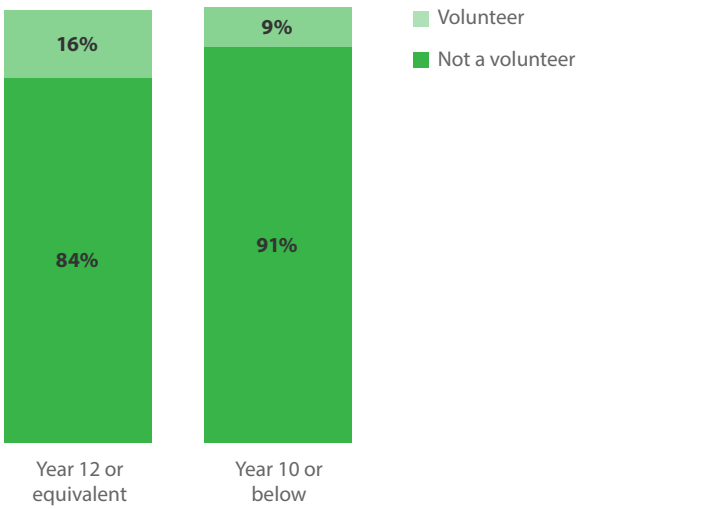
UNPAID CHILD CARE (2021 CENSUS, 20-59 YEAR OLDS)

In the two weeks prior to Census Night spent time caring for a child or children aged under 15 years without pay.



VOLUNTARY WORK FOR AN ORGANISATION OR GROUP (2021 CENSUS, 20-59 YEAR OLDS)

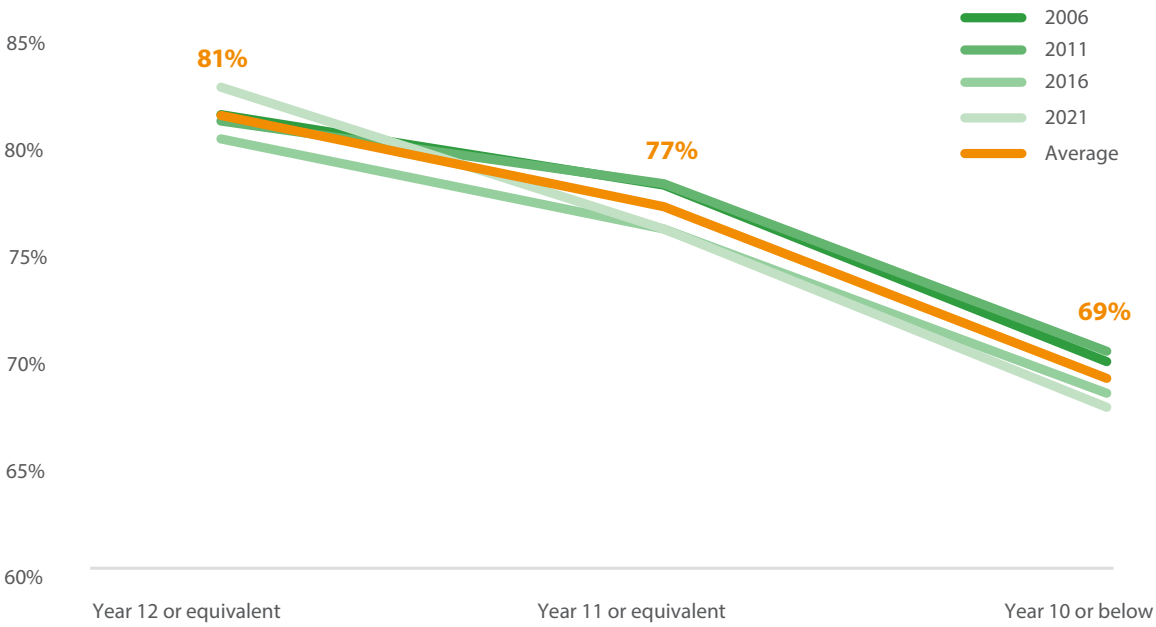
Spent time doing unpaid voluntary work for an organisation or group in the twelve months prior to Census Night



LOST EARNINGS

On average, the higher the level of schooling completed, the greater the employment rate. Among Australians who completed their schooling up to a Year 12 level or equivalent, more than 80% are employed throughout the typical working life (20 to 59). This declines to an average of 77% for those who completed up to a Year 11 level or equivalent. For those who completed to a Year 10 level or below, an average of 69% are employed.

