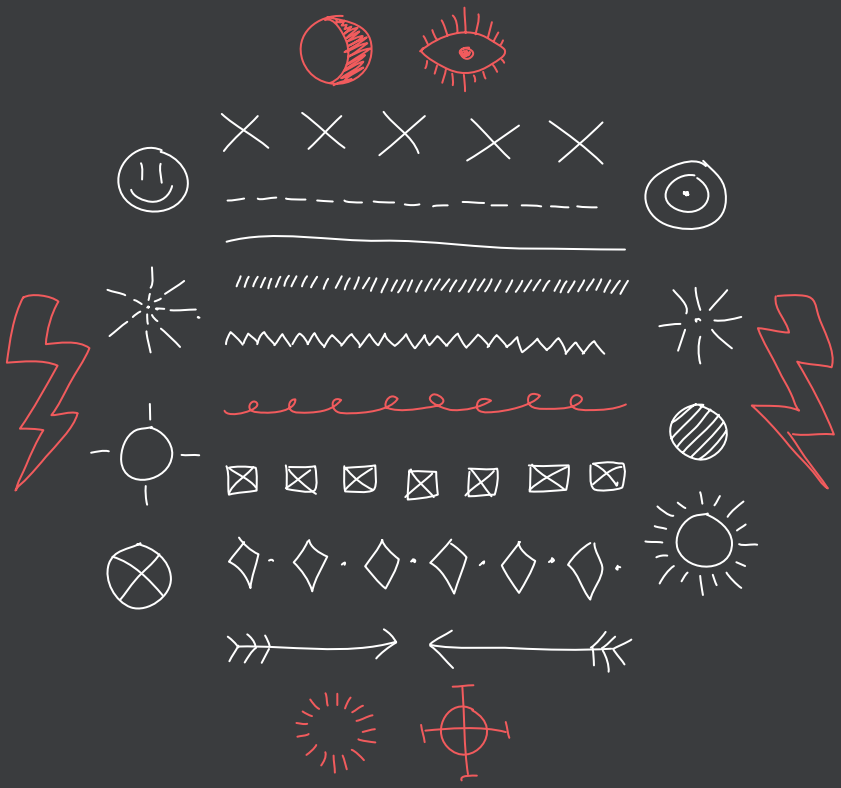




**MacKillop
Family Services**

“I JUST
WANT TO
GO TO
SCHOOL”

Voices of young people experiencing educational disadvantage
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



I Just Want to Go to School: Key Findings and Recommendations

A Research Project by Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services, 2012

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NOTE

The names used in this report and in the digital stories are pseudonyms and all identifying information has been removed.

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PHOTO CREDIT

The photos that feature were taken by Gee Bilal, Journeys Coordinator, Youth Services (NW), MacKillop Family Services. The photo on page 13 was taken by Tenille Tomson.

Recommendations



Better Strategies to Tackle Bullying and Violence

—RECOMMENDATION 1

Schools should be supported to provide strong prevention, early intervention and holistic responses to student wellbeing issues, including bullying and mental health issues.

Promoting Equal Access to Learning Experiences

—RECOMMENDATION 2

The State and Commonwealth governments should provide financial support to families to facilitate full participation in, and equitable access to, all school activities and excursions. This includes providing the Education Maintenance Allowance to low income families at a level commensurate with actual education costs.

—RECOMMENDATION 3

The State and Commonwealth governments should provide schools with funding for learning and teaching requirements in full, including the materials and processes that are part of structured learning activities including access to information technology, camps and excursions.

—RECOMMENDATION 4

Schools should conduct “equity audits” as part of their development and management of high quality education delivery. These equity audits should be based on the Standpoint audit tool (based on research conducted by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria University and Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service).



Providing Additional Learning Assistance Within and Outside School

—RECOMMENDATION 5

Schools should provide additional forms of assistance to facilitate learning and participation for all students, with proactive measures to engage students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes the provision of additional classroom helpers, English as a Second Language supports and homework clubs.

Greater Consultation about Young People’s Educational Needs

—RECOMMENDATION 6

Schools should utilise effective engagement strategies to ensure that young people and their parents and carers are engaged with their school and community and have a meaningful voice in school decision-making and policy direction and development.

—RECOMMENDATION 7

Schools should be resourced to allow students greater democratic and cultural expression within their schools and to ensure genuine consultation with their students.

Recognising Young People’s Individual Needs and Circumstances

—RECOMMENDATION 8

Schools and government should develop, implement and evaluate strategies to support a range of learning styles. This should include vocational and practice based learning, including practical approaches to theoretical learning and a commitment to ongoing support for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.

—RECOMMENDATION 9

Schools should recognise the diversity of needs, background and strengths that young people bring to their learning and the school culture, including resilience, optimism and hope.

