School Avoidance

The challenge that present students, parents and teachers face regarding school avoidance is multi-faceted. Several factors and functions drive and inhibit school attendance and school engagement. These factors include, but are not limited to, a person's current and previous educational experiences, curriculum content and delivery, social connections with peers, rapport with teachers and other school staff, mental health, disability and functional capacity. Additionally, the challenge of reduced school attendance may be a consequence of compliance driven, autonomy reduced approach to teaching, including inflexible curriculum delivery.

We find, and research indicates, that forcing school attendance via the application of physical supports to attend, rewards and consequences for specific behaviours, and focussing on compliance is unhelpful in supporting students, schools and families navigating difficulties with school avoidance. In a best-case scenario, the student might attend but the underlying factors contributing to the challenges remain unaddressed and therefore increase the likelihood of school attendance reducing again at some point.

Clinical experience, and empirical research indicate a thorough assessment of the learning environment, available resources, family functioning and exploration of the students' strengths and needs assists in identifying barriers, and strengths, to school attendance and learning engagement. For many students this may include engagement with a psychologist, occupational therapist, GP, Paediatrician and/or Psychiatrist. Following engagement with such supports, we are then able to make recommendations about how to support the student to helpfully navigate their educational experiences. At times, this can look like the following;

- Adjustments to the learning environment,
- Accommodations to the school curriculum, including how learning is assessed
- Social supports, aligned with the student's preferences
- Wellbeing support at school
- Collaborative plan for a gradual return to school
- Skill building for the student.

There is no one size fits all approach to school avoidance, and the best supports through this process are those that connect families and students with supports, invite collaboration with the student, and seek advice from the teachers and the school.