

Project Written Report

Project Title:

Fight, Flight or Friend?

Project Category

Category 4
(Resource Development)

Group ID

4-056

Members:

Lim Wei Han (3P2)
Lee Wei Cheng Clarence (3P2)
Seetoh Kok Xing (3P1)
Wong Yong Rui (3A3)

ABSTRACT

School refusal is a serious problem, which can negatively impact a child's development and future. Our project aims to help manage school refusal through our resource package consisting of a social media page and an online portal. Through these, we seek to educate and raise awareness on this issue, build a more inclusive class environment, equip students with the necessary skills to approach and help a friend or classmate facing school refusal.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

School refusal is a serious issue that can lead to students not attending school for long periods. Chronic absenteeism from school is associated with diminished outcomes in adulthood, higher rates of poverty, diminished physical indicators of physical health and increased involvement with the criminal justice system. Yet, there is a lack of awareness about it, with over 50% of students we surveyed being unaware of school refusal, and almost 70% not knowing how to approach a friend facing it.

School refusal has also been associated with mental disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders, which has been on the rise due to the COVID-19 pandemic and especially, in light of the incident at River Valley High School, caring for one's mental health and managing school refusal has become even more important. The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to students causing much stress, worry and grief, a great challenge for student's mental wellbeing. Singapore students were shown to be facing higher levels of anxiety as compared with the OECD average.

However, students are unaware of what school refusal is and how one can deal with it. Nearly 90% of our survey respondents agreed that school refusal is a very silent issue in school. Without proper guidance and knowledge on school refusal, students can be left very vulnerable to it when it strikes one of their classmates or even them.

Thus, with school refusal's serious impacts, the disruption of the current pandemic and a lack of resources, we believe that there is a need for our project to educate and raise awareness on this issue.

1.2 Objectives

Through this project, we aimed to:

- Allow students to know about and be well-informed about school refusal
- Build a more inclusive and embracing class environment and reducing negative school stimuli to encourage school refusal students to return to school
- Equip students with the necessary skills to help a friend facing school refusal

1.3 Target Audience

Our target audience was Upper Secondary students where students were more at risk of school refusal. We wanted to equip them with skills on how to handle school refusal cases better.

1.4 Resources

Our resource package consists of a portal and a social media page. Our portal and social media page include information about identifying potential signs of school refusal, providing more facts, and introducing preventive measures against school refusal using interactive tools such as videos and surveys.

Our resource package will inculcate awareness, familiarizing students with this issue, build a more inclusive and embracing class environment, and equip students with the knowledge and skills on how to approach students with school refusal

We aim to work towards a more inclusive school environment, encourage those facing absenteeism to return to school and equip students to identify potential cases and prevent school refusal

1) Social Media Page

The screenshot shows the Instagram profile for 'fightflightorfriend'. The profile picture is a circular logo with a heart shape divided into four colored quadrants (red, blue, green, yellow) and the text 'Fight, Flight or Friend?'. The bio reads: 'Project Fight, Flight or Friend. Hey! 🙌 We are a group of Secondary 3 Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) students with the aim to curb school refusal. Do follow us for weekly updates! 📅📖'. The profile statistics are 8 posts, 47 followers, and 169 following. The navigation bar shows 'POSTS' selected, along with 'IGTV', 'SAVED', and 'TAGGED'. The main content area displays a grid of six educational posters:

