



Inquiry into Education of Children in Out of Home Care

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This submission has been prepared by the Social Justice and Research Program, *UnitingCare* Burnside.

UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside) is the child and family welfare agency of the Uniting Church in NSW. Our agency has a long history, it has provided services to the most vulnerable children and young people in the state since 1911. Today the agency provides a wide range of early intervention, family support services, out of home care, family counselling and youth services.

Our vision is:

A just and safe society for all children, young people and their families – because children matter

Our purpose is:

To provide innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects vulnerable children, young people and their families in New South Wales

Since its inception in the early part of last century Burnside has provided care services for children and young people who, for various reasons, were unable to live with their birth parents. Although Burnside's work now includes many other types of programs, the provision of high quality out of home care services remains a priority. Currently the agency conducts foster care services, residential placements (Burnside operates three residential services), supportive casework and educational programs for those in care and two high intensity fostering services in regional NSW. Burnside provides one or more of these services to over 170 children and young people.

Burnside's policy and advocacy work is informed by the day to day practice of our programs as well as Australian and International research. This helps ensure that our contribution to governmental and other inquiries is shaped by practical service knowledge and is rooted in the experience of disadvantaged people. It is this knowledge and experience that has led the agency to become convinced of the critical importance of education for children and young people in care.

Burnside welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Parliament of New South Wales, Committee on Children and Young People. We wish members of the Committee a very thorough, satisfying and productive Inquiry into the Education of Children in Out of Home Care. It is our fervent hope that your deliberations will result in actions that produce lasting benefits for children and young people in care in New South Wales.

Introduction

This submission is in five sections. The submission begins with a description of the current situation regarding children in care in NSW. The next section briefly describes the importance of education for children and young people in care. The following three sections relate to the terms of reference of the Inquiry: issues and barriers to education faced by children and young people in care; strategies to monitor the educational programs for children in care and; strategies to enhance performance and educational outcomes for children and young people in care. The latter sections contain recommendations that if adopted will bring about substantial improvements for the education of children and young people in care.

1. Children and Young People in Care: An Overview of the current situation in NSW

According to the 1997 Department of Community Services (DoCS) analysis of the Substitute Care Integrated Database (IDB), approximately 8,000 - 9,000 children per year enter the NSW substitute care program, that is approximately 3.75 children a year for every 1,000 children in the population. Analysis by the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies suggests this figure can be expected to increase by 10% per annum during the next few years (ACWA, 1999).

While those under five years of age are from the age group that most frequently enters the out-of-home care system, there is also a sharp rise in intake of those between 11 and 14 years of age. For the age groups (a) under one year of age, and (b) 13-15 years of age, most enter the program to receive longer-term placements. In the older age group, entry is much more likely to be associated with significant family breakdown.

The majority of children in out of home care are in foster placements (approximately 60%). There has been a rise, since the beginning of the 90's, of children in kinship care (15% in 95/96), and a decrease of children in residential care (17% in 91/92 to 8% in 95/96). Most younger children enter foster placements. Children who enter residential care are likely to be 12 years and older. Most residential care in NSW is provided by the non-government sector (NGOs), while DoCS provides more foster placements than NGOs (DoCS: 55%; NGOs: 45%, 1996).

The rate of intake into out of home care services was 23.9 per 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ASTI) children in the population, which is almost eight times greater than other English-speaking-background children. Children from non-English speaking backgrounds are represented at a rate of 1.7 per 1,000 compared to a rate of 3.0 per 1,000 for English-speaking children. Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are less likely to be placed in residential care programs, and more likely to be placed in kinship care or with families of similar cultural/racial backgrounds.

2. Why education is important

Despite the vulnerabilities that beset children and young people in care and the associated risk of educational underachievement, school remains a significant place for them. For many of these students school may be the most constant factor in their lives and a place where they can be like “everybody else”. School is somewhere to develop skills, talents and self-confidence, receive praise and encouragement, make friends and achieve some success and the attainment of educational qualifications. Having qualifications is a highly significant gateway to later employment and study opportunities. Successful educational attainment may be the most important means of avoiding the patterns of family disadvantage that lead to entering care (Jackson, 1988). As Norman Tutt, Director of Social Services for Ealing in London, describes it “...education is the best form of protection for young people in care”. Good experiences of education and positive educational attainment are critical influences on these young people’s life course trajectories.

