

Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, June 2011

Children and young people speak out about education

"Every kid in the state [should] go to school so they can get a better education and life." boy 16

What do children and young people say about education?

In 2009, the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research to investigate children and young people's views on what was important to their wellbeing.¹ A good education was one of eight things that children and young people said was important. They also talked about the importance of being able to meet and spend time with their friends at school. Younger children said they enjoyed the range of activities available to them. Some participants who were experiencing family difficulties talked about school as a place of refuge.

"I like school because all my friends are there and we do all these fun games and activities." girl 6

"I like going to school, you see all your friends." boy 13

There was a significant difference between what non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal children and young people had to say about education. Aboriginal children and young people spoke of education as an aspiration, rather than a given, while non-Aboriginal children and young people tended to speak of school as a matter of course.

From the age of 12 years onwards, young people began to talk about school work as a source of 'pressure and stress'.

"All my spare time has been shut down to study and...that's not good because I'm not with my mates, so yeah a lot of it is just stress, very stressful." boy 16

A perceived lack of coordination by teachers with regard to tests and homework was seen as a contributing factor to stress by some young people. Others found the amount of homework too much.

"We have no homework for weeks on end and then we get homework from all our teachers and it's so hard to complete it all...we're like working all through the night." girl 15

"It would be ok if you only had maybe a little bit of homework but not the stacks and stacks of work we have to do at home." girl 12

Frustration with 'the way the school system is set up' was talked about by some young people. They talked about feeling like 'guinea pigs' and not being able to have input into what did or did not work in helping them learn.

"From a learning perspective we know what's not working but we can't do anything about it a lot of the time because it's above us to be able to do anything." girl 16



Some young people placed a lot of pressure on themselves by believing that their lives would be determined at the age of 15 or 16 by their school marks and the decisions they made about their education at that time. The desire to achieve and 'please people' was another source of stress that young people acknowledged they placed on themselves.

"I want to get somewhere, like go through uni and stuff. But I'm scared that I'm not going to be good enough to do it. I think that's my greatest fear, not being able to get where I want to be." girl 14

"With school you've only got one shot at it which really annoys me, if I blow that shot, and I've only got one way to do it. That's the way the school tells me I have to do it ... and if I screw up, that's it. It's over...roughly 50 years – two-thirds of my life – that I can't get back. I've screwed it up for years." boy 15

While recognising the importance of achieving well at school for future life opportunities, children and young people with learning difficulties who participated in the research generally talked about school as 'frustrating'.

Why is a good education important?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to an education that allows them to reach their fullest potential in terms of their personality, talents, mental and physical abilities.²

Overall, young people who participated in the research identified a good education as important to their present and future lives.

"Make sure every kid goes to school so they learn things they should know." boy 16

Evidence shows that daily school attendance increases the likelihood of children and young people actively engaging in the curriculum and developing the knowledge and skills they need for future personal and career development.³ Some of the reasons that impact on school attendance include illness and health issues; negative life experiences as a result of learning difficulties; family issues or lack of parental support; and social and emotional difficulties with peers including bullying and harassment.

These findings are consistent with the Commissioner's wellbeing research which identified that children and young people with learning difficulties found school more difficult. Difficulties in making friends, difficulties in relationships with friends and bullying and harassment were also of significant concern for children and young people.

"You stress out when your friends are saying bad things about you." girl 15

What is happening in education and training policy now?

To improve educational outcomes for children and young people and facilitate their transition to further education, training or into the workforce, the Commonwealth and State Governments have three key agreements.

The *National Education Agreement* is the key overarching commonwealth and state agreement. Its objectives include full school attendance, improved literacy and numeracy, international



excellence, the promotion of social inclusion and reduction in educational disadvantage through schooling, and successful transition from school to work or further study.⁴

The Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) *National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions 2009–2013* has been established to complement the *National Education Agreement*. Its goals include achieving a national Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate of 90 per cent by 2015; assisting young people aged 15 to 24 years to make a successful transition from schooling into further education, training or employment; and better aligning commonwealth, state and territory programs and services related to youth, careers and transitions.⁵

Each state, including WA, has developed an Implementation Plan for the *National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions 2009–2013* with associated performance indicators for annual reporting. In WA, the Department of Education is progressing the Implementation Plan in collaboration with the Catholic Education Office and the Association of Independent Schools of WA.