- Post 1 (Top Left):** 'Your mental health matters. Symptoms of School refusal:'. It lists four symptoms: 1. Being late or absent from school very often; 2. Not handing in homework or doing badly in exams; 3. Possible symptoms of depression: suicidal thoughts, Text Message etc.; 4. Antisocial behavior: Not interacting with classmates or teachers. It includes a call to action: 'If you notice your classmates suffering from these symptoms, reach out to them immediately! Visit our Instagram page and website for more info on these symptoms and how you can help your friends. Website: <https://fightflightorfriend.weebly.com/website> Instagram: fightflightorfriend'.
- Post 2 (Top Middle):** 'Give yourself a chance. A Message To Students Who Face School Refusal. Because you're worth it!'.
- Post 3 (Top Right):** 'FIGHT FLIGHT FRIEND. Tackling School Refusal. HOW PARENTS CAN HELP'.
- Post 4 (Bottom Left):** 'STUDENT ABSENTEEISM FACTS #2'. The background shows an open book.
- Post 5 (Bottom Middle):** 'FIGHT FLIGHT FRIEND. Causes of School Refusal. SWIPE LEFT TO FIND OUT!'. The background is solid blue.
- Post 6 (Bottom Right):** 'STUDENT ABSENTEEISM FACTS #1'. The background shows a stack of books.

2) Online Portal

What is School Refusal?

School refusal refers to a child's refusal to attend school over a significant period of time or being unable to stay in school the whole day. School refusal can manifest in different forms and can be due to various reasons. All these are unique to different cases.

However, school refusal differs from truancy. School refusal is more anxiety-driven, there can be factors at play causing emotional stress to a child triggering such behaviours. While in truancy, there is a lack of fear or anxiety about going to school. Parents are also usually aware of their child's absence from school in school refusal, while in truancy, the child may try to conceal it.

Why is school refusal such a serious problem?

School refusal can negatively impact a child's development. It has been linked to various serious negative consequences such as worsening academic performance and in later years, more involvement with the criminal justice system, highlighting the importance of dealing with this issue. Furthermore, the longer one misses school, the harder it is to get back to it, so getting the child back to school as soon as possible is important.



School Refusal Around the World

The Full Story

Over 7 million students in the United States missed 15 or more days of school from 2015 to 2016, which is about 1 in 6 students. It occurs at every educational level and everywhere. School refusal is even more in minority groups. In the face of the global COVID-19 Pandemic, schools and students have been met with unprecedented challenges, to provide equitable access to all students' educational needs and to make plans amidst great uncertainty. This has inevitably brought much stress, worry and grief, posing a great challenge for students' mental wellbeing.

We should remain supportive to others and assist others in their time of need such as checking on one another and providing additional assistance. We should seek to amplify positive and hopeful mindsets.

[WHO 2020, Mental health and psychological considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak]

Risk Profiles of students who face School Refusal:

Certain family characteristics have been found to be associated with school refusal cases.

In an overprotective relationship between parent and child, which creates an overdependence in the child on the parent, school refusal can arise. As going to school means separation between parent and child, the child may feel much anxiety over it and school refusal may occur. As such, the youngest child in the family tends to be most vulnerable, as they are likely to be more dependent.

At the same time, families whose relationships are extremely detached or have an unstable relationship with lots of tension can lead to children feeling vulnerable as they have no one to support them, leaving them to face the challenges of school alone, causing one to feel overwhelmed, leading to school refusal.

School Refusal and Psychological Disorders

School refusal behaviors have been found to be associated with anxiety disorders, such as generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder and separation anxiety disorder, and depression, although that may not necessarily be always the case.

A study involving 1422 American children and adolescents between 9 and 16 years old found that school refusal cases based on anxiety were most associated with separation anxiety disorder, depression and more problems in their relationship between those around them.

Tests have been made by Spitzer and colleagues (2006) and Dr. Robert J. Spitzer, Dr. Janet B.W. Williams, Dr. Kurt Kroenke, and colleagues in 1999 to test for generalised anxiety disorder (GAD7) and depression (PHQ-9)

PHQ-9

GAD7

As an Individual...

Dos of approaching someone you are worried about:

If you see someone you are worried about, you can reach out to them. When approaching them, you can ask questions to encourage them to open up, it is important to show that you care about them, and is taking this conversation and their feelings seriously

Reaching out is important as it is the first step as it allows you to better understand your classmate, and at the same time, allows he/she to know you will be there for them whenever they need you.



Lend a Listening Ear

Give them your full attention and hear what they have to say. Even if you may not know what to say or what advice to give, sometimes, just being a listening ear can be supportive and helpful towards them. Encourage them to share their feelings and thoughts with you.

