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Schools and the education system have become important sites for early intervention to assist homeless and at-risk students. Community agencies work more closely with schools than during the early nineties, in the aftermath of the HREOC report. School welfare staff have become an important part of the early intervention response. However, school welfare resources and the school welfare staff available are unevenly distributed across Australia and the NYC seeks to establish appropriate national standards. There are still problems of school exclusion, when schools are confronted by young people displaying 'challenging behaviours' due to family problems. Where family reconciliation and mediation is undertaken, good results are possible in many cases - but not all. Reconnect is a highly successful early intervention program but not all communities have a Reconnect service and only about one third of students deemed to be most at risk, are currently being reached. Students who become homeless receive more help than in the past but remain very vulnerable to not completing school. Alternative education settings should be made available as important options for some students

Chapter 13 | Early Intervention

I had a few really good things happening when I was in primary school and they started falling apart for me, and if you could catch it right when that starts happening and if you can do something to keep those good things going, then it won't get as bad.¹

Introduction

13.1 The Inquiry was presented with evidence about the role of schools in relation to youth homelessness and about programs and initiatives designed to support the educational needs of at-risk and homeless young people. Much of the evidence provided focused on programs and attitudes that have developed since the publication in 1989 of the Burdekin Report.² The Burdekin Report raised the question of ‘... whether the education authorities have a role in helping homeless or unsupported students.’³ In 2007, that question seems to have been well and truly answered in the affirmative. Expectations about the role of schools as agents of support and intervention have grown, in part as a result of data on the extent of student homelessness and the subsequent debate about ‘early intervention’.⁴

13.2 This chapter looks at early intervention and schools by first laying out the evidence provided to the Inquiry on the general topic of the educational experiences of at-risk and homeless young people, and then it examines the current situation in schools and alternative education providers.

13.3 The other major area in which the Inquiry sought evidence about early intervention was families and what happens to families. Along with schools, families are social institutional sites where young people can either be supported in the transition to a healthy adulthood or they can be abandoned and become homeless. The Burdekin Report identified families as potential sites for external support ‘... by way of resources, respite care, counselling, or related services.’⁵ This architecture of support remains

relevant today, and much of the evidence provided about young people and their families relates to the extent to which the nation has been able to make progress in this area of early intervention. This chapter also looks at the available early intervention support for young people and their families and for young families.

Education

13.4 The Inquiry was told that homeless young people have lower rates of participation in education than their home-based peers⁶ and that a lack of education has the potential to create long-term adverse outcomes.⁷ Young people and services submitted evidence to the Inquiry about the difficulty of maintaining their education when homeless.⁸ Some of the problems highlighted included young people:

- having nowhere to live; ⁹
- experiencing frequent changes of address; ¹⁰
- being pregnant or having children; ¹¹
- being unable to attend school regularly; ¹²
- coming from a background of high family mobility that involved attending multiple schools; ¹³
- lacking an income; ¹⁴
- living in an unsupportive peer environment; ¹⁵
- having constant appointments to keep; ¹⁶
- not having access to public transport; ¹⁷
- facing prohibitive course costs; ¹⁸
- having no access to washing facilities; ¹⁹
- having literacy and numeracy problems; ²⁰
- being poorly nourished; ²¹
- experiencing poor general and mental health; ²²
- being tired; ²³
- lacking books, stationery, clothing and access to computers; ²⁴
- having other pressing issues to worry about; ²⁵
- having adult responsibilities to shoulder. ²⁶

13.5 One young person wrote to the Inquiry about the reality of her life:

*... I worry so much about tomorrow I have no time for today. I can't cope with work, studies and finding a place. It's really hard.*²⁷

13.6 UnitingCare Burnside (NSW) conducted consultations with young service users in preparing its submission to the Inquiry. The results suggest that having survival issues to worry about is an experience shared by many at-risk and homeless young people:

They talked about surviving through the day and week and felt that finding some place

*to stay and finding food was far more important to them than school.*²⁸

13.7 The Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations drew the Inquiry's attention to the difficulties that SAAP services have in attempting to improve their young client's participation in education.²⁹ SAAP data on unaccompanied children provides a worrying picture:

*... around one-third of unaccompanied 14-15 year-olds and over half of unaccompanied 16-17 year-olds who accessed SAAP were not in the education system. These proportions were relatively unchanged after support.*³⁰

13.8 While this data highlights the high number of young homeless people who are missing out on an education, many homeless young people remain committed to acquiring an education.³¹ In Perth, one young person talked to the Inquiry about what it was like trying to get back into school:

*... I wanted to go to school as soon as I had stable accommodation. But, I found it really, really hard. I had to go to so many organisations to try and get book grants. It was a fight.*³²

The young person recommended that any decision to return to school should be met with enthusiasm and ready access to practical support.