For Aboriginal children and young people, the COAG *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* sets targets ranging from access to early childhood education to the transition of young people from school to further education, training or work.⁶

In 2009, the WA Auditor General released the *Every Day Counts* report on school attendance. The report provided sound evidence that irregular school attendance in WA (attending school less than 90 per cent of the time) was a significant problem. *Every Day Counts* found that:

- On average and across all years, students attend school 91 per cent of the time.
- Attendance starts to decrease in Year 8.
- By Year 10, only 53 per cent of students attend regularly.
- Two-thirds of Aboriginal students attend less than 90 per cent of the time, with a 16 per cent gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student attendance rates.⁷

The Department of Education has developed the *Better attendance: Brighter futures 2010* in response to the Auditor-General's report. The plan includes nine key actions to improve school attendance rates in public schools. The department has also developed an *Aboriginal Education Plan for WA Public Schools 2011-2014*.

Priorities for policy and program development

For the commonwealth and state agreements on education and training to achieve their objectives, the development of robust across-government partnerships and the monitoring of these agreements by the Commonwealth and State Governments will be required.

At a state level, *Better attendance: Brighter futures 2010* highlights that improving school attendance rates is critical to ensuring children and young people in WA have the opportunity to realise their educational potential. As the reasons for non-attendance at school are diverse and complex, and as the plan identifies, an across-government, whole-of-community, evidence-based approach is required.

Better attendance: Brighter futures 2010 identifies a number of key target groups, including Aboriginal students.

However, other disadvantaged groups that require consideration are:



- children and young people who are in the care of the State Government, including monitoring that each child or young person has an education plan that is reviewed annually with the child or young person (if appropriate), their carer, case manager (Department for Child Protection), teachers and biological parents (if appropriate)
- young people involved with the justice system
- children and young people with a disability
- children and young people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background
- children and young people with mental health problems.

With specific regard to children and young people with mental health problems, the Commissioner for Children and Young People's *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia* made a number of recommendations about education.⁸ The recommendations include providing integrated services on school sites, implementing social and emotional learning programs and increasing the number of school psychologists.

To improve educational outcomes for these disadvantaged groups, the Department of Education will need to work in partnership with other government agencies including the Department for Child Protection, the Department of Corrective Services, the Disability Services Commission and the Mental Health Commission.

To encourage attendance and improve educational outcomes for all children and young people, schools need to ensure a welcoming, supportive and inclusive environment for students and their families. They also need to include the views of children and young people in the planning, development and evaluation of strategic plans, policies, programs and services.

The on-going development, monitoring and review of state education plans at a systemic level will be critical in improving educational outcomes for children and young people. Emerging issues and trends will need to be identified and appropriate responses initiated.

¹ Commissioner of Children and Young People WA 2009, *Speaking out about wellbeing – The views of Western Australian children and young people*, Perth, Western Australia.

² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights [website], *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, viewed 1 June 2011, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>.

³ Department of Education Western Australia 2010, *Better attendance; Brighter futures*, viewed 1 June 2011, <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolsandyou/detcms/navigation/shaping-our-schools/better-attendance--brighter-futures/>

⁴ Council of Australian Governments 2009, *National Education Agreement*, viewed 1 June 2011, http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/national_agreements/downloads/IGA_FFR_ScheduleF_national_education_agreement.pdf

⁵ Council of Australian Governments 2009, *National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions 2009-2013*, viewed 1 June 2011, http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-07-02/docs/NP_youth_attainment_transitions.pdf

⁶ Council of Australian Governments 2008, *National Indigenous Reform Agreement*, viewed 1 June 2011, <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/progserv/ctg/Pages/default.aspx>

⁷ WA Auditor General 2009, *Every day counts: managing school attendance in WA public schools*, viewed 15 June 2011, http://www.audit.wa.gov.au/reports/pdfreports/report2009_09.pdf

⁸ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, Perth, Western Australia