3. Major issues and barriers affecting the education of children and young people in out-of-home care

Firstly, this section outlines some of the research evidence regarding educational outcomes for children and young people in care. The appalling educational outcomes for these children and young people is the fundamental issue that must be addressed. The second section identifies some of the reasons for these poor outcomes.

a. Research on the educational outcomes for children and young people in care

The educational outcomes for children and young in care people are part of a broader picture of society’s failure to address the needs of these most vulnerable members.

Jackson & Martin (1998) in their summing up of previous research, state that:

Leaving care studies consistently show that care-leavers are many times more likely than their peers to be unemployed, to become pregnant in adolescence, to be homeless, to engage in health-threatening behaviour such as smoking and misusing alcohol or drugs, and to suffer from eating disorders and mental health problems (p.570).

Research which specifically focuses on the educational needs of young people in care is very much a phenomena of the 90s. Most of this research comes from the UK. In Australia and the US there has been some discussion, mainly academic rather than practice-based, which is now contributing to our growing awareness of the educational needs of children and young people in care.

In her 1990 speech for the Hilda Lewis Memorial Lecture, Jane Aldgate looked at the research on education outcomes for children in care in the UK and the US, and states that *'these studies present a gloomy picture of failure'* (p.39). The work of Heath, Colton and Aldgate in the UK clearly demonstrates that children living in even the most favourable of care places, ie within stable and long-term foster homes, continue to perform well below average at school, even compared with their peers who remained in disadvantaged families (Heath et al., 1989).

In her study of 49 children in foster care, Aldgate examined how different variables may interact in different ways to contribute to the final educational outcomes for children in care. In foster care at least, **Aldgate identified the following factors that support the child's educational attainment:**

- **A stable foster home with related educational continuity, with the child's view of stability being based on the length of time they have been there.**
- **Carers and workers who place educational achievement high on their planning agenda from the beginning of intervention, and do not leave it until emotional trauma has been dealt with.**
- **Involvement of birth parents in educational activities and celebrations.**

In her study of children and young people in out of home care in Victoria, Lemos (1997) also identified a strong characteristic of the young people as being that their educational competencies and personal development are consistently lower than would be expected for students at comparable age levels in the general population. This was by at least one standard deviation (15 points), based on available normative data. In NSW this has been supported by the study by Cashmore & Paxman (1996) of young people leaving care. In this study, just over half had completed only year 10 or less of schooling, which was consistent with the findings of other studies of poor educational attainment of young people in care. For example, Jackson and Martin (1998), in a review of leaving care studies, state that over 75% of young people leaving care have no educational qualifications at all, which in turn has a strong effect on their employment opportunities.

Studies such as the Lothian Study of 27 Looked After Children in the UK (Goddard, 2000) highlight the fact that most children who come into care have already experienced significant school failure, mainly from behavioural problems affecting the child's learning and achievement. Goddard points out that effective early information exchange between the Education Department and the Welfare authority could have focused both systems on addressing these often entrenched behaviours.

In their 1996 NSW study of Wards Leaving Care, Cashmore & Paxman asked their sample whether teachers or their school experience had helped them through any of the difficulties of being in wardship. The answer was 'yes' in just under one quarter of the sample, with the participants identifying two main needs being met: the need to be treated just like other kids at school, and the support of an understanding teacher or counsellor during the years at school.

For the child or young person in care the picture that emerges is one of educational failure and low attainment in relation to the wider population. The child in care is more likely to leave school early, to have few if any qualifications, to be unemployed in future, and to have multiple social problems. What are some of the factors that have contributed to this situation and how can they be addressed?

b. Factors that influence the educational outcomes of children and young people in care

There are many reasons why children and young people in care tend to dramatically underachieve in school. In our experience of providing out of home care services Burnside has found the following to be significant. (Clarke, 1998):

