

Department of Education – Engagement Forum

25 November 2016

Thanks to the Department of Education for the opportunity to speak with you all today. There are many familiar faces in the room from my days in education.

In November 2015 I was appointed as Western Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People for a five year term. Rather than start out by talking about my role, I would like to set the scene by discussing the very important people I'm here to advocate for: There are now more than 590,000 children and young people under the age of 18 in WA – many of them will be in your classrooms; around 37,000 of these young people are Aboriginal; just over one quarter of our children and young people live outside of the metropolitan area.

Representing all of these children and young people is an honour. My role is outlined in detail under the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006. My overarching responsibility is to listen to our children and young people and advocate for, promote and monitor their wellbeing.

I am independent and report directly to the Western Australian Parliament, working across government and with community sector

partners. This independence is important – I must honour and utilise this in the best interests of our children and young people. Being independent means I can table reports directly to Parliament and have done so on issues of importance, including the mental health of children and young people. My paramount consideration in all of my work is the best interests of children and young people in WA. I am required to give priority to, and have a special regard for, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

My work also aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since my appointment I consulted a range of stakeholders, both in government and non-government sectors, before developing a plan for the coming five years that best supports the wellbeing of all 590,000 WA kids.

The work of the office aligns under three key platforms:

- Promoting the rights, voices and contributions of children and young people
- Monitoring and advocacy to strengthen the wellbeing of all WA children and young people
- Prioritising the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.

The greatest honour in my role is that I get to meet and work with many children and young people around the state. My office regularly undertakes consultations with children and young people on specific issues and I use this information to inform decision makers across both

government and the non-government sectors.

The most recent example of this is that last month I released a report, *Speaking Out About Raising Concerns in Care*. This report outlined the findings from a landmark consultation with almost 100 WA children and young people with experience of out-of-home care. These children – some of the most vulnerable children in WA – shared their views on what helps them and hinders them from speaking up when they are concerned and do not have a natural advocate, such as a parent, to act on their behalf.

The views shared by these children and young people gave us incredibly important information about how we can improve the systems and resources that enable them to raise concerns and access help. This information will inform the reform process in out-of-home care currently underway by the Department for Child Protection and Family Support.

I am monitoring this process to ensure that the views of these children are heard and that improved supports and services are delivered.

Throughout the many consultations my office undertakes with children there are a number of common themes. I have highlighted some of what children have told me in the slides you're seeing today.

Children frequently cite the importance of having a strong connection to family and friends, their education, and having access to age-appropriate recreational activities, including sport, as being important to their wellbeing. For Aboriginal children and young people, these broad themes remain the same, with the addition of a connection to culture.

Children also regularly cite the importance of being listened to, having their opinions taken seriously – and adults doing what they say they will

do.

All of us here today well know how vital education is for a child's wellbeing and the role of education in creating a pathway for children into lifelong learning and future employment. Conversely, as you are probably aware, poor engagement with school and low school attainment may not only result in poor educational outcomes and diminished employment prospects, but also social exclusion, poverty and involvement in the justice system.

WA children themselves identify that education is important to them in achieving their future goals. Yet I am concerned there are too many WA children and young people who are not engaged in school and for whom learning is a negative experience. This is reflected in Year 12 completion rates, unproductive classroom behaviours and student absence rates. For example, the literature review undertaken by Telethon Kids Institute in 2015 in partnership with my office found that about 25 per cent of Australian students do not complete Year 12, and that for 25% of these students the reason for was because they did not like school. While the literature review identified many studies on disengagement, what I believe is lacking in WA is the student's perspective.

This must change if we are to truly value and listen to what our young people have to say.

What are WA children and young people really thinking about their schooling? What helps them and what hinders them in their education?

This vital information if we are to keep children engaged in their learning and afford them every opportunity they deserve.

As Commissioner, it is my role to listen to children and young people and ensure their voices are heard on issues that affect them. In light of this, I have embarked on a major project to look specifically at the factors that support children and young people's engagement in their education and learning. This is a long-term project, and the first phase of this is a major consultation with students around WA on school and learning.

Before I discuss the consultation phase of this project I would like to make something very clear: this is not a witch hunt on schools and educators. It is my view that, in general, our schools do a great job of supporting the wide range of learning and developmental needs of their students and work hard to develop positive relationships with them. This project is purely about understanding the factors affecting engagement from a student's perspective and identifying any opportunities in which we can improve engagement in our schools.

This consultation has involved more than 1,800 Year 3 to Year 12 students from 98 schools around WA. A reference group has informed this consultation, with representation from the Department of Education, Catholic Education WA and the WA Independent Schools Association, among others. Importantly, also informing this consultation was two Advisory Committees of students – around 35 students from Swan View Senior High School in outer Perth who are involved in the school's Follow The Dream program, and around 20 students from the student leadership group and the Rising Albany Yorgas program at North Albany Senior High

School. Both of these advisory groups were selected from an expression of interest process and the students helped us to develop and test the consultation questions and processes.

Students from randomly selected government, Catholic and independent schools were invited to take part in the consultation. The aim was to have students participating from a random sample of schools representing all sectors, of metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools and schools of various sizes. The consultation took the form of an individual survey completed on a tablet followed by workshops involving small group discussion.

Students were asked questions around:

- how do you feel about school and learning?
- how well do you get along with other students and teachers?
- how are family involved in your school and learning?

In addition to consulting with students, we also surveyed interested parents. Having only completed the last consultation this month, we are now analysing the large volume of data we have collected. I am in the process of providing feedback about the initial findings to participating students.

