

The Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

Advice to: Australian Government Productivity Commission
Topic: Schools Workforce Productivity Commission Draft Research Report
Date due: 23 February 2012

Thank you for providing the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian with the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Commission Draft Research Report on the Schools Workforce (the Report).

Summary of the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian's position:

1. The Commission notes and endorses the Report's acknowledgement that although reducing the adverse effects of educational disadvantage will call for a range of educational and general policy responses, it must be a high priority for school workforce reform
2. The Commission recommends that consideration be given to the explicit recognition of children in the statutory care system and the future workforce development needs required to deliver education programs that are responsive to their needs, and
3. The Commission urges the Productivity Commission to give consideration to how education programs for children and young people at risk of exclusion from mainstream school settings can fit within any proposed workforce reforms.

1. The Commission notes and endorses the Report's acknowledgement that although reducing the adverse effects of educational disadvantage will call for a range of educational and general policy responses, it must be a high priority for school workforce reform

The Commission supports the finding that reducing the adverse effects of individual, economic and social factors on student outcomes must be a high priority for schools' workforce policies - especially for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students living in rural or remote areas, Indigenous students, and/or students with disabilities or other special needs.

The Commission also supports the Report's recognition that although reducing the adverse effects of educational disadvantage will call for a range of education and general policy responses, it must be a high priority for schools workforce reform. The Commission also supports the point that while many of the general strategies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the schools workforce will benefit disadvantaged students, as the Council of Australian Government's reform agenda recognises, specific workforce initiatives will also be required.

The Commission recognises the importance of evaluating which combination of measures would be most effective in reducing disadvantage but is cautious of implementing purely test focused results to assess effectiveness. The Commission supports the point raised in the Report by the Australian Education Union that many of

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the learning and other benefits imparted by school education cannot easily be measured.

In line with this recognition that there are broader issues which may influence children and young people's experiences at school, the Commission commends the Productivity Commission's recognition that *schools and schools workforce policies need to be accompanied by broader policy actions to help tackle the sources of educational advantage. Thus initiatives that target health, family and community-related impediments to the learning outcomes of disadvantaged students have important roles to play in promoting quality of educational opportunity.*

The Commission also notes the importance the Report places on quality teaching and the various methods outlined to appraise teaching quality. While indicators of student learning such as test scores and samples of student work can form an important part of this process, the Commission considers that a holistic view of schooling experiences should also be taken into consideration. It is important that recognition is given to the vastly different types of student needs which should to be taken into account as part of providing a student with an education. While the Commission supports the recognition in the report that *[a] well-functioning schooling system should be able to identify and assist students at risk of failing to realise their potential, irrespective of their background or family circumstances or where they sit on the ability spectrum*, the Commission also considers it critical to take into account that there are a variety of adjustments and supports which may be required to facilitate a student being able to realise their potential, particularly for vulnerable students.

The Commission notes the point that appraisals would be more effective if based on school-level indicators and criteria and that more than one method is used to gather evidence on performance – including an indicator of student outcomes – so that the various dimensions of teacher performance are adequately captured. Accordingly the Commission is supportive of the recognition in the report that *wider perspectives¹ are rarely reflected in student outcomes measures, which are often based on standardised tests that only cover a subset of subjects and students*. The Commission considers it critical that a variety of factors be taken into consideration when assessing the quality of teaching. These factors could include:

- identification and provision of supports to address individual education needs
- parent and student satisfaction
- facilitation of parent and student involvement in achieving educational goals, and
- supports and programs offered to students with disability, and for students at risk of suspension or exclusion from the mainstream school system.

It is important that a high calibre of staff is attracted to working with vulnerable students such as those with disability and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the Commission notes the recognition in the Report that there are significant shortages of teachers who are qualified to educate students with disabilities and other special needs. It is important that any appraisals or performance-based pay systems do not further exacerbate this situation by relying solely on a narrow analysis of academic

¹ Such as student attendance and retention rates, academic achievement, fulfilment and wellbeing, interpersonal or social relationships, and various types of participation in and contributions to school and general community life as highlighted in the Report by the submission from the Australian Education Union.