13.9 The support and maintenance of education was seen as an urgent priority by Hanover Welfare Services (Vic). Hanover challenged the popular notion of housing first, suggesting that education should be an absolute priority:

*... shift the focus from homelessness and housing to education and make it the top priority. At the moment, where it's housing first, we make decisions that impact badly on their education, in an effort to get the house.*³³

*Hanover advised the Inquiry that the homelessness and education sectors need to change current practices to improve educational outcomes, especially for young people in the middle years of their schooling.*³⁴

13.10 This question about the age at which students need to be provided with early intervention support to protect their engagement in education was also a concern for the workers from Darumbal Community Youth Services (Qld), who spoke about the importance of addressing literacy and numeracy problems at the primary school level.³⁵

*... by the time we start working with these kids in Grade 8, there's a whole lot of issues there which should have been tackled probably back in Year 5.*³⁶

Programs and initiatives

13.11 The NYC sought evidence about programs and initiatives designed to improve educational and social outcomes for young people. A selection rather than a fully comprehensive list is featured here, that provides a snapshot of some the current approaches.

13.12 The NSW Association for Adolescent Health identified that state's Links to Learning Community Grants as an initiative.³⁷ Originally developed between 1988 and 1994³⁸, this suite of programs allows local councils and non-government agencies to apply for funds to deliver education and training activities to young people who are at risk of disengaging, or who have already disengaged, from education.³⁹

13.13 A number of witnesses provided evidence about the Australian Government's Connections program, which was formerly known as POEM (Partnership Outreach Education Model).⁴⁰ This program stream commenced in 2002 and aims to reach 13 to 19 year-olds who are not engaged in mainstream schooling by providing an education and personal development program in a community, TAFE or school setting.⁴¹ Questions have been raised about the level of funding for this program and for these students being unrealistically low.

13.14 Barwon South West Homelessness Network (Vic) drew the Inquiry's attention to the Victorian Government's Youth Employment Education and Training Initiative or YEETI⁴², which grew out of that government's Youth Housing Action Plan of 2004.⁴³ This program offers high-risk 15 to 25 year-olds additional financial assistance to help them with educational and employment expenses.⁴⁴

13.15 In Launceston, Anglicare talked about the Start@TAFE course, which is a TAFE Tasmania initiative for 16 to 19 year-olds that started in 2003. The course is designed for early school leavers and offers mentoring and individualised programs.⁴⁵

13.16 In the Northern Territory, Palmerston High School and Taminmin High School⁴⁶ both highlighted the Territory's School-Based Constables program. The program commenced in 1984 and involves school-based police officers teaching in selected subject areas.⁴⁷

13.17 The Northern Territory Government drew attention to Families and Schools Together and MindMatters as intervention programs.⁴⁸ The Families and Schools Together program originated in the United States in 1988 and was piloted in Australia in 1997.⁴⁹ It is being implemented in primary schools and combines outreach and multi-family groups to help strengthen families and prevent educational failure and other harms. MindMatters is an Australian program funded by the Australian Government and designed to improve secondary school environments and embed prevention and early intervention activities as 'protective factors' for mental health.⁵⁰

13.18 Service to Youth Council (SA) described a pilot project called Flexible Learning Options, or FLO, which is an approach to enrolment targeting at-risk or disengaged 12 to 19 year-olds. Learning can take place in the community or in a school setting and the program provides resources for case management and offers students an individualised learning program with personal support.⁵¹

13.19 The Victorian State Government's Office of Housing and BATForce in Geelong (Vic) drew the Inquiry's attention to the efficacy of the School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) in Victoria.⁵² This program targets at-risk young people between the ages of 10

and 18 and is delivered by and through community agencies and schools. It includes access to brokerage funding for purchasing services.⁵³ SFYS is designed to provide comprehensive, integrated and school-linked welfare support and has an emphasis on coordination and partnerships between youth services and schools.⁵⁴

