

Burnett Youth Learning Centre



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Elliott Farm
3693 Goodwood Road
PO Box 4170 Bundaberg Q 4670

Telephone: (07) 41597579
Facsimile: (07) 41597557
Email: office@bylc.qld.edu.au

Submission

Schools Workforce study

18th August 2011

Schools Workforce Study
Productivity Commission
LB2 Collins Street East
MELBOURNE VIC 8003
schools@pc.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Schools Workforce study

I provide this submission on behalf of the Burnett Youth Learning Centre (BYLC).

The Burnett Youth Learning Centre was established in 2006 to provide an opportunity for disengaged youth aged 12-18 years to develop intellectually, physically, socially, morally, spiritually and aesthetically and thereby become effective members of society. The mission of BYLC is *'taking the challenge ... inspiring hope'*.

We present an alternative education facility that is owned and managed by the Christian community for the benefit of the broader community. BYLC is committed to providing youth in this district with alternative education and employment pathway opportunities together with inspiring a hope for their future. BYLC caters for 12 – 18 year old youth termed 'at risk' from within the Bundaberg Regional Council area, in collaboration with youth stakeholders.

BYLC operates a 70 acre farm featuring cattle, tree and small crops.

Current training opportunities are: Personal support and Life Skilling; Pre-vocational courses; Work Readiness; and Vocational Certificate 1 in ICT.

Further courses being developed in:

- Certificate 1 in Rural Practices;
- VET Units of Metal Engineering, General Construction, Automotive, Retail and Hospitality.

Language, Literacy and Numeracy training is a major focus in conjunction with student Individual Learning Plans.

Students are referred to BYLC primarily from local state high schools and the Department of Youth Justice, having exhausted learning opportunities available to them in the public system. Most students have been suspended or expelled from their referring school or, in some cases, have dropped out of school. BYLC is the last opportunity many students have to be part of the educational system. Many students come from broken families and have used

or use drugs and abuse alcohol. Current student population is approximately forty (40) students with a full time staff equivalent of six.

This submission is allowed to be put in the public domain.

BYLC welcomes the opportunity to add to the debate in this area and provide feedback in this important area.

BYLC operates in a specialised area of education, and one of our constraints to grow and provide quality outcomes to our students is human capital. Our response will be based on our experience as a specialised education provider.

The schools workforce

What other features of the current schools workforce and its changing context are important from a policy perspective?

Although the Issues paper is not about funding, we believe funding issues, especially equity of funding, need to be mentioned. For schools such as ours, there is no equity. The consequence of the current funding arrangement is that our students attend school at a facility that requires more resourcing, yet receives less funding from the government than government schools do, despite our students not having their needs met in the mainstream education system.

Unlike other nongovernment schools, BYLC is unable to charge families or carers school fees as the majority are in low income employment or are welfare recipients.

We note that most government schools in this region ask parents to make a monetary contribution to help meet the running costs of the school and to pay for school excursions.

BYLC provides breakfast and lunch to students and utilises three buses to pick up and drop off students at their residential address (some students live 50 kilometres away). This is done to give students every opportunity to attend school and to engage. Attendance rates average 65%.

Youth workers are available to address issues that prevent or hold back enjoyable and meaningful learning. Youth at risk face complex issues and educational risk is rarely an isolated problem. Young people who are disengaged from learning often have a wide range of circumstances that generate needs and concerns. Some have urgent and immediate concerns about their survival and safety, therefore formal education may be low on their list of priorities. Provision of pastoral care support to clients and families is vital.

We note that at educational forums schools such as ours are constantly being told by government (in response for more funding) that “we have not asked you to have the students

you have”. Although it is very clear the mainstream educational system is not able to work with disengaged youth, it is disappointing that government does not recognise this fact. BYLC is successfully filling a gap in the education market and whilst this may best be described as pioneering, it is currently not being rewarded or acknowledged on a per capita funding basis.

In our opinion, support staff such as youth workers, chaplains and counsellors is essential to prepare and allow students to engage in the learning process. We believe our support staff are an essential part of our school and without their involvement, the learning experience of each of our students would be lessened or nonexistent.

Why is the performance of the schools workforce important?

BYLC firmly believes that the success or lack of success of any school is highly reliant on having a workforce who have a passion for the students they work with. For all of our staff, their role is more than a job; it is a passion or desire to engage with those who are disengaged and to encourage them to start the journey to reach their potential.

Student outcomes in all sectors of the educational system would be greatly enhanced with a workforce who is passionate and adequately resourced to do their job.

BYLC has a lower staff-student ratio than mainstream schools for several reasons:

- To allow greater staff interaction with individual students
- To reduce behavioural effects in classroom
- To allow delivery of tailored individual student plans
- To help staff to engage with students

Recent policy developments

We welcome the review of current funding arrangements and submitted a submission to the review. Our submission can be found at http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Review_of_Funding/SubEip/AtoF/Documents/Burnett_Youth_Learning_Centre_QLD.pdf

Balancing supply and demand

Being in a specialised area of education, BYLC find's it hard to find staff quickly. Although many applicants reply to our job advertisements, very few of those who apply have experience working with disengaged youth or have had any training in this field.

The BYLC model of learning is more expensive to maintain than the model on which the AGSRC is based. We urge the committee to recommend to government the need for a more realistic/accurate way of determining recurrent expenditure of educating a student than the current method.

We question why a school such as ours is deemed to be able to fully function on 70% of funding of the estimated cost of a state school, when state schools have not been able to meet our students' needs.

