

Submission to the Australian Government Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) Interim Report consultation

The Productivity Commission is interested in receiving feedback from stakeholders about their recently released Interim Report relating to the Review of the National School Reform Agreement, to inform their final report.

Key Recommendations

1. Life Without Barriers supports the Interim Report's statement that the priority equity cohorts in the NSRA do not capture all cohorts of students experiencing educational disadvantage and strongly recommends that children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) are included as a new priority equity cohort in the next iteration of the NSRA.
2. Life Without Barriers supports the Interim Report's statement that the next NSRA should concentrate on the pervasive challenge of addressing poor student wellbeing and agrees that schools and teachers need more support to help students overcome these circumstances and achieve their potential.
3. Life Without Barriers recommends that children and young people (including those from priority equity cohorts and those in OOHC) are involved with the creation of the next NSRA and that their voices are embedded into the new intergovernmental agreement.
4. Life Without Barriers supports the Interim Report's statement that the next NSRA should focus on a small number of reforms that will directly lift student outcomes and that tailored strategies are essential to support children and young people in OOHC improve their educational outcomes.

About Life Without Barriers

Life Without Barriers is a registered charity supporting approximately 23,000 people in over 400 communities across Australia. We provide people with services they need so they can maximise their opportunities to participate in the community. We offer services to people with disability; children, young people and families in the child protection system; people with mental health and alcohol and other drug issues and people seeking asylum and refugee status in Australia.

Life Without Barriers directly supports around 2000 children and young people across our services and have close to 3000 foster and kinship carers as part of our community. We also are an experienced provider of disability services, having been formed in Newcastle 30 years ago to create service access for people with disability where there was a gap in service provision.

In relation to the care and support of children, young people and families, we operate guided by the following intention:

"We are dedicated to providing children, young people and families with the right services at the right time to prevent, intervene early, and break the cycle of disadvantage, so that we can change their life trajectories and support them to thrive".

Life Without Barriers employs over 8,200 staff and is responsible for annual funding of approximately \$750 million. Life Without Barriers has a firm commitment to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people within our care and in the communities we serve.

Comments on the Interim Report

As outlined throughout the Interim Report, children and young people in OOHC continue to experience significant challenges to achieve successful educational outcomes. Life Without Barriers is one of a small number of agencies that provides out-of-home care (OOHC) for children and young people in most states of Australia.

Given this experience, Life Without Barriers recognises that we play an important role to offer and share the insights we have gained from this provision of care and the gaps children and young people in out-of-home care are experiencing in relation to education. Life Without Barriers sees firsthand that children and young people in OOHC experience poorer educational outcome than their peers and that they are considerably less likely to attend school and engage with education. Our organisation has developed a deep understanding of how children and young people in care experience education and is committed to addressing the significant educational barriers they experience.

Listening to the voices of children and young people

As a result of the recent Victorian Commission for Children and Young People's Systemic Inquiry into the Educational Experiences of Children and Young People Living in Out-of-Home Care, Life Without Barriers staff supported a number of children and young people, aged between 14 to 17 years, in our care to make submissions to this inquiry. Staff heard how the children in our care experience education, the barriers they face to meaningfully engage with education and what they thought could be done to improve their experience.

When asked what positive experiences they have had with their school/education one young person responded with:

- "I haven't had many positives with schooling, the only time I have felt engaged and enjoyed study was when I started independent schooling in a subject I chose"

When asked what things they would change young people responded with:

- "I would make it more individualised instead of assuming everyone is the same and learns the same. I would also stop having teachers assume kids don't have other things going on in their lives. I would like the teachers to be more understanding of kids mental health and have teachers be more understanding of the underlying issues that make kids act out."
- "Bullies. People can be mean to you to try and fit in. Some kids will fight you for being in care."
- "I'd make lessons more interesting. It is like we are made to sit there and do nothing. I like to actually do stuff and move around instead of sitting there. It makes it hard."

When asked how living in care has impacted their experience at school, if at all, young people responded with:

- "I haven't been able to go to school, I have been having sessions with "my worker" (name withheld)."
- "Made me anxious that people would see me differently because of my living situation. It made me feel alienated and like an oddity."