13.20 In Hobart, The Salvation Army spoke about its Home and School Support Program, or HASS. This program is funded by The Army and targets boys between the ages of 10 and 14, with the aim of preventing homelessness and disengagement from school. The program provides a child and family worker in the home and school context.⁵⁵

Schools

13.21 Schools are logical sites for early intervention initiatives to prevent or ameliorate youth homelessness and for initiatives to support the educational needs of at-risk and homeless young people. Schools are universal institutions, engaged in long-term relationships with all young people up to some point. The Service to Youth Council (SA) wrote to the Inquiry about the opportunities that schools have to intervene early. The Council conducted research in 2005, examining the experiences of young people who had been homeless:

*... 80 per cent of young people in the survey had told someone at school when they had become homeless.*⁵⁶

13.22 In Melbourne, Eastern Health CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) reiterated this view:

*... long before agencies become involved, [schools] are the places that see these young people first and see the changes first.*⁵⁷

13.23 The Inquiry did not hear any direct evidence disputing the proposition of an early and active role for schools in student welfare, but it did hear that 'student welfare support' is not necessarily embraced by all schools. Witnesses submitted evidence that schools vary in the quality of school leadership on student welfare issues, the local organisational cultures of different schools influence their interactions with outside agencies; schools organise their staff structures and priorities differently; and schools vary in the nature of their philosophical and practical commitment to the educational and emotional needs of homeless and at-risk students.

Schools and outside agencies

13.24 Mission Australia advised that school and agency partnerships have enormous potential in relation to early intervention.⁵⁸ However on the ground, these partnerships are not always effective as they might otherwise be. Vinnies Services, Deniliquin (NSW) told the Inquiry that school-community agency relationships are very dependent on the attitude of individual school principals. Vinnies gave an example of two schools with which its Commonwealth-funded Reconnect early intervention service works. One school embraced the concept of having a partnership with an outside agency, provided

the service with an office in the school and encouraged all school staff members to make direct referrals to Reconnect. As a consequence, the Reconnect service was able routinely to identify and engage with students in difficulty at an early stage. By contrast, the other school only ever called Reconnect during a crisis and it appeared to lack a school culture that embraced collaboration with outside agencies:

... they would sing our praises and say what a fantastic program. If you were to contact them, that would probably be the response that you received, and yet for us to receive referrals from them, it's probably a quarter to four on a Friday, and we'll get a phone call to say Joe can't go home from school today.⁵⁹

13.25 While a school's culture isn't simply a product of the principals' leadership, leadership can be a determining factor in how well a school deals with at-risk and homeless young people. Vinnies Reconnect advised the Inquiry that in order to have a more consistent approach, there needs to be policy support to encourage principals to make student 'student welfare' a practical priority in the school:

... the Head must have a motivation to do it, and that may need to come from a more formal direction, because if there isn't the formal direction and there's no accountability for that head to be engaging with services like ourselves ...⁶⁰

Welfare support systems in schools

13.26 In a nation with an education system controlled by different states and territories there is necessarily great variation in the welfare support available in schools. In some parts of Australia, the level of support staffing is relatively high; in other jurisdictions it is less comprehensive. Even when the support staff are in place in a particular state or territory system, that doesn't necessarily mean that the support system is working effectively. The Inquiry heard evidence that some welfare staff members are used inappropriately by school management.⁶¹

13.27 UnitingCare Burnside (NSW) raised concerns about the level of resources and training provided for early intervention in schools:

Young people we interviewed stated that often they didn't find school counsellors to be helpful. They said they didn't feel the school counsellor had the relevant life experience to deal with their issues. One young person stated, "it's okay if you go to them with normal stuff. But if you go say to them - I've been raped, they don't really know what to do".⁶²

Also, UnitingCare made the point that schools should not be the only site for early intervention and that they may not be able to meet the needs of young people who feel alienated from the school culture. The service believes that partnerships offer a cost-effective solution:

[A partnership] allows young people to form relationships with youth workers from the local council or from community service agencies outside of a casework model. Once young people have made these connections they are more likely to seek assistance from youth workers if they are experiencing conflict or other issues.⁶³

13.28 Centacare's Reconnect program in the ACT made the same point by emphasising the importance of youth workers who being too closely associated with the school.⁶⁴