—RECOMMENDATION 10

Schools should implement individualised learning approaches for vulnerable and disadvantaged students, in line with their responsibility to engage with all students. As described in the ‘Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools’ guidelines, Individual Learning Plans are critical to ensuring young people achieve. However, they need to be implemented, monitored, reviewed and revised if they are to be effective for young people.

Better Understanding of the Range of Issues Young People Face

—RECOMMENDATION 11

The State and Commonwealth Governments should provide resources to ensure that schools are forging positive and ongoing partnerships with community agencies, to contribute to the wellbeing of their students. In relation to students living in out-of-home-care, this includes the strengthening of the regional Partnering Agreement Contacts, to open dialogue and support cross-sector understanding. In line with the ‘Partnership Agreement between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Victorian Community Sector 2010–2014’, community liaison should occur with agencies including out-of-home care, family/parenting, adolescent mental health, financial support and emergency relief services and providers.

—RECOMMENDATION 12

Education policy should recognise that schools need to be a ‘safe space’ offering security, stability and a holistic learning environment. This is particularly critical for vulnerable children and young people.

Supporting Alternative Education Settings

—RECOMMENDATION 13

Alternative education settings should be supported to ensure they remain integrated, robust alternatives to mainstream education settings. Although they should provide a range of means for engagement (for example, physical activity, art and performance), they should also provide a full curriculum taught in ways to engage students within that setting.



Background to the Project

In 2010, three agencies commissioned research to engage young people in creating digital recordings of their stories and their experiences of education. Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services collaborated to identify, from the perspectives of young people, the key forces behind educational disadvantage. As part of this project, we produced the stories of 13 young people who had experienced various forms of educational disadvantage. These stories have been de-identified and are available as downloadable audio and video files from the three organisations' websites.

The purpose of this research was to give a voice to young people who have experienced educational disadvantage and to use their stories to promote positive change in the education system. The experiences of educational disadvantage described by the young people in these stories are not new. However, they make an important contribution to the policy debate precisely because they come directly from the voices of the people affected. The stories provide critical support for a number of existing policy initiatives, proposed reforms and programs. The issues raised in the stories are supported by the findings of broader research and policy on education and school engagement, including the *Review of Funding for Schooling—Final Report* (commissioned by the Commonwealth Government and led by Chair, David Gonski AC) (the 'Gonski Report').

The stories also provide evidence that can be used to advocate for improvements in the education system to ensure that all young people achieve their full potential within their education settings. Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services view this collection of stories as a test: which educational strategies are not working and how we can move forward. The stories have been used by this project to develop a number of findings and recommendations.

What the Young People Told Us

The stories of the young people who took part in this project identified a number of key factors inhibiting their educational engagement, including:

- bullying and violence
- unequal access to learning experiences
- need for additional learning assistance within and outside school
- no ‘voice’ or consultation about educational needs
- not being adequately recognised as an individual, with distinct learning and other needs
- little understanding of the range of issues young people face (for example, mental health issues, bullying, living in out-of-home care, abuse from parents)
- dissatisfaction with some aspects of alternative education settings.

These issues are discussed in further detail below.

BULLYING AND VIOLENCE

I’m not going to school anymore because of bullies. — ‘MADISON’¹

Sometimes I wagged school so that people at school wouldn’t fight me. — ‘GUY’

Many of the young people recorded experiences of violence and bullying as part of their schooling story. Some also talked about a lack of adequate support and intervention from their school when they sought assistance for these problems.

The young people said that being a victim of bullying, with other experiences of trauma, led to their disengagement from school. Young people told us that schools need to provide effective responses to complaints of violence and bullying. They said it was especially important to support young people who make complaints, and not to dismiss or ignore incidents of bullying and violence.

¹ All of the names used in this report are pseudonyms.



AT MAINSTREAM SCHOOL YOU HAD TO PAY SIX DOLLARS OR
SOMETHING FOR EXCURSIONS AND I COULD NEVER PAY.
I'D HAVE TO GO AND SIT WITH THE YEAR BELOW ME
BECAUSE MY WHOLE YEAR WOULD GO... I FELT POOR.
IT SUCKED. (ANNA)



Unequal Access to Learning Experiences

... [A]t mainstream school you had to pay six dollars or something for excursions and I could never pay. I'd have to go and sit with the year below me because my whole year would go on the excursion. I felt poor. It sucked. — 'ANNA'

Some young people told us that they missed out on school excursions and extracurricular activities because the costs of these were prohibitive. These young people missed out on valuable opportunities for learning experiences and new environments. The young people we spoke to said that this situation was unfair and resulted in them feeling stigmatised.