- **The lack of good data:** This lack is evident in two ways. Firstly, obtaining accurate data on the numbers of children in care and in different care arrangements can be difficult. Secondly, and more importantly in NSW, there is a complete absence of data about how children and young people in care are performing educationally. Despite concerns being expressed on this issue, Burnside has been informed that the NSW Department of Education and Training does not collect data on the educational outcomes of children in care and has no plans to collect such data in the future (though the Minister states that discussion regarding data collection is welcome). Good data on children in care and educational outcomes of children in care is necessary to create benchmarks for future policy and intervention strategies.
- **The impact of a poor start to life:** Many children in out of home care have a poor start to life as many birth families are characterised by poverty, lack of nurturing, substandard housing and high mobility. In addition most children in care have experienced some form of abuse and neglect. As early years research is now telling us such experiences can have a profound affect on children's development. We know that children's early experiences shape the developing brain and consequently their cognitive and linguistic capabilities as well as their social and emotional abilities and capacity for self regulation (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Children who experience nurturing, secure and responsive relationships with parents and other primary caregivers will develop towards their full potential. Without such relationships, healthy development is disrupted and children and young people are more likely to develop learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is not surprising, given their histories that children and young people in care develop such problems and consequently struggle at school. Such early years research should not be interpreted deterministically, as though for children in care "the dye is cast". As Cashmore (2001) has noted, the human brain continues to develop into adulthood and there are many opportunities where timely support and intervention can lead to positive change.
- **Low expectations of education in birth families:** Expectation around education and commitment to education appear to be significant underlying factors in school achievement (Zubrick et al, 1997). Such expectation seems to be an important factor in explaining different school outcomes among children who otherwise share similar indicators of disadvantage (Zappala & Considine, 2001). Unfortunately a lack of

expectation about schooling in birth families appears to be a strong predictor of lesser educational achievement. Burnside's experience is that educational expectations of birth families remain significant long after a child has been taken into care and especially if there is ongoing interaction between family and child. It is therefore important to pursue strategies that can foster a sense of family support and encouragement of a child's education.

- **The impact of multiple placements:** Once in care, many children and young people move through a number of placements. Australian research shows that the more placements young people have, the fewer years of high school they complete (Cashmore and Paxman, 1996). Moves and other disruptions often lead to young people falling behind with schoolwork. Specific learning difficulties may go undetected. Frustration at not coping academically can lead to behaviour problems and/or reluctance to attend school. Of particular significance is the fact that multiple moves undermine any sense of school connectedness. This sense of connection to school is perceived by the young person as a key source of feeling connected with adults and the general community (Resnick et al, 1997). In a study on resilience Resnick et al (1997) found that perceived school connectedness (alongside parent-family connectedness) was protective against every adolescent health-risk behaviour except pregnancy.
- **Children and young people in care often experience greater uncertainty and a lack of control over their lives:** They face more than their fair share of changes and adjustments in their lives with new carers, households, locations, schools with new sets of rules and expectations in each setting. Researchers such as Michael Marmot have pointed to the significance of a sense of personal control or agency as being a critical factor influencing health and other outcomes (ABC, 1998). Similarly, the research team for National Crime Prevention (NCP) in Australia identified a sense of control as an important underlying factor that may help explain positive outcomes in a range of early intervention programs, including those with an educational focus (NCP, 1999). Given these findings, efforts to encourage children and young people in care having a say in decisions that affect their lives and especially in relation to their education should be encouraged.
- **A lack of emphasis on education within the care system:** In their UK study of the education of children in care, Fletcher-Campbell & Hall (1993) overviewed the educational commitment of a sample of social services in England and Wales. They found that records of the educational careers of children in care were virtually non-existent and, when they were present, were minimal. In planning notes, the authors found some general references to a child's right to have their educational needs met, but no procedures for meeting these needs were included. Stein (1994) found that nearly one in five UK social workers did not know whether individual young people (their case loads) had any qualifications. Contact between UK social workers and the schools varied, and contact was mainly at Head or Year Teacher level rather than classroom teachers, who would have more intimate knowledge of the child. The chief focus tended to be on behaviour management and attendance rather than academic outcomes. Similar issues seem to exist in Australia, eg Burnside would be one of the few, perhaps only agency

with a designated position to support education of children in care. If educational outcomes for these children are to improve, resources directed to these ends will have to be found.