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results. Such an approach would not be a complete reflection of the achievements made by individual students in the various aspects of their development and may discourage teachers from working with vulnerable students perceived as unlikely to achieve high academic results.

In the Commission's view, a more effective way of attracting and retaining high quality teaching staff without compromising the supports provided to vulnerable children would be to address the issue highlighted in the report that *increases in teachers' pay have not kept pace with those in many other professions* by ensuring that the pay and conditions reflect the importance of the role.

2. The Commission recommends that consideration be given to the explicit recognition of children in the statutory child protection system and the future workforce development needs required to deliver education programs that are responsive to their needs

The Commission urges the Productivity Commission to consider the educational needs of children and young people in the statutory child protection system. At 30 June 2011, there were 37,648 children in out-of-home care, a rate of 7.3 per 1,000 Australian children.² The responsibility for the education of children and young people in care is shared across government.³

The Commission undertakes regular surveys of children and young people in the statutory care system. When these children and young people are asked about their experiences in care they frequently talk about school. For example when asked about *the best thing about living here?* some responses included –

- *having a bright education which I really need, and*
- *get some money for school. I get woken up for school⁴.*

Similarly, education is frequently mentioned by young people in youth detention. Some responses to the question *what do you think would most help you stay out of trouble when you leave* include -

- *going to school*
- *school and getting a job and working, and*
- *school and apprenticeship.⁵*

Children and young people's responses in the Commission's Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care Survey Report 2011 highlighted the importance of a positive relationship with school staff. In response to the question *is your teacher generally happy with your schoolwork?* some comments from children and young people included:

- *I have always like school i have a kind teacher*

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child protection Australia 2010-11*, p.31

³ Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-home Care in Queensland, *Education Matters A call for action to improve educational participation, retention and attainment for children and young people in care in Queensland*, March 2011.

⁴ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian. (2010). *Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care, Queensland, 2010*. Brisbane: Author.

⁵ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian. (2011). *Views of Young People in Detention Centres, Queensland, 2011*. Brisbane: Author.

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- *With my perswaseive writing and she trust me very well*
- *A little bit some work a bit hard I need help, and*
- *My teachers can never stop smiling at my work.*

Some other responses to this were less positive with some children and young people stating:

- *If I don't get it right she normally gets angry*
- *Most of the time they don't even check it I just keep it in my desk and don't do it, and*
- *I'm doing year 1 work as I haven't learnt anything at school for 2 years now so I'm trying to catch up.*

While children and young people frequently mention the important role school plays in their lives, they also identify significant issues in relation to their schooling with a number of children and young people in care reporting:

- attending multiple schools
- having problems at school which they haven't received help with
- having health and behavioural problems, and
- being suspended and/or excluded from school.⁶

Attending multiple schools is a significant issue with 43.3% of children in foster care in 2009 having attended three or more primary schools. Additionally, 42.2% of young people in foster care in 2009 said that they had been suspended from school at some time and 9% reported that they had been formally excluded. In 2009, 57% of children and young people in residential care reported that they had been excluded from school.⁷

As highlighted by these statistics, *children and young people in care are impacted by a range of environmental factors which may affect their ability to perform in standardised tests.*⁸ In Queensland, 53% of children in out-of-home care reached minimum benchmarks in writing compared to 90% of Year 5 students overall and 69% of Indigenous students.⁹ When considering these statistics it is important to note that Indigenous children are 8.5 times more likely to be living in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children and make up 37% of children in out-of-home care in Queensland.¹⁰ Due to the important role that positive school experiences can have, particularly for children and young people in care, it is vital that there are supports in place for all children and young people to access high quality education to allow them to reach their potential.

In relation to children in the child protection system, the Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland has highlighted that *in*

⁶ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian. (2010). *Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care, Queensland, 2010*. Brisbane: Author.

⁷ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian. (2010). *Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care, Queensland, 2010*. Brisbane: Author.

⁸ Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-home Care in Queensland, *Education Matters A call for action to improve educational participation, retention and attainment for children and young people in care in Queensland*, March 2011.