2 REVIEW

Currently, there is a lack of resources in school that focuses on school refusal. Even on the Internet, treatment methods covered only include people like parents and therapists, and do not talk about what role the friend or classmate of one facing school refusal can do to help, making it extremely difficult for students to find out much about school refusal and how to deal with it. There is also a lack of research conducted, and help available for students in Singapore even though it is a pressing issue.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Needs Analysis

A survey was conducted on 45 Upper Secondary students (Secondary 3 to Secondary 5) to find out more about their knowledge and perceptions of school refusal.

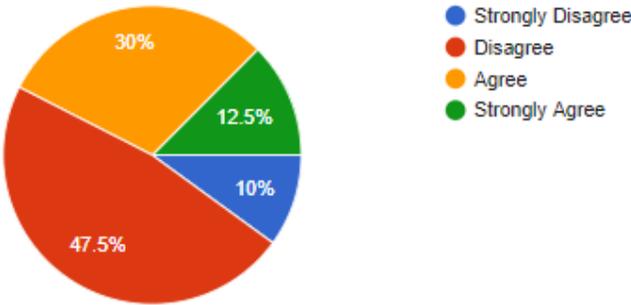
Over half of respondents (57.5%), did not know about or had not heard about school refusal before. This shows a lack of emphasis on education and raising awareness about this issue.

This is further supported by the fact that almost 90% of respondents agree that school refusal is a very silent issue in their school and that almost 70% of respondents were not sure how they could help a classmate facing school refusal. It can be seen that there is a lack of education on this issue in school and that a majority of students are not well informed or well equipped with the necessary knowledge to help a friend in need.

Lastly, approximately 95% of the respondents expressed interest in learning more about how they could help a classmate with school refusal.

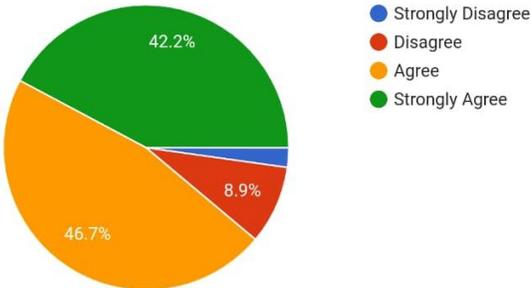
I am aware that some schoolmates suffer from school refusal

40 responses



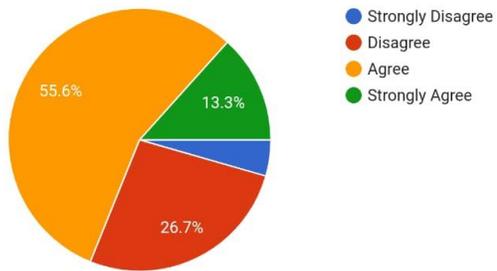
School refusal is a very 'silent' issue in my school

45 responses



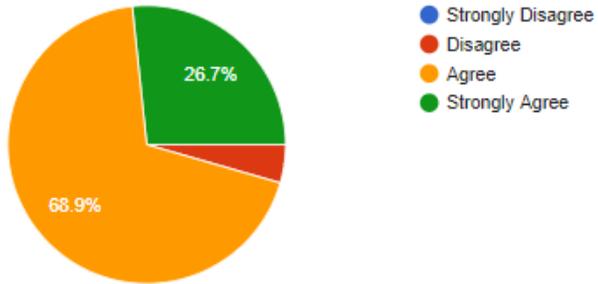
I am not really sure of how I can help my classmates if they are reluctant to attend school

45 responses



I would like to know more about how I can help

45 responses



3.2 Literature Research

Extensive research was also conducted online through the adding of various literature, to ensure that our information was as reliable as possible.

We also interviewed Mr. Vincent Tan, our school counsellor in Hwa Chong Institution, to find out more about the problem of student refusal in Hwa Chong from a counsellor's perspective and to better understand how we can develop solutions for school refusal. The interview was conducted online via Google Meet.