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOME – RATE OF EMPLOYMENT (% 20-59 POPULATION)

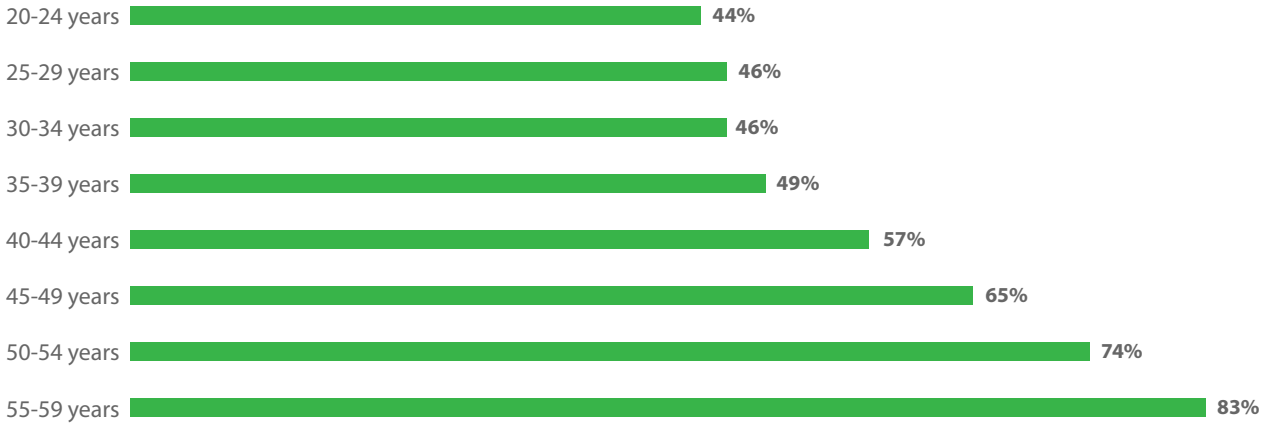


While the cycles and seasons of life are a common human experience, directly influencing patterns of employment and engagement, disengagement looks to be the precursor to long-term disengagement.

Based on analysis of linked Census records, almost half of all Australians who are not engaged in education or employment remain so after 5 years. This increases sharply after the age of 40, likely a result of life stage and age-related opportunity barriers. Similarly, just under half of all Australians who are unemployed or not in the labour force remain so after 10 years, increasing again after the age of 40.

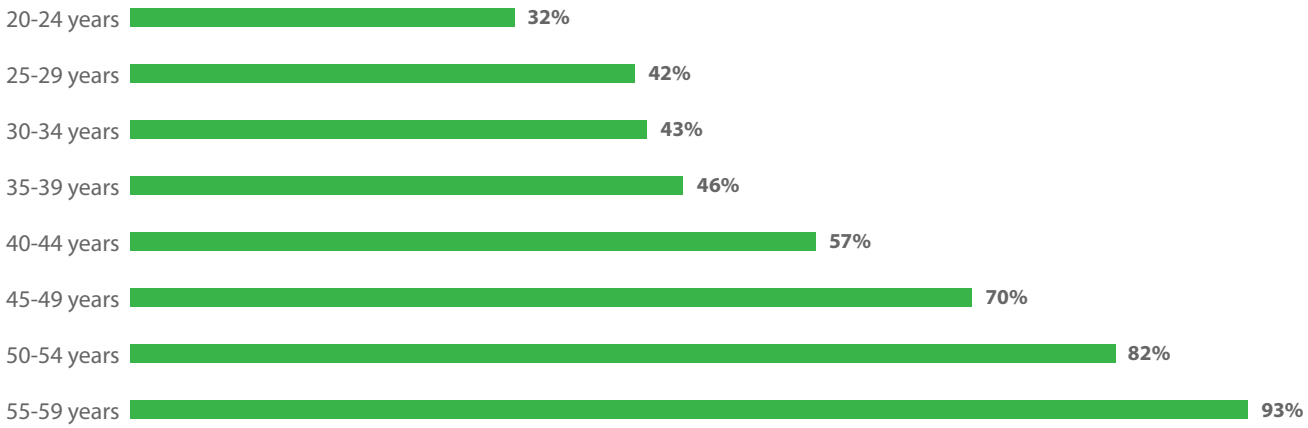
NOT ENGAGED IN EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION OR TRAINING AND REMAIN SO AFTER 5 YEARS

Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset, 2016-2021



UNEMPLOYED OR NOT IN THE LABOUR FORCE AND REMAIN SO AFTER 10 YEARS

Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset, 2006-2016.