⁹ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2010). *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy: National Report for 2010*. Sydney: Author and Department of Communities (Child Safety Services). (2011). *2009-10 Child Protection Partnerships Report: Annual Report on the operations of Queensland Government agencies relevant to child protection*. Brisbane: Author.

¹⁰ Department of Community (Child Safety Services). (2011). *Our Performance*.

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*general, teachers and school staff do not fully appreciate their needs or possess the necessary skills to manage the impact that trauma and poor attachment can have on children and young people in care, nor do they have adequate training to understand how this may contribute to inappropriate behaviours.*¹¹

Research has identified that the *sheer normalcy, routine and safety of school can be powerfully therapeutic for a vulnerable child* and that school has the potential to be a *key preventative and protective resource for children experiencing social adversity, since happily the positive effects of school experience seem most evident or potent among students who are vulnerable and have few other supports.*¹² As children in the statutory care system have been demonstrated to be particularly vulnerable to poorer educational outcomes, it is important that their needs are specifically taken into consideration in any workforce reforms.

3. The Commission urges the Productivity Commission to give consideration to how education programs for children and young people at risk of exclusion from school settings can fit within any proposed workforce reforms

The Commission notes the point raised in the Report that there continue to be concerns about the incidence of *inappropriate classroom behaviour*. In the Commission's view it is vital that classroom teachers have adequate support to be able to deal with the additional difficulties of managing challenging behaviour which may ordinarily lead to suspensions/exclusions.

The Commission urges the Productivity Commission to give consideration to the design and implementation of education programs for children and young people at risk of exclusion from 'mainstream' school settings and workforce issues impacting on these programs. The Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland has highlighted that *difficulties in engaging and retaining children and young people in the mainstream school system often results in compounding wide-ranging social issues and self-harming behaviours. This makes it difficult for young people to get back into education and potentially difficult to re-enter community life.*¹³

It is important to make programs and supports available for children and young people at risk of exclusion as it has been highlighted that *enjoying school may have many positive effects for the young person at risk.*¹⁴ Due to the positive outcomes that educational experiences can have for children and young people it is important that quality programs are made available, particularly for students who may exhibit challenging behaviours.

¹¹ Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-home Care in Queensland, *Education Matters A call for action to improve educational participation, retention and attainment for children and young people in care in Queensland*, March 2011.

¹² Rutter, 1991 cited in Gilligan, R. (1998) *The importance of schools and teachers in child welfare*, Child and Family Social Work, 3, p.14.

¹³ Wise, S., Pollock, S., Mitchell, G. Argus, and Farquhar, P., (2010). *Care-system impacts on academic outcomes: Research report*. Melbourne: Anglicare Victoria and Wesley Mission Victoria; cited in Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland, *Education Matters A call for action to improve educational participation, retention and attainment for children and young people in care in Queensland*, March 2011.

¹⁴ Gilligan, R. (1998) *The importance of schools and teachers in child welfare*, Child and Family Social Work, 3, p.14.

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It has been highlighted that *the risk of behavioural and emotional problems may be reduced by positive change in the school system, where opportunities, through multi-disciplinary approaches to social development strategies, exist.*¹⁵ The Commission urges the Productivity Commission to consider the role of specialised education programs for children who display particular challenging behaviours and/or require intensive supports and the impact any workforce reforms may have on the provision of these programs.

The Commission notes the recognition in the Report that *it appears that teachers sometimes have difficulty recognising and responding to outside-school factors that are impeding student learning, and/or have low expectations of what disadvantaged students can achieve. Yet, as noted earlier, awareness of individual student needs and setting ambitious learning goals are hallmarks of quality teaching and a significant contributor to good student outcomes.* As mentioned above in relation to point 1, the Commission recommends that in developing any kind of teacher and/or school appraisal system, recognition should be given to the range of supports and interventions which may be required for individual students to perform to their potential at school and that appraisals are mindful of taking such factors into account rather than just narrow test result outcomes.

¹⁵ Cox cited in Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland, *Education Matters A call for action to improve educational participation, retention and attainment for children and young people in care in Queensland*, March 2011.