13.29 Witnesses emphasised the need for accomplished welfare support staff with some independence from school management. In Wagga Wagga, there was a recommendation for experienced social workers.⁶⁵ Mission Australia included youth workers and social workers in the preferred mix.⁶⁶ In Darwin, the Inquiry was told that the ideal would be a two-person, male-female model.⁶⁷

13.30 The Inquiry also heard that welfare support staff members need ready access to specialist services.⁶⁸ A youth worker from Hobart College explained that beyond having supportive leadership and adequate welfare resources, schools need to be able to rely on the existence of non-school-based, expert adolescent specific services:

*... the bottom line is that the core business of a college is to assist students to be educated. [The school provides] the best possible back-up service for that process. So the school would be really grateful if there were better drug and alcohol services so that not every single service can be delivered in the school.*⁶⁹

13.31 In relation to the timing of early interventions, witnesses advised the Inquiry about the need for earlier action.⁷⁰ Darumbal Community Youth Services in Brisbane called for the appointment of youth support staff at the primary school level.⁷¹ BATForce in Geelong (Vic) agreed, telling the Inquiry that even at Grade 3, schools know which young people likely to be at-risk later on.⁷²

13.32 The Inquiry was interested in the views of witnesses on what constitutes good or effective early intervention in schools and what works well. Hobart College (Tas) provided an overview of its response to the needs of at-risk and homeless young people, giving an picture of teamwork and a multi-service approach. The College responded to the challenge by:

*... employing a full-time youth worker, working collaboratively with Colony 47 to support a student housing complex, providing staff Professional Learning in relation to understanding poverty and disadvantage, developing close links with Centrelink Social Workers, permitting the youth worker to be a member of the IHSHY State Advisory Committee (Youth Health Fund), operating a weekly free dinner for independent students - catered by staff, providing material assistance when required by homeless students, offering flexible learning options, working together with Jobs Pathways and JPET and, more recently, Youth Pathways ...*⁷³

13.33 At the opposite end of the country, Taminmin High School talked about working creatively with students and parents to build its capacity to support at-risk and homeless young people in a rural context where support services and infrastructure are limited or inaccessible:

... it is not only children that present to us, like parents are coming to us with their families falling apart, and trying to actually link them in ... those services ... are often in Darwin which is 50 kilometres, and these families are not necessarily wealthy and the

*petrol money for example would be difficult and there is a very limited bus.*⁷⁴

The school uses a planned approach to building capacity that involves the rigorous development of peer support networks with students supporting students and parents supporting parents:

*Prior to parent teacher night, the parents phone a number of parents and invite the harder to reach families to come in, so it's coming from other parents and not the school. We run food, we have some incentives. ... We always offer transport as part of the thing. Sometimes people can come together. ... if it's a family in crisis, we've been known to do a home visit as well. So we do get out and go to the families if that's an absolute barrier or meet the family. We've met at the Corroboree Park Tavern, because that's where the parent felt safe in meeting.*⁷⁵

Taminmin also provides professional development for teaching staff, including mental health first aid and makes use of the presence of a youth-friendly, school-based constable.

Schools as obstacles

13.34 While the Inquiry was presented with evidence about schools playing a supportive and nurturing role in the lives of at-risk and homeless young people, it also heard from the homelessness sector and alternative education providers about at-risk and homeless young people being excluded from schools.⁷⁶ Shopfront Youth Legal Centre (NSW) advised the Inquiry that exclusions are the norm:

*By the time most of our clients come to us, they usually pretty much have left school or at least mainstream schools anyway. Usually, that is as a result of having been suspended or excluded.*⁷⁷

13.35 The sector acknowledged that schools sometimes face challenging behaviours⁷⁸, but there were criticisms about young people being easy targets and particular criticisms of educational departments for denying the ramifications of school exclusion and for failing to protect the educational progress of young people during their periods of exclusion.