Beyond a lower rate of employment, and the likelihood of a pattern of longer-term unemployment and disengagement, earning capacity also tends to be limited by education level. Employees who are educated to the equivalence of a Year 10 level have median weekly earnings of $1,000 ($52,000 p.a.). Schooling to a Year 12 level or equivalent increases median earnings to $1,400 ($72,800 p.a.)

Accounting for the average employment rate of the two cohorts, the average annual earnings per person is $59,112 for a Year 12 graduate and $35,823 for a Year 10 graduate.

INCOME TAX CONTRIBUTION

The loss in income-earning capacity directly flows on to the loss in income tax contribution to government, which accounts for almost 40% of Australian Government's revenue through taxation, or 30% of total government revenue.

Based on the Resident tax rates 2025–26, annual taxable income between $45,001 and $135,000 incurs an income tax contribution of $4,288 plus 30c for each $1 over $45,000. Based on the median employee earnings of a Year 12 graduate ($72,800) and a Year 10 graduate ($52,000), weighted by their respective rates of employment over the typical working life (81.2% for Year 12, 68.9% for Year 10) to determine the per person weighted average, income tax contribution for a Year 12 graduate is $10,254 per annum, for a Year 10 graduate it's $4,401.

COST TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT THROUGH INCOME SUPPORT IN THE FORM OF JOBSEEKER PAYMENT

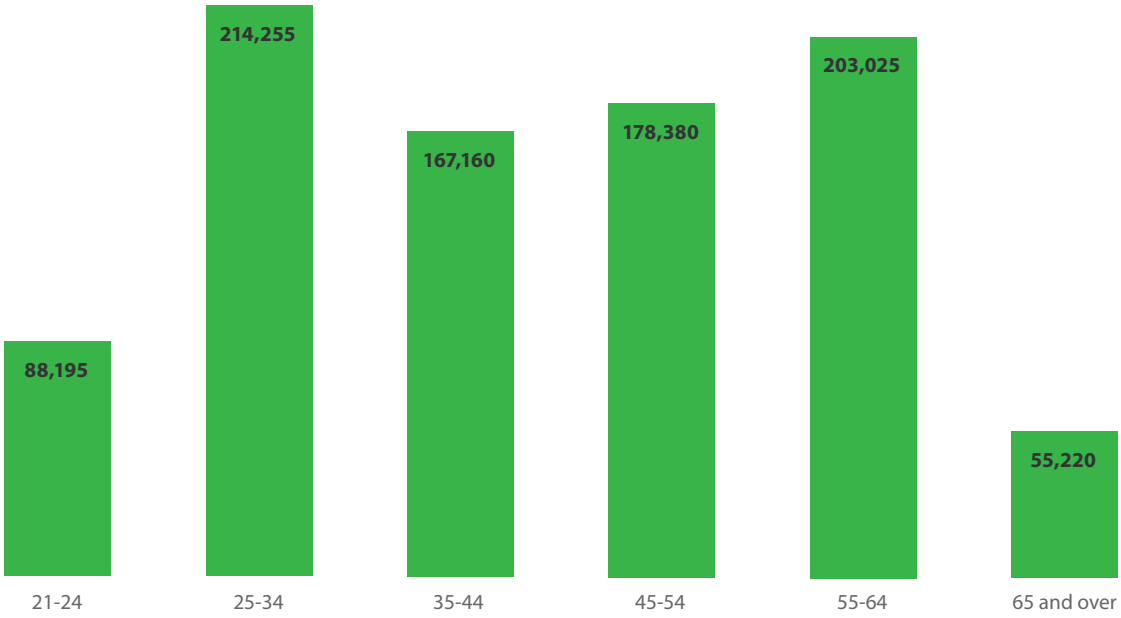
As of December 2025, more than 900,00 Australians are supported by the JobSeeker Payment, which provides financial help for anyone aged 22 to 67 who is looking for work or unable to work due to sickness or injury. This is one of the more common forms of payment support accessed by Australians, after the Age Pension (2.7 million), Family Tax Benefit (2.2 million), and Commonwealth Rent Assistance (1.4 million).