During the interview, Mr. Tan shared with us the 4 functional reasons for school refusal.

- 1) avoid school-based stimuli which provokes a general sense of negative affect.
Negative affect refers to negative emotions such as depression, dread and fear,
- 2) avoid aversive social and evaluative situations, such as
Tests, presentations, conversations with peers or bullying.
- 3) seeking attention from their significant others.
- 4) seeking positive tangible reinforcement.

Mr Tan had also shared a few examples of school refusal in HCI, but we are unable to go into detail to protect their confidentiality. From this discussion, we were able to get a clearer idea of how school refusal cases are approached in school, knowing more about who is involved, the process of getting the student to come back to school and one's

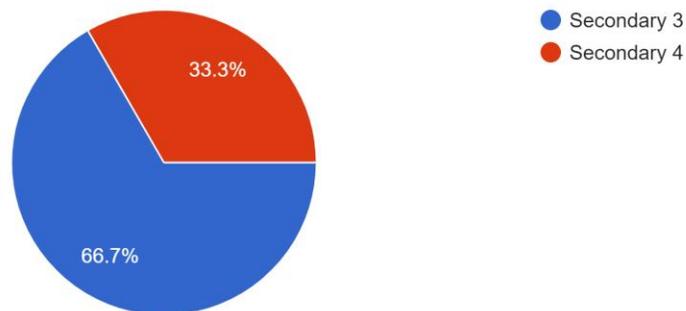
friends and classmates' roles in helping them. This greatly assisted us in developing solutions towards school refusal, as such information could not be found through literature research.

3.3 Pilot Test

We created a short survey on google forms to find out how we could improve on our current resources. For this survey, we had a total sample size of 50 Secondary 3 and Secondary 4 students. Here are the results of the survey

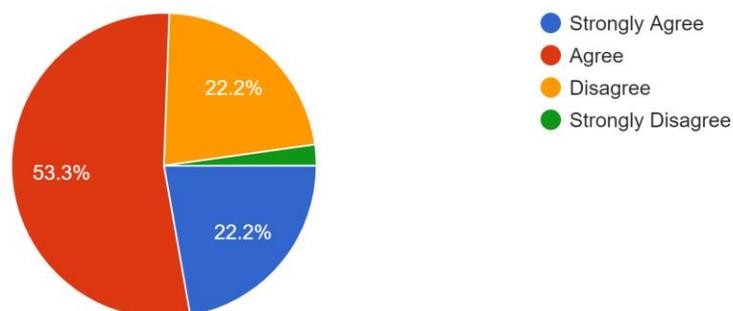
What is your level?

45 responses



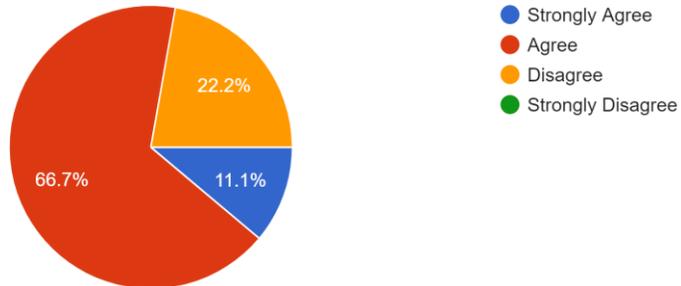
Do you find the content On our Instagram page interesting and informative?

45 responses



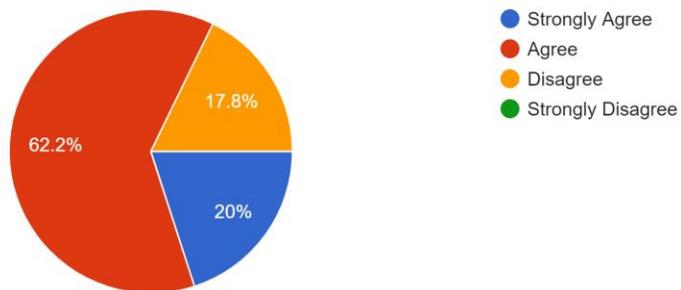
Do you feel more capable of helping a friend who is suffering from student absenteeism after viewing our Instagram Page?