Need for Additional Learning Assistance Within and Outside School

I had a lot of trouble with homework because I was always getting into trouble so I was never in class so I didn't understand the work or homework that was given as homework. Even though I was in trouble, if I had extra help, like a tutor, it would have helped. — 'KEVIN'

The young people we spoke to told us that they would have benefitted from additional assistance within mainstream settings. A couple of young people identified that extra classroom help, tutoring and help with homework would be beneficial. Positively, one young person talked about when he was struggling with his schoolwork, he asked for support for all students for whom English was their second language. This was made available and he said it assisted him with his learning.

No 'Voice' or Consultation about Educational Needs

There needs to be communication with the education system to find out what all the students really need. — 'PAUL'

The young people who recorded their stories told us they felt disempowered in their education because they were unable to

articulate their needs and concerns about their schooling. They felt marginalised and silenced by the school system. There are a number of measures of a school's effectiveness, and one of those should be how well the school engages with and responds to its students.

Not Being Adequately Recognised as an Individual

I felt unchallenged a lot of the time, starting and not finishing projects or learning basic skills. It's part of the nature of the school having a diverse range of students with different backgrounds and skill sets. So because of that, being in class you often find yourself learning a lot of very basic skills, which often felt like a bit of a joke. It wasn't stimulating enough. — 'PAUL'

Well the standard problem with the school system is that the teachers don't show any care for the students when they need help. The teachers may help him or her but the students need to be shown that he or she is an individual, not just a kid of 600. — 'HARRY'

Some young people said they liked learning in practical, 'hands-on' ways, whereas others said they felt they would have benefitted from more formalised approaches. Still others said that they would have benefitted from a mix of practical and theoretical approaches. These statements reinforce the importance of flexible approaches to learning and of engaging with individual students to discover how they learn best.

Young people also told us that they did not feel listened to or understood within mainstream school settings and felt lost and ignored in large secondary schools. This often contributed to their disengagement from those settings.

Little Understanding of the Range of Issues Young People Face

[Hanging out with friends] ... gave me an opportunity to get away from home and not have to worry about what is happening in the household and I could think of other things until the day ended. — 'KATE'

There are so many kids in schools experiencing mental health problems and not knowing where to turn to. — ‘ALEXANDRA’

The biggest challenges for me at school was the teachers were always treating me different to the other kids because I was a foster kid and I was known to get in trouble at school. — ‘KEVIN’

Young people told us that they experienced different treatment because they lived in out-of-home care. Some young people felt disconnected from school because of difficulties at home and with mental health, and the link between these experiences and prior trauma. Although these students should be able to access a range of supports within school, they felt that school was particularly disconnected from other areas of their lives. This resulted in a barrier to accessing education.

Dissatisfaction with Some Aspects of Alternative Education Settings

If you are a teen going to an alternative school you should work your hardest because when you’re hanging out with the kids there, you change. It’s not about your education anymore; it’s about getting high and drinking and getting arrested by the police. ... Work your hardest so you can go to a mainstream school. — ‘HARRY’

Those young people who spoke about their experiences in alternative school settings reported mixed experiences. Some said they felt supported to learn in a range of ways, whereas others criticised the curriculum for being inconsistent, repetitive and trying to do too many things for too many students. Some also identified difficulties with their peers in alternative school settings.

Current Policy Context

We recognise that the Victorian Government has implemented a number of key initiatives aimed at overcoming some of the issues raised by the young people we spoke to. We refer, for example, to the changes that have occurred in relation to the allocation of Student Resource Packages, the Youth Partnership trial projects and the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment.

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs’ *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young*

Australians includes a commitment to act on improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Gonski Report, states:

Australia's schools, government and non-government, should be staffed with the very best principals and teachers, those who feel empowered to lead and drive change, and create opportunities for students to learn in new ways to meet their individual needs. Classrooms should support innovative approaches to learning, not only through the curriculum, technologies and infrastructure, but also through the culture of the school. Principals and teachers should encourage a culture of high expectations, continuous learning, and independence and responsibility for all students. They should also forge connections with parents and the community, as key partners in children's learning and attitudes to school. (p. xix)

To this end, the Gonski Report has made a series of recommendations to deliver schools funding in different ways, with the aim of reducing educational disadvantage. The Commonwealth Government has committed to taking the Gonski Report's recommendations to the states and territories for further discussion. Importantly, the Gonski Report confirms precisely what the young people in our research revealed to us — that socioeconomic status should not adversely impact on their access to quality education.²

At the Victorian level, however, implementation of school engagement policy for vulnerable and disadvantaged young people has been piecemeal. This project revealed a number of issues that are yet to be dealt with. For example, policies like the 'School Focussed Youth Service' and the 'Effective Schools are Engaging Schools' initiatives have yet to be given a long term commitment by the current government.