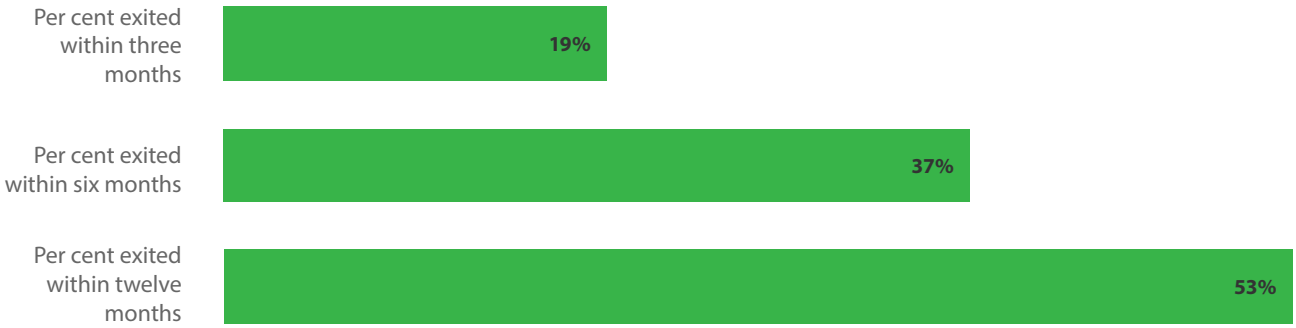
Accounting for the transition from Newstart Allowance to JobSeeker in 2020, the average duration of the JobSeeker payment is 172 weeks (3 years and 4 months). This increases to 261 weeks (5 years) when accounting for periods of exits or switches to other forms of income support.

While the average duration of Australians receiving the JobSeeker payment is more than 3 years, approximately half (53%) of the recipients will exit within 12 months.The remainder include some who may be more dependent on long term income support, and some who exit but require financial help in the future and return to Jobseeker payments as a result of unemployment or injury.

Recipient of JobSeeker payment

To estimate the cost of income support, we assume that half of all who are not engaged in employment or education will require access to JobSeeker payment in their lifetime, and a further half will require the support long term. While this captures only one form of income support, and approximates the reality of a highly dynamic set of circumstances only crudely at best, it remains a valid measure to assess the impact of schooling on the costs of income support to Australian society.