45 responses



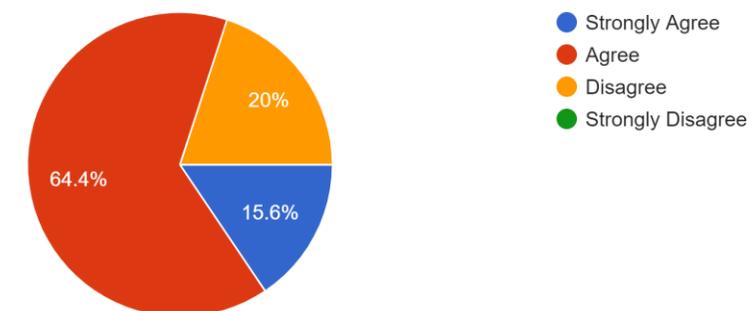
If you have, has it helped you to gain a deeper understanding of what student absenteeism is?

45 responses



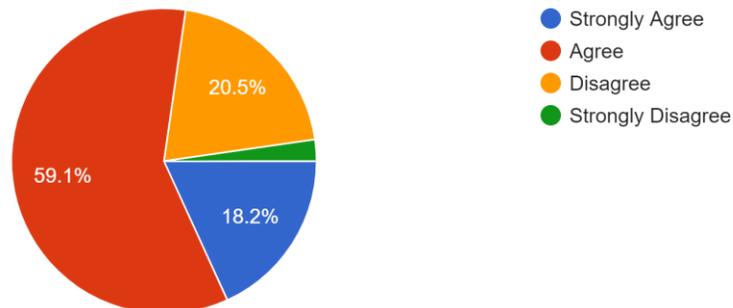
Do you feel more capable of helping a friend who is suffering from student absenteeism after viewing our website?

45 responses



Do you feel that our website is effective in reaching out to students who are suffering from school refusal?

44 responses



Some suggestions we received from the survey include:

- Publicising our website and Instagram page to a greater extent
- Posting Instagram content more regularly
- Including more encouraging quotes and reasons for students to come back to school on our website.

4 OUTCOME & DISCUSSION

4.1 Limitations

Our resources are only able to encourage students who suffer from school refusal to return to school. The project is unable to serve as a replacement for counseling services. Ultimately, the student has to decide whether he wants to return to school. The role of our project is to provide support to such students via educating their peers and making school a more welcoming and comfortable place for all to learn and make new friends.

4.2 Improvements

We can publicise our website on school refusal more extensively through our Instagram page and WhatsApp chat groups in order to help more students in Hwa Chong to gain awareness of this problem in schools. More students will also be able to help their classmates should they come across someone facing this problem in their class.

We can improve our Instagram page by adding more interesting content such as Live Q&A sessions and post content more regularly. It was our first attempt to use Instagram to publicise and raise awareness for our cause, so we lacked experience in this sector.

5 CONCLUSION

The project was generally smooth sailing, but we still met with certain challenges along the way. The resources cover a substantial amount of content, we had to make time from our schedules to complete the project. With the COVID-19 situation in Singapore, group gatherings were limited, and we were unable to meet physically. Thankfully, we were able to communicate effectively with each other and execute our plans.

This project has been an extremely fruitful and enriching experience. Through this year-long project, every member learnt to be more empathetic and understand those who experience school refusal. The extensive research conducted allowed us to understand that school refusal is a problem that stems from a variety of factors and thus requires unique solutions for every student. Our group members were unfamiliar with school refusal when we first embarked on this project given our lack of understanding and awareness. However, through this project, members learnt various new skills and after the final product was completed, we were well-equipped with understanding and relevant knowledge in tackling such cases should we face one in the future.

Link to our website: <https://fightflightorfrien.wixsite.com/website>

(1499 words)

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