² At the time of going to print, the model for the implementation of reforms proposed in the Gonski Report is unclear. It is understood that the Commonwealth Government broadly embraces the Report, however there is no agreement as yet to the level of implementation or reforms to funding between Commonwealth and State governments.



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Key Lessons



The recommendations set out at the beginning of this report flow directly from what the young people told us about their experiences of educational disadvantage. They identify seven key areas for policy change:

- Better strategies to tackle bullying and violence
- Promoting equal access to learning experiences
- Providing additional learning assistance both within and outside school
- Greater consultation about young people’s educational needs
- Recognising young people’s individual needs and circumstances
- Better understanding of the range of issues young people face
- Supporting alternative education settings.

In addition to the 13 recommendations set out by this report, we urge the government and stakeholders to:

- acknowledge the gains, gaps and opportunities of previous governments to overcome educational disadvantage;
- engage with young people in planning initiatives — youth-focused agencies argue that very often young people are absent from decision-making processes about them. The young people we spoke to told us about the disempowerment they felt when marginalised by the education system. Initiatives such as the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s work on student participation represent an important step towards fostering an inclusive school environment;

- implement the strategies contained in the important guides developed by the Child Safety Commissioner on education, including:
 - *Great Expectations: Supporting Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care to Achieve at School* (2007)
 - *Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatised Children* (2007)
 - *Caring Classrooms: A Guide to Understanding Traumatised Children and Young People — for Parents and the School Community* (2010).

These documents ask educators to recognise the negative impact of experiences of trauma and engagement with education;

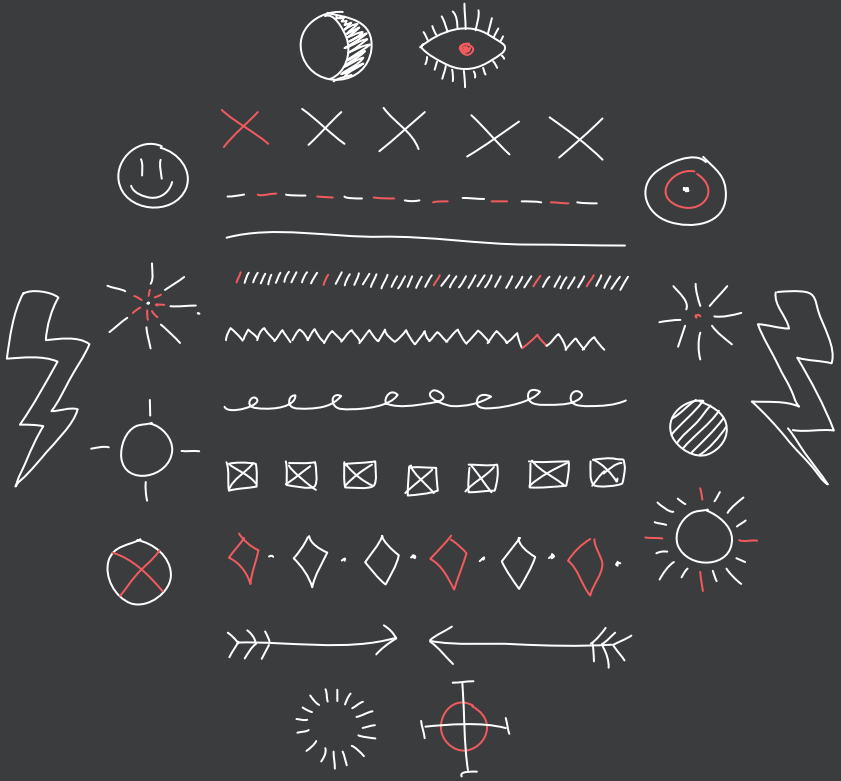
- ensure schools address disadvantaged students’ needs, including using the relevant government funding to subsidise camps, excursions and parent payments;
- work with community service organisations in partnership on student wellbeing issues (for example, by building on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Victorian Community Sector Partnership Agreement 2010–14);
- undertake research that engages with and listens to young people, using community partnerships to provide additional expertise and evidence;
- monitor and evaluate recent policy and funding changes, including changes to the Student Resource Package funding model, in which funds ‘follow’ the student; and
- formalise and strengthen the role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People in relation to education and give consideration to the implementation of an Ombudsman for education.

Further Information

The full report for this project, together with the young people's digital stories, are available on the research partners' websites:

- Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service
<http://www.goodshepvic.org.au/>
- Jesuit Social Services
<http://www.jss.org.au/>
- MacKillop Family Services
<http://www.mackillop.org.au/>

We strongly encourage you to listen to the young people's stories and share in the wisdom they have to offer.





“I’M NOT GOING TO SCHOOL
ANYMORE BECAUSE OF BULLIES”
(MADISON)



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