BYLC firmly believes that if the funding we received was at least equal to what state schools receive we would be in a position to train staff who are passionate about working with disengaged youth and be able to attract staff from local schools and match the pay rates being offered by the private sector.

Training and professional development

BYLC supports staff by providing training and professional development opportunities, but we note that many opportunities are offered in Brisbane, which is some four hours drive away. BYLC operates with a limited staff, having only one person away impacts heavily on the staff-student ratio. Anecdotally, behavioural issues increase when staff members are absent or student staff ratio is above 6:1, our optimum ratio would be 3:1.

We would welcome more specialised learning opportunities for our staff that allowed our staff to mix and network with similar schools in a more cost effective and logistically efficient manner.

Remuneration and performance evaluation

Funding restrictions do not allow BYLC to pay more than other private schools. This has in the past meant that we have not been able employ some staff as the current budget was not able to offer prospective staff a competitive wage.

We do not in favour performance based pay as with disengaged students, it is hard to set up performance metrics as each student has their particular needs. Having performance based pay could change the current emphasis from a team based approach to an individual focus.

Further we believe it would be unrealistic to measure people whose motivation is their heart commitment (passionate about what and how they do).

School leadership

With a small staff and using a team based approach to teaching outcomes, BYLC has found that each staff member displays leadership in their area of expertise. We believe that having a team focus and allowing individual staff to "step up" when needed allows individuals to freely contribute to learning outcomes and process.

Each member is important, but working as a team is, from our perspective, more important. Critical to this model of leadership is the concentrated effort to maintain a student free review, feedback and professional development day. This day is spent across a range of activities including staff meeting time, training, program research and development,

development of individual learning plans and also permits times for a student to attend the Centre without other student's knowledge.

The art of teaching disengaged youth is a balance between designing innovative and needs met curriculum and learning opportunities, and building in a buffer time throughout the week to accommodate 'reactive' behaviour management techniques. We believe our flexible approach enhances what we do.

Meeting the needs of particular student populations

BYLC is in existence because of the need to meet a particular student population, in our case disengaged youth.

The greatest challenge for our students is engagement – that is, finding purpose and a way forward that gives them hope. Many have become disengaged through the failure of mainstream schools (mainly due to large class sizes) to have adequate resources to identify learning roadblocks and forcing students to engage in a learning process/model that does not suit their learning style or forces them to engage in a manner that reinforces their low self worth. Special education units separate students into a grouping that the rest of the school community recognises, intentionally or unintentionally, as not having much value.

At BYLC students are treated with respect and are positively challenged to 'step up' and make the most of their opportunity at the Centre. Some students view themselves as so entrenched that we are unable to help them. Others, after many months of persistent positive reinforcement, change and start the process to a future of hope.

BYLC employs youth workers who are available to address issues that prevent or hold back enjoyable and meaningful learning. Youth at risk face complex issues and educational risk is rarely an isolated problem. Young people who are disengaged from learning often have a wide range of circumstances that generate needs and concerns. Some have urgent and immediate concerns about their survival and safety, therefore formal education may be low on their list of priorities. Provision of pastoral care support to clients and families is vital.

To facilitate the particular needs of a student population we ask that there be a different model for funding and ask that whatever models are used reflects the true cost of the operation of a school, the location of the school and the SES level of the school.

An example of one way of determining need would be to incorporate the latest available research on the needs of disengaged youth or the location of regions of low socio-economic indicators.

We offer highlights of a report released last year (2010) as an example of research that could be used to determine priorities for funding models and of need.

The Scan of Disadvantage in Queensland by Uniting Care Queensland¹ contains an analysis of the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) using the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) for Statistical Divisions.

This analysis shows the Wide Bay-Burnett region as the highest-rated statistical division in Queensland for social and economic disadvantage. The Bundaberg Region (the feeder area for students to BYLC) is a significant population base in this area (p.45).

Key points from the report showing the number 1 ranking of the area in various measures are:

- (p.109) Population on unemployment benefits.
- (p.110) Unemployment.
- (p.113) Early school leaving.
- (p. 115) Household Projections for Lone-Person Households.
- (p. 116) Projected Increases in One-Parent Households.
- (p. 122) Welfare-Dependent and Other Low Income Families with Children.
- (p.130) People Aged 65 Years Who Live Alone.
- (p. 132) Low Income Households Aged 65 Years and Over in Unaffordable Private Rental.
- (p. 138) People with a Profound or Severe Disability (includes people in long-term accommodation).
- (p. 140) People with a Profound or Severe Disability and Living in the Community.
- (p. 140) Dwellings Rented from the Government Housing Authority.
- (p. 140) Households in Dwellings Receiving Rent Assistance from Centrelink.
- (p. 145) Rental Stress.
- (p.146) Mortgage Stress.
- (p. 149) Private Dwellings with No Motor Vehicle.

¹ The Scan of Disadvantage in Queensland A report by the Centre for Social Justice for Uniting Care Queensland October 2006

http://www.ucareqld.com.au/SocialJustice/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=133&Itemid=20

In summary BYLC seeks the following:

1. The funding is increased for high SES schools.
2. The funding allows a greater emphasis on training and resourcing of support staff such as counsellors and youth workers.
3. Lower staff-student ratios.
4. The needs of disengaged youth become a priority of education funding.
5. Training and professional development events for all staff become more available to those who live in regional or rural areas.

Yours sincerely,

David Lawson
Chairman BYLC Management Committee