13.36 Hanover Welfare Services (Vic) advised the Inquiry that exclusions are an open secret:

*The State Government will say that kids aren't expelled from government schools. That's rubbish. They're excluded through stealth, and because it is difficult to exclude a student, what happens is that kids, particularly kids who are difficult, when they start to disappear from school they are not followed up ...*⁷⁹

13.37 Southern Youth and Family Services, Wollongong (NSW) wrote to the Inquiry about the lack of educational support once suspension has taken place:

*... there is no assistance provided by the Education Department during suspension periods.*⁸⁰

This complaint was echoed by Colony 47's Youth Services Unit (Tasmania).⁸¹

13.38 The Youth Accommodation Association advised the Inquiry that this lack of support for services with clients who've been excluded from school is a widespread problem for the homelessness sector.⁸²

13.39 Witnesses also submitted evidence suggesting that, in some locations, independent young people who want to enrol in a new school are unable to do so. Sometimes the difficulty is related to the absence of a guardian⁸³ and sometimes it is because schools are reluctant to accept homeless and at-risk young people. Key College, an alternative school, wrote of its experience supporting young people wanting to re-enter mainstream schooling:

*Sometimes our students would like to move back to a mainstream school. It doesn't happen very often. However when a student wants to give it a "go" then the opportunity should be there for them. This is extremely difficult and becoming harder. ... Last year we rang a number of private and public schools for one particular student. No one was prepared to give this student a second chance. One school did not even bother to return our calls (6 in total). They didn't even know the background ... of the child.*⁸⁴

Barriers to remaining at school

13.40 As mentioned previously, there is a range of factors that can act as barriers to young people remaining in education. These factors influence young people's ability to attend mainstream schools. The Inquiry heard that attending mainstream school can be particularly difficult for young parents, who often feel judged.⁸⁵ Even when young parents are welcome, the availability of on-site childcare is a significant issue.⁸⁶

Alternative education

13.41 The Inquiry heard about a number of organisations in different parts of Australia that offer alternative educational options to homeless and at-risk young people.⁸⁷ Witnesses agreed that models which offered personal support to address life issues and a modular approach to learning had real advantages.

13.42 Youth in the City in Canberra gave evidence about the importance of having several workers and a module-based curriculum as part of its Youth Education Program, then went on to describe the program's atmosphere:

*... they've got someone who is interested in everything and not in a really pokey and nose way, but is working in conjunction with that young person to make sure that they're getting the best ... and understanding of the fact that if a young person has been homeless that night, there's no way that they're going to be keen on getting straight into their maths that morning, ... they're wanting to go and have a feed, they want to get warm, you know, and perhaps be able to have a shower and do things like that, and have that flexibility.*⁸⁸

13.43 Mission Australia cited their Learning Unlimited program, which operates in South Australia, as an example of best practice:

*Mission Australia, in partnership with young people, local communities, government departments and schools has developed Learning Unlimited, a cluster of services and programs for young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from their communities and their education. Off-campus programs offer accredited schooling to young people who need an alternative to mainstream school life. Delivered from community setting they provide a bridge, enabling young people to complete their studies and to find a sense of purpose for the future.*⁸⁹

13.44 Mission Australia also highlighted Creative Youth Initiatives, a Sydney-based learning program that it operates for young people with high and complex needs. The program provides:

*... a highly specialised and supportive learning environment for young people aged 16-24 years who are homeless or marginalised. Many of the young people who attend the six-month program have severe mental health, financial and personal health issues. The key focus is on creative learning, working with others and rebuilding their lives. Programs designed to engage them in music, photography, art and other disciplines are offered.*⁹⁰

13.45 Key College, a small alternative school in Sydney, incorporates counselling into its program and claims that its educational outcomes demonstrate that in a supportive and well-designed educational environment, young homeless people can make significant educational advances. Six students completed their school certificate in English, Mathematics and computers. One student achieved 91 per cent in English, another 82 per cent and a third 75 per cent. One student in 2005 completed two HSC subjects on a part-time enrolment. In the experience of the teachers from Key College, young people, even those with high and complex needs, can achieve educationally if provided with sufficient support and in smaller-scale environment than a mainstream school.⁹¹ The college advised the Inquiry that its students seek meaningful and recognisable qualifications.⁹²

13.46 The Inquiry heard that in order to maintain their education, young homeless people often need access to alternative educational environments. A critical factor is that these alternative environments are staffed by supportive trustworthy adults and that the students are protected from ridicule and don't feel out of place.⁹³ UnitingCare Burnside gave an example that demonstrates the way a mainstream school environment can become intolerable even when the school's intention is good:

*When a school Principal bought one young person a uniform so she could replace her worn one, she said it became known around the school and other students called her a "scab".*⁹⁴