While it is very early days in terms of reporting on the findings, I know from speaking with students myself and from the initial analysis my office has undertaken that several clear themes about factors affecting students' engagement with school and learning are emerging.

So, starting with the primary school students (Years 3-6), we spoke with 950 girls and boys, slightly more girls than boys. Ten per cent were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 20 students (across both primary and secondary) were in education support. Most students were born in Australia, and the students who were not born in Australia were mainly born in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, India and Malaysia. Almost three quarters of them liked school – either “a lot” or “a bit”. The top three things students liked about school were being with friends, sports and learning new things.

Of the students who said they did not like school, the main reason cited was that school was “boring”. In years 3-6, we had just over a quarter of students saying that they didn’t like school at all, don’t like or rated it only as OK. And again just over a quarter said they thought it was either not important at all or only somewhat important to be at school every day. These numbers raise flags with me as I’m sure they do with you.

A fair proportion of students said that they did not feel safe at school. This includes the issue of bullying, and I will be looking closely at this data. At high school level, we spoke with 850 students from around the state in years 7 to 12. Eight per cent of them were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

For high school students, similar to primary school students, the main areas that students most liked about school were being with their friends, learning new things and sports. For those who indicated that they did not enjoy school, the main reasons for this were that they thought school was boring, they did not like the way in which they are being taught or because they didn’t think it was interesting. Nearly all children said their

parents or carers think it is important for them to be at school every day, and they ask about their school work. More than a quarter felt that it was not important or only somewhat important to attend school every day and you can see behind me the issue of safety again shows that many of our students do not feel safe at school.

I would like to re-emphasise that this is just the tip of the iceberg on the data from this consultation, we are just not in a position yet to interpret meaningfully what WA children and young people have shared with us about their education experience. However, I would like to highlight several key issues.

It is clear from the student's responses that **relationships and support** from teachers, their friends and family is pivotal to enjoying school and learning well. **Mental health** was also referred to frequently – including the need for support. This is consistent with the findings from my report, *Our Children Can't Wait* – a review of progress since the inaugural Commissioner's Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in WA.

In my review, I made two recommendations around strengthening the capacity of schools in this area:

- That schools should be resourced to provide whole-of-school approaches that have been demonstrated to be effective in promoting resilience and supporting social and emotional learning, and
- that a model of integrated services be piloted in primary and secondary schools, to provide better access to mental health and

wellbeing supports and services for children and young people and their families.

Safety in schools has been discussed in some detail by students, and this has direct links to my broader work to promote child safe organisations. My Child Safe Organisations program includes a range of resources to assist WA organisations to identify and manage risks that affect the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

The resources were born out of the St Andrew's Hostel Inquiry, the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and other inquiries both here and overseas. These inquiries continue to highlight that children and young people are vulnerable to abuse where:

- organisations neglect their responsibilities
- fail to listen to children and young people
- and prioritise the reputation of the organisation over the protection of children and young people.

In developing these resources, we consulted with more than 300 children and young people on what they thought made an organisation child safe.

They told us the key things were:

- having friendly and engaged staff who like children
- being proactively asked their views
- having their views taken seriously
- being given choice and having flexibility around participating
- having information about expectations and clear rules of behaviour
- seeing action taken to stop problems from continuing, and

- adults doing what they say they will do.

For those in classrooms and working with students every day, these are all simple reminders from children of what they say helps them to feel safe and respected. Next month I am publishing the findings from a consultation with around 100 young people in touch with the youth justice system. These young people have shared their experiences and their views on how they ended up in the youth justice system and what support they need to turn their lives around.

The vast majority of our children and young people have no contact with the justice system, so the following comments refer only to the young people within youth justice we spoke to and not the general Western Australian student population. The majority of the young people and their families we spoke with identified disengagement from school as a factor in their criminal behaviour.

This group of young people said that they were disengaged from school because:

- they did not like school because it was boring/unstimulating
- they felt out of place and unwelcome at school
- bullying and discrimination
- a lack of support educationally, socially and financially
- suspension or exclusion from school.

A number of these young people when describing incidents of bullying and racial discrimination said that when they complained, they were not believed or did not receive any support to prevent ongoing harassment.

Some of these young people experienced a lack of academic and social support which put them at further educational disadvantage, or felt shame due to a lack of money to buy basic items such as lunch, school supplies and uniforms. Education programs designed for students like them and intensive academic programs, such as Lit Up and Follow The Dream were cited by these young people as being helpful to improving their educational experience.

I will be releasing the report Speaking Out About Youth Justice next month. I highlight this consultation to show that the importance of engagement in education goes beyond just one education consultation – it is a theme consistent across many of my consultations with WA children and young people.

Data from the education consultation is now being analysed and will shape the findings of a report that I intend to publish next year. This report will rely heavily on the words of the students themselves to increase understanding about the factors that influence children and young people's successful engagement in their education and learning. It is my intention that the resulting publication will assist schools and education programs and services to better meet students' needs and that children and young people's views about their education are clearly heard by policy makers and education staff. I am hopeful that this consultation will also give all of you valuable information that will help you in your role as educators. I see this consultation as the first phase in a long term project for my office to ensure that all WA children and young people are successfully engaged in learning.

Education is crucial to children and young people's wellbeing. Every child has the right to a good quality education that encourages them to use their talents and abilities. They should also be encouraged to go to school to the highest level they can. We owe each child in Western Australia the opportunity to an engaging and meaningful education experience. It is up to all of us involved in education to use the best evidence we have available to deliver on this.

I look forward to reporting back to you all in the first half of next year on this consultation and I wish you all well in your discussions today around this important topic.

Thank you.