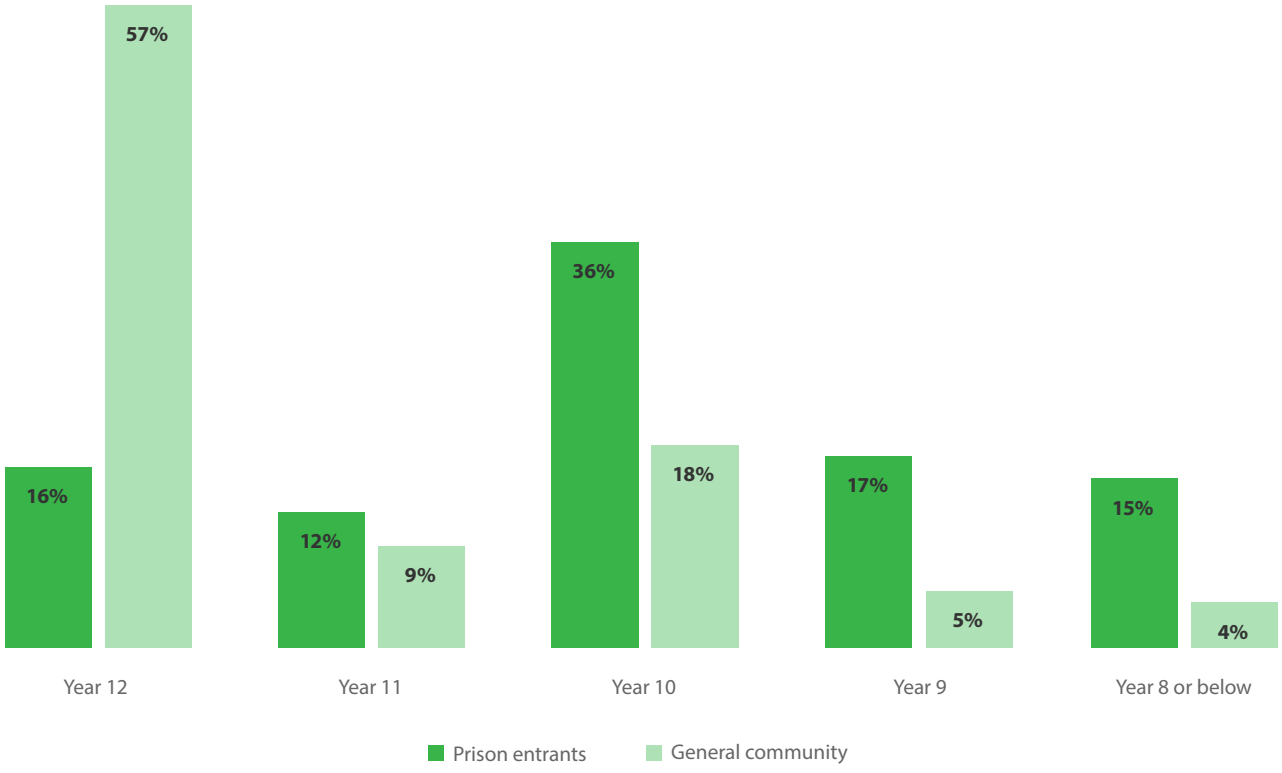
AN ADDITIONAL $780 IN INCOME SUPPORT

Working age Australians who complete their schooling up to a Year 12 level or equivalent are half as likely as those who complete to a Year 10 level to be disengaged from education and employment (13% cf. 29%). As outlined, we assume 3.4% and 7.2% of the cohort will require long term access to JobSeeker payment respectively. In 2025, JobSeeker payment at full rate is $793.60 per fortnight for singles with no dependents. This equates to $20,634 per annum. When weighted by the long-term rate of income support, a graduate who complete their schooling to a Year 12 level or equivalent will require income support to the scale of $707 per annum. A graduate who completes their schooling to a Year 10 level or below will require $1,488 per annum, equating to a difference of $780.

COST TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT THROUGH EXPENDITURE OF AUSTRALIA'S PRISONS

Education is a commonly identified contributor in the myriads of factors that influence a person's likelihood of criminal offence and incarceration. In Australia's prison population, early school leavers are disproportionately represented. Based on samples of prison entrants, 69% have completed schooling to a Year 10 level or below, more than 2.5 times as high as the general population of Australia. Summarised by Baldry et al. (2018) "Many offenders were not integrated into the mainstream community prior to their offending, but were marginalised due to significant social disadvantage encompassing, for example, criminal justice involvement as young people, disability, poverty, dysfunctional families, experience of trauma and/or abuse, lack of education and work-related skills."

HIGHEST LEVEL OF SCHOOLING COMPLETED



ANNUAL COSTS OF $116,650 PER PERSON IN AUSTRALIA'S PRISONS

The operating expenditure of Australia's prisons was just over $5 billion in 2023-24.[4] Over the same period, the average daily prison population was 43,000, equating to an annual expenditure of $116,650 on average per person in Australia's prisons.