- **Limited additional support for children in care within the school system**: There is a need for additional support within the school system for children and young people in care. Burnside has advocated for the provision of at least one substitute care teacher in each school district in NSW. Such teachers can raise awareness of educational needs of children and young people in care and monitor their educational progress. Burnside believes that each school should also appoint an experienced staff member as an out of home care liaison teacher. These teachers would act as mentors to students in care and ensure effective communication between teachers, school administration and carers. Most importantly they ensure the whole school's awareness of educational issues of children and young people in care and oversee the development and implementation of education plans for each student in care.

The barriers to educational attainment that children and young people in care face will not be overcome by maintaining things as they are. At least three steps are required to ensure that these most vulnerable of citizens are able to maximise the benefits from our education system.

- **Firstly, the particular educational disadvantages faced by children in care must be more actively recognised.**
- **Secondly, this recognition should cause us to move from our current systemic neglect of the issue to sustained, focussed attention on the educational needs of children and young people in care.**
- **Thirdly, key strategies to improve the educational outcomes of children and young people in care must be identified and implemented in both the education and care systems.**

4. Strategies to monitor the educational progress of children and young people living in out-of-home care

Burnside urges the adoption of three key strategies to improve the monitoring of the educational progress of children and young people in care.

4.1 Effective data collection and dissemination

As we have seen, the absence of accurate data on the educational outcomes of children in care is an impediment effective to planning and interventions. We cannot identify the needs and track improvements without accurate data.

Recommendation

The NSW Government should establish a data set specifically mapping the educational attainments of children and young people in care in NSW. This should be included in the existing data set collected by the Department of Community Services and the Department of Education and Training. The data must be shared between government departments and with non-government agencies.

4.2 Proclamation of the out-of-home care section of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998

This is important for three reasons:

- a. Knowing more exact numbers will assist the Department of Education and Training to report on their educational achievement.
- b. The Act requires that each child must have a comprehensive care plan. The care plan must outline the strategies and resources needed for the young person's education (Burnside has argued in its submission on the out-of-home care regulations that these aspects could be further strengthened and made more explicit).
- c. The Act requires the participation of children and young people themselves in the development of all aspects of care plans.

Recommendation

That the NSW Government proclaim the remaining out-of-home care sections of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998.

4.3 Establish a position in the Office of the Children's Guardian to monitor development of education plans for all children in care

This person will ensure that the educational aspects of each child's care plan are fully addressed and implemented.

Recommendation

That the NSW Government establish a position in the Office of the Children's Guardian to monitor and review the development and implementation of education plans for each child and young person in care.

5. Strategies to enhance the educational performance and outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care

Burnside considers that the following strategies, if implemented will significantly improve the educational outcomes of children and young people in care. The strategies are grouped into four sections: strategies for the NSW Government; strategies for agencies providing out-of-home care; strategies for schools and; strategies to improve training. In practice though, most strategies will require collaboration and a spirit of cooperation between all parties/government departments, schools' administration, teachers, agencies, carers and children and young people.

Strategies for the NSW Government

Service Agreements that include educational outcomes: Government and non-government agencies must work together in deliberate ways to improve education for children in care. One way to do this is to include a focus on education as an explicit part of service agreements.

Recommendation

That the NSW Government and non-government providers immediately develop Service Agreements that include measurable educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

Scholarships for higher education: Currently young people in care are greatly disadvantaged in terms of access to higher education opportunities. A scholarship program in recognition of these financial and other barriers would be of great benefit in increasing access for young people in care to higher education. Such a system would be consistent with the after care provisions and responsibilities outlined in the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998.

Recommendation

That the NSW Government institutes a scholarship program for young people in care to support their participation in higher education opportunities.

Australian research about children in care: Future policies and strategies need to be based on valid evidence and sound research. NSW could take the lead in establishing a national research base on children and young people in care.

Recommendation

That the NSW Government pursue discussions with Federal State and Territory governments, and NGO's with a view to establishing a national research base about children and young people in care.

Strategies for the Department of Education and Training

Substitute Care teachers for each school district: This is an important support for children and young people in care. Currently there are around twenty such teachers in NSW who assist with education and career pathways and help monitor educational progress. At least a further twenty teachers are required to adequately cover the forty school districts in NSW. They will not necessarily be evenly spread as some districts have many children and young people in care while others would have only a few.

Recommendation

That a further twenty substitute care teachers be deployed across the state.