13.47 Witnesses advised the Inquiry that many young people who are in need of alternative education options do not have easy and timely access to them, particularly in rural areas.⁹⁵ Reconnect Townsville talked about the work done locally by the Flexible

Learning Centre, but pointed out that the Centre can only assist a few:

*... [it] is doing an excellent job but that's 45 kids for again a 160,000, 170,000 population. That is not much. But they are doing excellent work.*⁹⁶

Young people and their families

13.48 The Reconnect program dominates the area of early intervention for young people and their families. Reconnect grew out of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program and began in 1999 as a nationwide Australian Government recurrently funded program, designed to reduce youth homelessness. The program targets 12 to 18 year-olds and focuses on reconnecting young people to family, education, employment and the community.⁹⁷

13.49 The program has fostered a change in the homelessness sector. It has provided some resources for early intervention work with families and, through its successes in working with individual young people and their families, has shifted attitudes about the best way to respond to young people during the early stages of homelessness. In Geelong, Time for Youth spoke about this shift, which saw its workers weighing up the competing imperatives of rights-based responses with reunification-focused responses. Time for Youth advised the Inquiry that in certain circumstances it gave preference to reunification efforts:

*... traditionally it's been every easy to put [15, 16 and 17 year-olds] in the refuge, purchase motel accommodation for them and they end up at Centrelink and start down the road of homelessness ... What we're wanting to do is identify those young people at the point which they contact our service ... and sit down with them at that point before they spend a night at a refuge, to contact the family, work with them and do some informal mediation work, explore with the family whether there are other options, an aunty, an uncle or a friend that they could stay with while supports are put into place.*⁹⁸

13.50 A father spoke to the Inquiry in Melbourne about the impact Reconnect's existence has had on his family. Two of the children in his family had contact with homelessness services: the first in 1999 and the second in 2005. In 1999, his 14 year-old son's assertion that he could not live at home was taken at face value, no mediation or counselling was offered to assist his family, in spite of repeated requests, and the boy was supported to move into an independent living arrangement. His father advised the Inquiry that he has had almost no contact with his son since then. In 2005 his daughter became homeless, but the family was assisted by Reconnect:

*I'm probably talking about 20 or 30 hours of work from the counsellor, from the Reconnect. He got things to a stage where we could talk and go out to talk with our daughter, and worked out some things and in the end she actually came back home. But none of that I believe would have been possible, if it hadn't have been for the way that the organisation swung in straight away. There was no hesitation.*⁹⁹

13.51 The most recent evaluation of Reconnect suggests that this success story is not an isolated example. The Reconnect evaluation found that the program was effective, had

significant positive outcomes for young people and families and increased the capacity of families to manage their relationships.¹⁰⁰

13.52 The Inquiry did not receive any criticisms about the work undertaken by Reconnect services. However, there were concerns about gaps in the program's spread¹⁰¹, about funding levels and demand exceeding supply¹⁰², and about the perceived need to offer support to younger age groups and their families.¹⁰³

13.53 Both Project i and the Victorian Government drew the Inquiry's attention to the Family Reconciliation Mediation Program, or FRMP, a Victorian Government initiative.¹⁰⁴ FRMP extends the principle of maintaining links with family to 15 to 25 year-olds who have experienced longer periods of homelessness than those targeted by Reconnect.¹⁰⁵ FRMP is discussed in more detail in Chapter 15 Post-SAAP Transitions.

13.54 In terms of earlier interventions, a worker from an early intervention service in Darwin talked about help coming too late for families:

*It is kind of ironic that we're looking at early intervention and prevention, but it's actually the families that need that service to support their young people not to get to the stage where they are going to become homeless.*¹⁰⁶

*Colony 47 (Tasmania) told the Inquiry about a successful program it ran for 6 to 12 year-olds that was not re-funded, suggesting that there was a lack of clarity about which level of government is responsible for funding prevention and earlier interventions services for under 12s.*¹⁰⁷

13.55 In relation to demand, North East Support and Action for Youth (north-eastern Victoria) talked about the call on its Reconnect service:

*We are overwhelmed with family mediation work in Reconnect. We currently, this year, serviced about 105 families ... We have 2.2 workers in Reconnect for the whole of the region. We got a 1.8 per cent increase in funding last year. It just doesn't compute for us and we actually had to cut services to some of our outlying areas.*¹⁰⁸