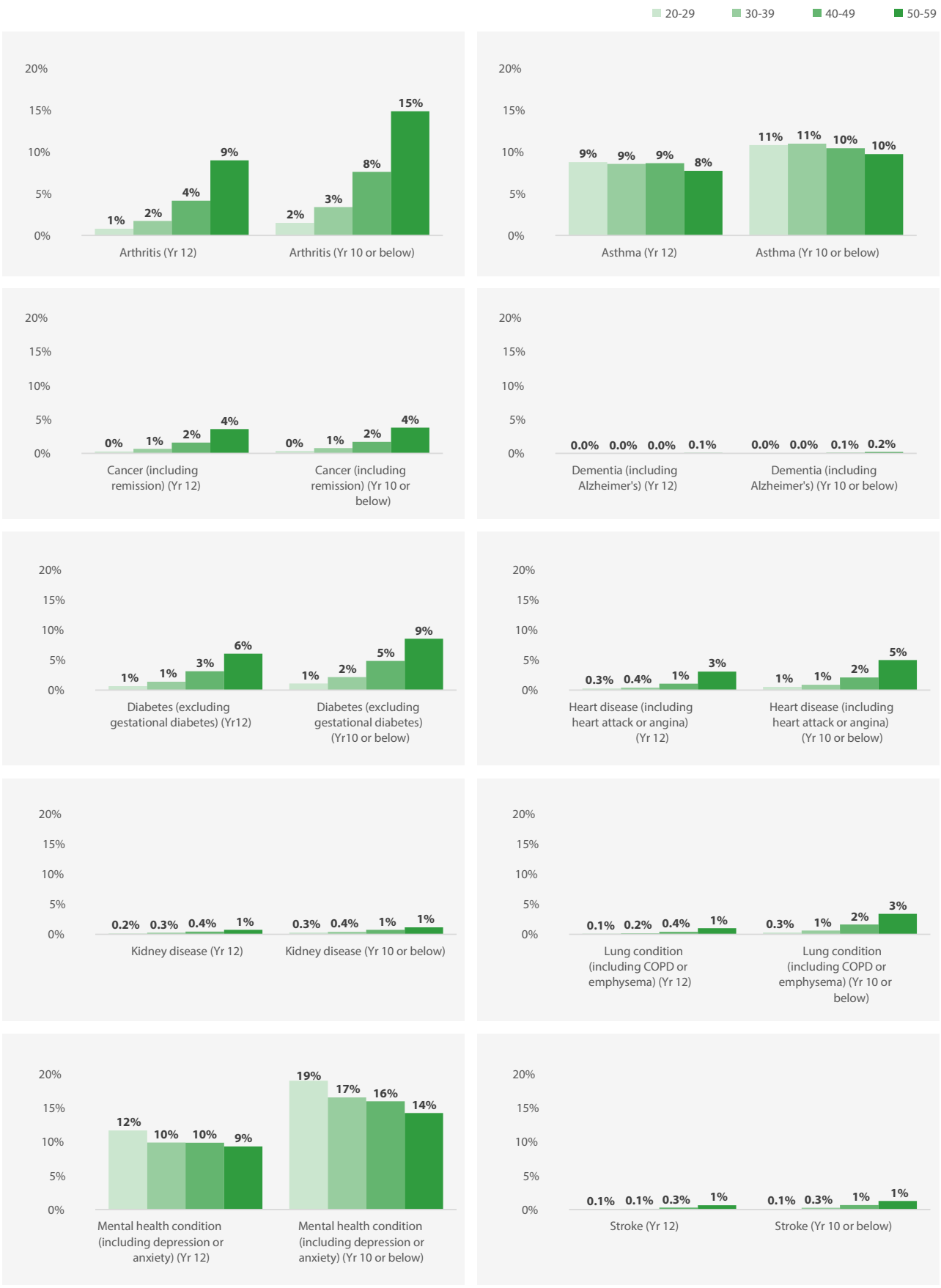
As a result of the small prison population relative to the overall population of Australia, the per person costs of incarceration when weighted by incarceration rate is $66.46 per year for Year 12 graduate, and $612.87 for school-leavers who complete to a Year 10 level or below.

COST TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT THROUGH HEALTH CARE EXPENDITURE

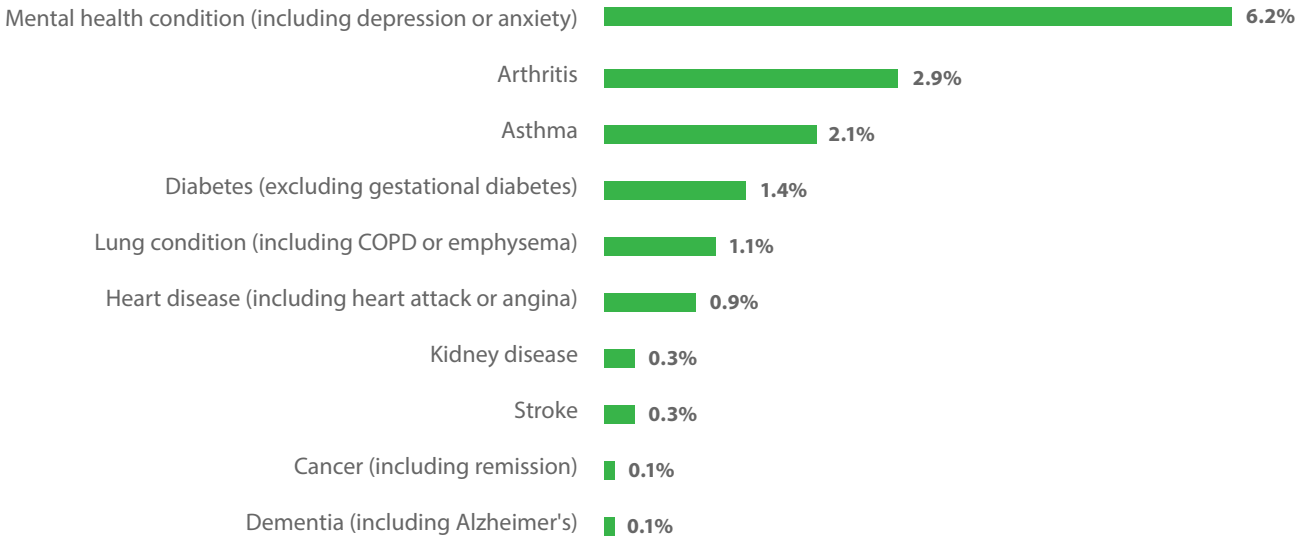
As a determinant of health, education improves the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Perhaps the most direct contributor is the interaction between education and other health determinants, such as employment, access to services, and stress, all of which combine and contribute to the wellbeing of the individual.