Specialist out-of-home care liaison teachers in every school: These teachers would have some key roles. They would be a point of contact for carers and agencies regarding educational concerns. They would act as mentors and a resource for children in care and they would ensure that education plans for each child are implemented effectively.

Recommendation

That every school in NSW appoints a senior teacher as a specialist out-of-home care liaison teacher.

Information for teachers and schools about the educational needs of children and young people in care: It is important that schools and teachers are aware of the particular situation and needs of children in care. Information should be provided to schools that provides this and suggests ways that schools can support students in care. Such a resource should be developed in collaboration with agencies providing out-of-home care. (Note: Burnside has produced a draft resource along these lines. See Attachment 4).

Recommendation

That a booklet or other resource be developed to assist teachers better understand and support children and young people in care.

Strategies for Agencies Providing Out-of-Home Care

Education support staff: Agencies, offering out-of-home care should be encouraged to appoint specialist staff to oversee and encourage educational support. In small agencies this role may form only part of a person's responsibilities but the role needs to be explicitly identified, planned and resourced. Government will need to provide additional funding to allow these sorts of positions to develop.

Recommendation

That each agency providing out-of-home care in NSW create education support positions to develop initiatives to improve the educational outcome of children and young people in their care.

Tutoring opportunities: Given that children and young people in care frequently have disrupted schooling or are subject to learning and other difficulties, many may benefit from a tutoring program. Agencies providing care should offer tutoring opportunities for children and young people who require additional support with schoolwork. Some funds to this end should be provided by the State government with the provision of the program being reflected in service agreements.

Recommendation

That agencies providing care seek to establish tutoring programs for children and young people in care.

Training for foster carers, residential care staff & birth families: Part of the work of raising the profile of education in care settings requires training for both foster carers and residential care staff. Training could include both information about the critical role of education and the barriers that children in care face as well as providing guidance on practical matters of supporting learning and dealing positively with the school system. Agencies also need to be mindful of educating birth parents regarding the value of education. Although birth parents are not generally involved in the education of their children in care, research indicates that parental attitudes to education have an enduring impact (Jackson & Martin, 1998). There is value then in cultivating positive attitudes to education in birth parents (where possible) as they can be a potent influence towards better outcomes.

Recommendation

That agencies providing care offer training for foster carers, residential care staff and birth families regarding the importance of education and practical ways to support education in cooperation with the school system.

Strategies for Training

Training for DoCS staff: Currently standard training for field staff within DoCS covers little if any material relating to the educational needs of children and young people in care. A training segment should be devised that covers the importance of education to children in care, identifies barriers and suggests key strategies to improve educational outcomes. This will become more of an issue given the requirement that the Department develop comprehensive care plans that include explicit attention to education.

Recommendation

That training for DoCS field staff cover key issues around the importance of education for children in care and strategies to support better educational outcomes for children in care.

Training for teachers and social workers: Issues around the education of children and young people in care should also be incorporated into teacher training programs. Teachers will inevitably have children or young people in care as part of their class at some stage. Having teachers who are aware of the needs of children in care and have some understanding of the educational barriers they face is an important step to improving outcomes. It is also important that training around educational issues is included in social work and social welfare courses. Universities should liaise with the Department of Education and Training, schools, professional associations and agencies providing care in the development of course material.

Recommendation

That information on the educational issues for children in care should be incorporated into teacher training programs.

Burnside has become convinced of the critical importance of education for children and young people in care. Effective education will never completely make up for past disadvantage or traumatic experiences, but it can redress the imbalances. Education provides a solid platform for our most vulnerable children to develop their capabilities. We believe that the educational needs of children in care requires sustained attention together with the resources to enable effective strategies to be put in place. We commend our submission to the attention of the Committee and we look forward to the results of the Inquiry.

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Appendix:

Attachment 1: The educational needs of children and young people in out of home care,
Making the Grade

Attachment 2: Educational issues for children and young people with disabilities living in care

Attachment 3: Education matters: making a commitment to improving educational outcomes
for children and young people in care

Attachment 4: A guide for high schools enrolling young people living in out of home care

Attachment 5: The education of children and young people in out of home care – Notes from
a presentation to the Social Justice Reference Group NSW