13.56 In Adelaide, Anglican Community Care, Mt Gambier told the Inquiry about its attempts to gain a Reconnect service:

*... we've been told that there's no money for that program. ... some of these children that I'm talking about, I believe can be reunited with their families.*¹⁰⁹

*This organisation and a number of others pointed out that a service combination of Reconnect with appropriate, locally-based respite or crisis accommodation is essential if young people are to remain connected to education, family and the community.*¹¹⁰

Respite

13.57 While respite services were identified as a potential early intervention support for families in the Burdekin Report, the National Youth Commission Inquiry was

advised by witnesses that respite remains an urgent unmet need that could be central to reunification work.¹¹¹ In Geelong, a worker from a Reconnect service pointed out the difficulty the lack of respite care creates for families in crisis:

*There is virtually no place you can take your kid out of home and put them into respite for a week or two while you are trying to work things out.*¹¹²

She told the Inquiry that a respite service would need to offer skilled parenting support as part of its package:

*... it is beyond youth work. This sort of work needs family trained workers who are at least social workers if not more and I think at least family and therapy trained to get in there and work with these parents.*¹¹³

Young families

13.58 The Inquiry heard from organisations and services working with young families and young pregnant women. While most did not identify themselves as ‘early intervention’ services as such, their work with young pregnant women and young families in crisis necessarily involved them in early intervention work. Many of these services had a strong health component and that aspect of their evidence is covered in Chapter 17 Health.

13.59 Starting Out (Vic) wrote to the Inquiry about working with parents under 25 and described its services, in addition to antenatal support, as including parenting support, counselling, supported accommodation, outreach, advocacy, group work and peer education¹¹⁴. All of the issues raised by this organisation dealt with the problems that young families experience finding secure accommodation, and this testimony highlighting for the Inquiry the essential role secure accommodation plays in any early intervention into family welfare.

13.60 Karinya Young Womyn’s Service (Tas) works with young women between the ages of 13 and 20. Approximately 10 per cent of the Karinya’s clients are pregnant and the service identified the need to intervene early in terms of life-planning and education.¹¹⁵

13.61 Family Access Network (Vic) works with young homeless people and estimates that approximately 50 per cent to 60 per cent of its clients are pregnant or parenting. The service drew the Inquiry’s attention to some of its non-SAAP funded initiatives designed to support young families. These include running a supported young mum’s group and a children’s program for children accompanying young parents into SAAP.¹¹⁶

13.62 The Inquiry was also interested in programs that intervene early and prevent homelessness for young families. The Australian Government’s Household Organisational Management Expenses HOME Advice program is a good example. This program targets families in crisis who are at-risk of homelessness. While Home Advice is not youth-specific, its potential to support young families and therefore impact on outcomes for children, is significant. A recent evaluation of the program suggested that it is highly effective and recommends that the program be expanded.¹¹⁷ In its current

small-scale form, the program funds one provider in each state and territory. HOME Advice uses a family-centred approach to support families experiencing housing instability.

13.63 The recent Opportunity for Change report on homelessness and young mothers suggests that closer links should be developed between the homelessness and health sectors in order to create better outcomes for young mothers.¹¹⁸ The report also emphasised that young mothers need youth specific services, tailored crisis accommodation services, and well-located transitional housing with social support. The report also highlighted the importance of services acknowledging the role of young fathers and young mothers' partners and the needs of children in services. Pregnancy, birth and early motherhood were identified as significant early intervention opportunities for reconnecting young mothers with their families of origin.

Findings and Recommendations

13.64 A major early intervention initiative has been the Reconnect program developed following the Prime Minister's Youth Homelessness Task Force. According to a 2003 evaluation and fieldwork by researchers, this was a very effective program, which has contributed to the reduction in the number of homeless 12-18 year olds since 2001. This program has been deployed at about 100 sites but at least one half of communities in Australia have no access to Reconnect services. The Victorian Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program, which was designed for homeless young people in SAAP, also allows 'early intervention' family reconciliation because in some areas Reconnect services are not available. In an AHURI Report, Youth homelessness: Four Policy Proposals, researchers have recommended that Reconnect be doubled or trebled in size in order to reach the number of at-risk young people and their families in need who would benefit from early intervention¹¹⁹.

