

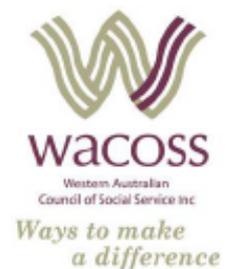


Issues Paper – Excerpt

Companion to the WACOSS Pre-Budget Submission

Investing in Outcomes
Making it Count for the People of WA

**Part One – Issues and Funding Pressures in the Community Services Sector
Youth and Education**



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*Part One – Issues and Funding Pressures in the Community Services Sector
Youth and Education*

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YOUTH AND EDUCATION

Background

An education is recognised as a key human development indicator and a fundamental economic, social and cultural human right. Article 26, 1&2 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to education...education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.

Access to a positive educational experience is a vital part of being socially included. All Western Australian children and young people must be able to attend school and achieve the necessary learning base that will enable productive social and economic participation. It is the our nation's best interest to ensure that all children and young people have access to a positive educational experience, whether that be in a traditional school setting or via alternative means.

The need to invest in our education system, and the economic benefits of doing so, is recognised at a Commonwealth level. Australian governments have agreed to work together to develop the skills of the Australian people, in order to ensure the present and future needs of Australian businesses and industries are met.

COAG's Working Group on the Productivity Agenda has acknowledged the impact the education system has on the nation's productivity:

Substantial reform of Australia's education and training systems is required to boost productivity and participation in the economy, improve human capital outcomes for all Australians and reduce entrenched disadvantage in Indigenous and other communities.¹

Looking to the early years of a child's school life, the Australian Early Development Index tells us that 12.2% of WA's children are 'developmentally vulnerable' across two or more of the five domains. These domains are physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school); and communication skills and general knowledge. Worryingly, this percentage is higher than the ACT, NSW, VIC, SA, and Tasmania.²

While most of our children fare well, these statistics tell us that there are some children missing out, and that the education system is not meeting their needs.

The COAG Reform Council's baseline performance report for skills and workforce development found that the "proportion of the working age population with low literacy and numeracy skills decreases as socio-economic status improves. At a national level, 60.0 per cent of working age people in the most disadvantaged socio-economic areas have low literacy skills compared with 29.3 per cent in the least disadvantaged areas. The figures for numeracy are 66.2 per cent and 35.3 per cent respectively."³

¹ (COAG, 2008d, p. 7).

² AEDI A Snapshot of early Childhood Development (p.24). See http://video.wch.org.au/aedi/A_Snapshot_of_Early_Childhood_Development_in_Australia-AEDI_National_Report_2009.pdf

³ National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development: Baseline performance report for 2008 See http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/reports/docs/skills_workforce_agreement_report_2008_exec_sum.pdf

Clearly, educational attainment, like many other social indicators, is dependent on socio-economic status, and we must do more for those children and young who are vulnerable and at risk of disengaging with the school system.

Issues

Support for at-risk young people in WA high schools

Anecdotal evidence and youth worker testimonies indicate that young people perceive youth workers differently to other trained professional adults in the school environment. Because of this, youth workers are often able to access, build relationships with, and serve young people in ways that many school counsellors, psychologists and chaplains cannot. They may point young people to a range of services that address problems in a holistic way, such as counselling; health and employment services; accommodation and financial services; and other NGOs. While WACOSS understands the Federal Government's 'Youth Connections' program has the potential to fill some of this service gap, the new service model requires four types of services to be delivered within one program, so capacity is limited. In the West Coast region, for example, Youth Connections funding only allows for the appointment of two youth workers to work in 52 schools.

From 2011, each public school will be allocated a notional entitlement to a school psychologist through an open, transparent and equitable resource allocation formula that takes account of the size and complexity of each school. School psychologists within a region will then be allocated to schools or networks of schools.⁴

WACOSS recommends that youth workers are provided to each school in the same way that school psychologists are. Ideally, these two support staff would be part of a suite of supports provided at each school, including:

- Nurse
- Chaplain
- Psychologist
- Youth Worker
- Aboriginal Liaison
- CaLD Liaison

Support for young people who have disengaged from the school system

As well as support in the school environment, there must also be acknowledgement of the fact that some young people will disengage with the school system, for a variety of reasons. In 2011, there will be eight education regions across Western Australia. In each region, there will be up to 75 networks, each with up to 20 schools, both primary and secondary. Network Principals will support these networks. The regions are:

⁴Department of Education. School and You. School Psychologist information. See <http://det.wa.edu.au/schoolsandyou/detcms/navigation/shaping-our-schools/new-education-networks-and-regions/?oid=MultiPartArticle-id-10391840#toc8>

- North Metro
- South Metro
- Kimberley
- Pilbara
- Midwest
- Wheatbelt
- Southwest
- Goldfields

It is unclear what impact the changes to the education system will have, especially in terms of how at-risk young people can remain engaged in the education process. While there has been an assurance that there will be more support available to schools, it is up to independent decision makers within the school environment to determine which kinds of supports they require. However, with a fewer number of education regions taking in a greater number of schools, it is highly likely that many young people will fall through the cracks.

The Federal Government's Youth Connections program provides funding to 14 service providers across the state, to deliver four different service models. In WA, Youth Connections Providers must offer a mix of community based learning programs, as well as an intensive case management, youth-focused outreach service. WA's funding allocation from the Commonwealth to deliver Youth Connections is \$7.4M, meaning each provider receives approximately \$500,000, if allocated evenly.

WACOSS feels that alternative education programs are a vital means of ensuring that vulnerable young people who disengage from the education system can still achieve educational attainment. Currently, service providers tell us that this issue is particularly relevant for young men people leaving care around the age of 15 years old. Often they are exiting the system with no prospects or possibility of attending school or TAFE, getting a job, or accessing housing.

Helping young people to break down these barriers increases self-esteem and personal responsibility, and encourages them to make a valuable contribution to their community through successful education and employment. This kind of intensive, personalised support can have positive outcomes over a number of social indicators. Researchers of a Philadelphia-based mentoring program⁵ found that after 18 months of spending time in a mentoring relationship, young people were:

- 46% less likely to begin using illegal drugs;
- 52% less likely to skip school;
- 27% less likely to begin using alcohol;
- 37% less likely to skip a class;
- More confident of their performance in school work;
- One-third less likely to assault someone; and
- Getting along better with their families.

⁵ Tierney, J.P., Grossman, J.B., and Resch, N.L. (1995). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures

At the local level, the Youth Futures, COMET program and Communicare's VIP Plus are just two examples of successful programs for at-risk young people that exist across the State.

WACOSS recommends that, as a minimum, the State Government through the Department of Education and Training provide funding for alternative education programs to operate for at-risk young people in each of the eight new 'education regions' across WA. State funding would give greater capacity to community agencies delivering these services and others through the Youth Connections programs.

Young mothers

Young mothers face a challenging set of obstacles across a range of social indicators, especially when trying to continue their education. They are more likely to be single, to smoke, and to be living in an area of socioeconomic disadvantage.⁶ Their pregnancies are associated with fewer antenatal visits and carry a higher risk of medical complications. However, if appropriate support services exist, it is likely that outcomes across these indicators for teen mothers and their children will improve. Young mothers may require a variety of supports, which include but are not limited to:

- Support to complete their education, as well as parenting assistance and counselling or referral services;
- Expansion of childcare facilities in existing programs; and
- Alternative transport to provide for young mothers who cannot easily access vehicles or public transport networks.

While a range of community sector agencies run many excellent programs, funding is constantly required to expand services to all teenage parents who need it, wherever they might be across the State. Investing in alternative education and other supports for young mothers now will mitigate the drive into higher costs later. Children who are raised happy and healthy are less at risk of coming in contact with the justice and state care systems, and more likely to be able to access education and employment opportunities.

Inclusive schools

Education on social issues, which can often be sensitive in nature, needs to be honest, frank and realistic. Good examples are in sex and drug education. There needs to be more awareness of social issues more broadly within a school setting, including:

- Carers;
- Same sex attracted young people;
- Refugees and other CaLD issues;
- Young parents;
- Children and young people in care;

⁶ *A compendium of social inclusion indicators, Australian Social Inclusion Board indicators working group, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 72*

- Aboriginal issues; and
- Understanding of political system in a real-life context, to empower and educate young people to meaningfully engage with the political system and cast an informed vote

A social inclusion framework needs to be fostered in the school environment for all young people, regardless of socio-economic status, sexual preference, race, religion, or gender.