When asked what they would tell the government is the most important thing to change for children and young people living in care to help them get the best education they responded with:

- “Make it fun to be there.”
- “Having more funding for school supplies would help me at school because sometimes we don’t have the money to get things I need in my classroom.”
- “My teachers are pretty good, but I think all teachers should be fun, springy and positive around the kids in care that they work with.”
- “That kids in care have gone through hell, learning is not going to be their top priority. Workers and managers need to understand that surviving is going to be the kid’s priority, not learning. Also listen to the kids when they tell you how they learn best and what situations will help them thrive and what situations will add to their misery.”
- “Our brains are wired different because of what we have been through and how the trauma has impacted us. We need more support and encouragement and less rigid regulations around schooling and making it a priority.”
- “It needs to be shorter or at least more flexible. It’s hard to sit there and be expected to learn when you’re not feeling it or when you’re so exhausted. I think shorter lessons would be heaps better because I’d be able to concentrate and get more learning done.”
- “It would be better if teachers at school were calmer.”
- “Students have potential”
- “Teachers to be more helpful and positive.”
- “To understand sometimes I can be silly, but teachers need to be supportive and more understanding about my disability.”

Life Without Barriers supports the Interim Report’s statement that the priority equity cohorts in the NSRA do not capture all cohorts of students experiencing educational disadvantage and strongly recommends that children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) are included as a new priority equity cohort in the next iteration of the NSRA. This will ensure that children and young people in OOHC are given the same level of support that other already identified priority equity cohorts receive as a result of being included in the current NSRA.

It is evident from the above comments made by the children and young people in OOHC that wellbeing has a significant impact on educational success. Life Without Barriers supports the Interim Report’s statement that the next NSRA should concentrate on the pervasive challenge of addressing poor student wellbeing and agrees that schools and teachers need more support to help students overcome these circumstances and achieve their potential.

Life Without Barriers recommends that children and young people (including those from priority equity cohorts and those in OOHC) are involved with the creation of the next NSRA and that their voices are embedded into the new agreement. This could be done by engaging the National Children’s Commissioner as well as the State and Territory Children’s Commissioners and Guardians across Australia.

Life Without Barriers Education Unit

To demonstrate our commitment to ensuring that the children and young people we support in OOHC are given every opportunity to thrive, we have established a specialised Education Unit within our organisation.

The Education Unit aims to revitalise education and enhance learning outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care by understanding the impact trauma has on children and young people in care, challenging systemic barriers within education systems, and influencing positive change that promotes educational engagement and achievement. Life Without Barriers works in partnership with children, carers, families, educators, specialists, communities and key governments to recognise the deeper complexities of experience children and young people in care often have, as well as the responses from education facilities that can disrupt and damage a child or young person's confidence and access to education. The unit aims to ignite eagerness to engage in learning and provide the support children and young people require to recognise the value of education for their immediate benefit and the future.

We provide our foster, kinship carers and our workforce with the materials and resources that they need to support learning at the key developmental stages in ways that work for them. Another crucial aspect to the formation of Life Without Barriers' Education Unit, is the employment of specialised Education Consultants that work directly with children and young people in OOHC to engage meaningfully in their education. These workers ensure that the child or young person's view and perspective is shared and understood. The Victorian State Government has funded an Education Consultant to work with a small number of children in residential settings.

Life Without Barriers has witnessed numerous positive changes and increased educational engagement with the children and young people in our care as a result of them connecting with the specialised Education Consultants from our Education Unit. School Engagement and retention has dramatically increased, and school suspension has decreased.

The Life Without Barriers Education Unit is an example of a tailored strategy and the program could be expanded to benefit more children and young people in OOHC. Our organisation intends to continue to find ways to deliver a personal experience for each child.

Life Without Barriers supports the Interim Report's statement that the next NSRA should focus on a small number of reforms that will directly lift student outcomes and that tailored strategies are essential to support children and young people in OOHC improve their educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Life Without Barriers agrees that the next reform agreement is an opportunity to focus directly on lifting student outcomes, improving equity, and enhancing student wellbeing. We look forward to seeing how the updated NSRA positively impacts the lives of children and young people, especially those in out-of-home care.

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