Across the working life of Australians, long-term health conditions are more common among early school leavers who completed their schooling to a Year 10 level or below. While a complex set of factors undoubtedly influence the likelihood and severity of different health conditions, it remains clear that schooling is positively associated with long-term health.

LIVING WITH THE FOLLOWING LONG-TERM HEALTH CONDITIONS



AVERAGE DIFFERENCE (YEAR 10 OR BELOW COMPARED TO YEAR 12) IN PEOPLE LIVING WITH THE FOLLOWING LONG TERM HEALTH CONDITIONS.



HEALTH SYSTEM SPENDING

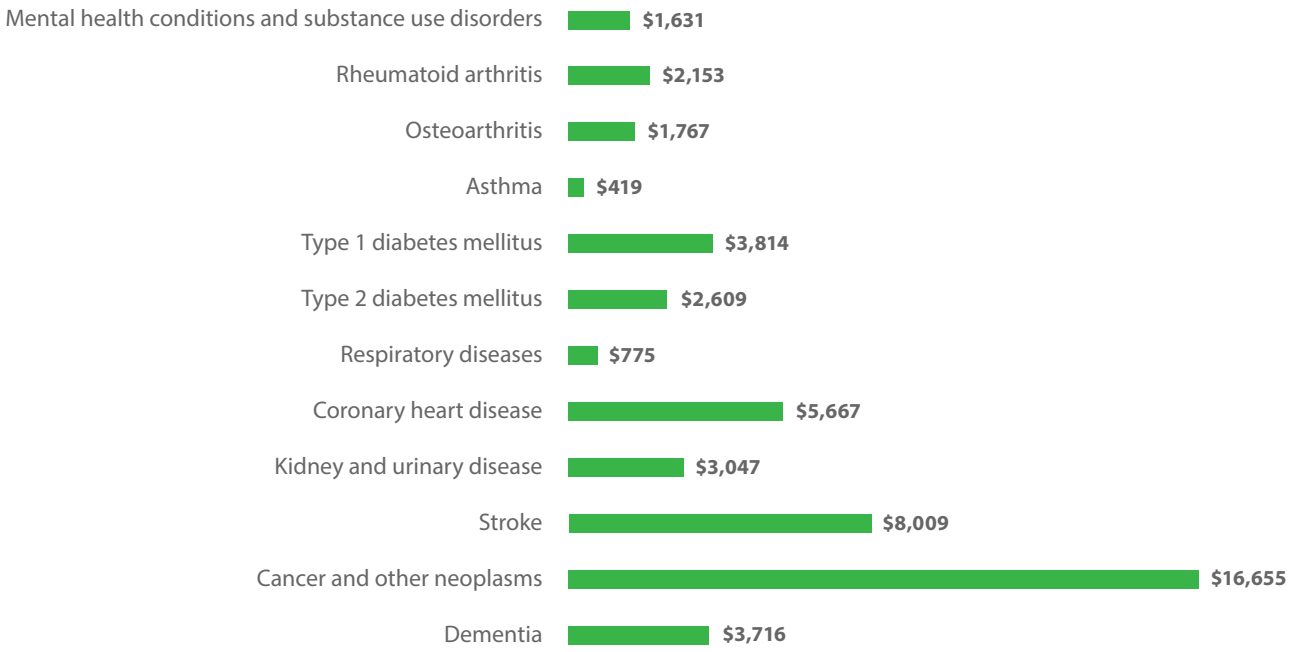
Australia spent $270.5 billion in health expenditure in 2023-24. These are primarily (84%) spent on hospital, primary health care, and referred medical services such as non-hospital specialist and allied health services. Overall, the Australian and State/Territory governments contributed to 70% of the spend, with non-government sources (individual, private health fund) contributing to the remaining 30%.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare also publishes estimated spending per case of disease, providing helpful information the financial burden of health conditions on health systems.