Recommendation 13.1:

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Reconnect program be progressively expanded to optimally three times present capacity to provide full national coverage for at-risk young people and their families.

13.65 The policy perspective of 'early intervention' and the idea of schools as sites for early intervention have been well established in the policy imagination. School welfare support services have been improved and extended in several jurisdictions however overall provision remains uneven and there is no strong push for a national approach on what could be called the 'social curriculum' as there is for literacy and numeracy and subjects considered core learning areas. Recommendations 13.2 to 13.8 relate to some specific reforms that would strengthen student welfare support in schools and inform policy. Australian schools of the 21st century need to incorporate social as well as educational support in their care values. In the US, the notion of the co-located full-service school has been widely promoted although minimally implemented. In the

Australian context, social aims seem to be best achieved through a partnership between schools and community organisations.

Recommendation 13.2

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Australian Government together with the states and territories conduct a national review of the provision of student welfare services in both primary and secondary schools. The review should:

- provide a detailed audit report on the extent of student support at school level and across schools;
- identify schools on a hierarchy of need and risk;
- examine the issue of qualifications and experience for student welfare staff;
- compare student support across states and territories;
- propose national standards for student welfare services in schools.

13.66 The following recommendation seeks explicit policy development within the education department that mandates certain standards for student support and work with community organisations. Too often, schools can avoid these commitments if the local principal does not see the value of such work. Generally, local decision-making has many advantages over a highly centralised bureaucracy, however, local decision-making should not be able to avoid large national policy issues. There is a need for policy guidelines and expectations to focus the performance of schools and principals on specifically on how they might assist at-risk students in appropriate ways in their local community context.

Recommendation 13.3:

The NYC Inquiry recommends that Australian government-funded public and private secondary schools be required under a policy guideline agreed by all departments of education to participate in initiatives for the community coordination of youth services.

Recommendation 13.4

The NYC Inquiry recommends that all jurisdictions develop clear student well-being policies, form a dedicated central leadership team on student well-being matters, issue explicit operational requirements for school principals and councils, including reporting on school leaving and social issues for departmental monitoring as well as accountability to the community.

13.68 Evidence on the range of social issues experienced by students and their families could be collected while young people are at school. Schools collect a vast amount of information but on some of critical issues, virtually nothing. While there are drug surveys regularly done on a sample of school students, a comprehensive assessment has only been undertaken only on several occasions in a limited way. Recommendation 13.5 proposes that schools as community institutions have a requirement to publicly report

on certain social indicators as a vehicle for stimulating improved performance and a way of encouraging attention to these issues as priority areas within the school community.

Recommendation 13.5

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Australian Government commissions a national at-risk assessment of students in primary and secondary schools and develops a tool and a mechanism that will allow the benchmark data to be updated regularly if not annually.

Recommendation 13.6

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Federal, state and territory governments develop a data collection on social indicators for schools, such as:

- **the number of young people who fail to progress from primary school into secondary school;**
- **information on school suspensions and exclusions, both formal and informal;**
- **the number of young people leaving schools before completing Year 12;**
- **the reasons why young people leave school;**
- **demographic information about early school leavers.**

13.69 Accurate measures of disadvantage are important for school funding and for the rational distribution of special needs resources. The use of ABS area data to compare schools in terms of disadvantage is misleading and inaccurate because schools do not simply draw students from a catchment surrounding the school. Special needs funding is based on formulae derived from ABS data. A more discriminating approach using data collected from students who actually attend a school and their families is clearly necessary and would provide much better evidence of difference and disadvantage. This level of information also would provide an accurate assessment of the number of at-risk students and who they are, which would hugely assist school welfare support and programs such as Reconnect to engage with at-risk students and their families.

Recommendation 13.7

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Australian Government undertakes a project to assess the needs of schools based on actual student and family level data and real-time monitoring rather than ABS area data based on the location of a school, which often underestimates the need of students in particular schools.

13.70 There should be major concern about the progress by Indigenous students in the education system. A significant number do not make the transition from primary to secondary school. Statistical information on students progressing, or not progressing, from primary to secondary school is not readily available except as aggregated school retention rates.

Recommendation 13.8:

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the issue of transition from primary to secondary school for Indigenous students and early school leaving be addressed as a specific strategy by state and territory governments, with additional support and funding from the Australian Government.

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