Spend per person by disease

Estimates of average health system spending per case, by burden of disease group, condition, area of expenditure, and sex, Australia, 2015-16 to 2023-24.

Includes spending on public and private hospitals, PBS pharmaceuticals, MBS services and dental. This does not include some spending through private providers, or the aged care system.



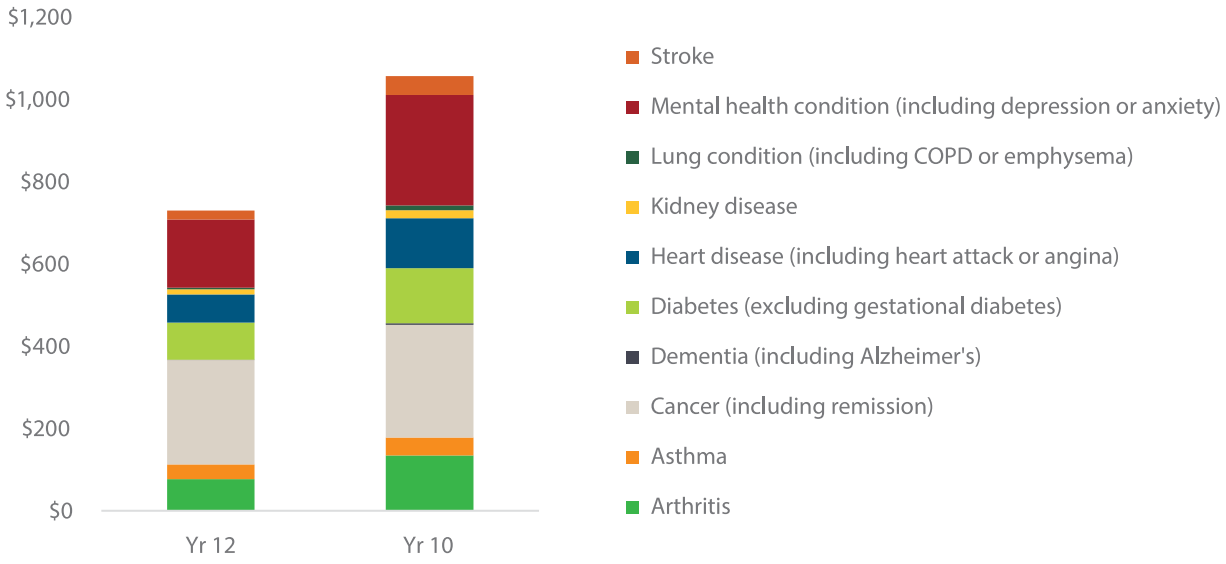
A DIFFERENCE OF $327 PER YEAR

Accounting for the average incidence rate of long-term health condition, and average health spending per case, health system spending for a Year 12 graduate between the ages of 20 and 59 is an annual average of $729 based the long-term health conditions assessed. For an early school leaver who finishes schooling at a Year 10 level or below, health spending is an annual average of $1,056. This equates a difference of $327 per year before the age of 60, when age-related health conditions become an increasing contributors to health care expenditures.

LIFETIME COSTS IN NET PRESENT VALUE

To estimate the difference in fiscal impact, a 40-year period from the age of 20 to 59 has been assumed to capture the typical working-life of Australians. A discount rate of 4% and inflation value of 2.5% has been adopted to calculate Net Present Value.

HEALTH SPENDING PER PERSON BASED ON SELECTED LONG-TERM HEALTH CONDITIONS



REFERENCES

1. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, The Nest Wellbeing Framework, 2013

2. The Senate Education and Employment References Committee Report, The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters, August 2023

3. International Wellbeing Group, The Personal Wellbeing Index-Adult, 2024

4. Productivity Commission (2026), Report on Government Services, Australian Government.

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