



Submission to the
Inquiry into the provisions of the
Australian Education Bill 2012

February 2013

Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national, not for profit organisation that has been transforming the lives of Australians in need for more than 150 years. Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life. The breadth and diversity of our programs reflects that vision – from early learning and youth services, extensive family support and homelessness initiatives, employment and skills development, to the provision of affordable housing.

In 2011-12 our 326 Community Services (including 28 Early Learning Services) assisted 110,389 individuals and 5,732 families¹. Of these our 78 youth services helped 15,109 individuals and supported 164 families. We also assisted a significant number of young people through our homeless, employment and training services. As a provider of Youth Connections programs in the Northern Territory, New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria we were able to re-engage young people into the education and training system.

The holistic nature of our work is reflected in our *Outcomes Hierarchy for Pathways to Strong Families and Happy, Healthy Children*². We recognise that some families find it difficult to provide a safe and nurturing environment in which children can thrive and have a solid foundation for success - including educational attainment. For young children and their families, we offer assistance so they have every opportunity to succeed and work with the existing strengths of the children and their families, inviting them to lead the transformation of their lives³. We are also an early learning childcare and long day care services provider and our staff work closely with families to provide a caring, fun and creative place for children to develop the skills and attitudes that will prepare them for school and beyond⁴.

Our holistic approach is also reflected in our *Outcomes Hierarchy for Pathways through a Successful Youth*. This hierarchy provides an overview of the foundations necessary for young people to engage with learning opportunities and participate fully in the social and economic life of their communities, and to negotiate safe and successful transitions into adulthood. Community capacity, in terms of communities' problem-solving capabilities and their ability to create safe, vibrant and inclusive environments, is also critical to engaging young people and promoting their overall wellbeing. Accordingly, Mission Australia works not only at the individual level with young people, but also with their families, their peers, and a range of organisations, and also works at the community level. We work with young people to develop their strengths and capacity to make positive life decisions and support them in reaching their goals as well as in developing solutions, skills and competencies to achieve success. Our range of services for young people includes prevention and early intervention, counselling and case management, education and skills development, mentoring, and residential programs⁵.

¹ Mission Australia (2012) *Annual Report 2012*. Mission Australia; Sydney

² The Outcomes Hierarchies are available from <http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/document-downloads/category/4-annual-report-2009#>

³ More information is available at <http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/community-services/families-and-children>

⁴ More information is available at <http://www.maeearlylearning.com.au/>

⁵ More information is available at <http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/community-services/pathways-through-a-successful-youth>

Our response

Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Australian Education Bill 2012*. As an organisation we are motivated by a vision for a fairer Australia – and contribute to that agenda by helping children develop the skills they require to lead a *contributing life*⁶, and enabling them to make successful transitions into adulthood.

It is our service delivery experience in the provision of early childhood education and care through our Early Learning Services and children and families programs; our extensive experience in the provision of youth services; and our broader client experience of young people accessing other MA services that informs our response to the *Australian Education Bill 2012*.

Specific Feedback on elements of the Bill:

Preamble

Mission Australia strongly supports the intention of the *Bill* as presented in the preamble and firmly believes that all children are entitled to reach their full potential. We also affirm the intention that students should not be disproportionately affected as a result of their geographic, financial or other circumstances.

The need for and importance of stronger partnerships highlighted in the preamble is something Mission Australia routinely espouses so are pleased to see it acknowledged. In our view however the partnerships listed are not exhaustive enough given the significant role organisations like ours play in supporting young people during their school years and helping them stay engaged or re-engaging them with schools. This is an important aspect to supporting and lifting school and student performance.

We are also concerned that the *Bill* appears limited to those children who are in school as per the definitions provided and does not extend to education providers more generally, including alternative education. Although there is no agreed definition of ‘alternative education’ there are a number of terms used to describe the various program offerings including second chance education, re-engagement programs, flexi schools or flexible learning options, community based programs and non-traditional or unconventional programs⁷.

The importance of these alternative education settings cannot be underestimated. It is estimated that there are up to 33,000 young people currently enrolled in over 400 programs in 1200 locations across Australia. A further 4,100 young people are on waiting lists⁸. Alternative education is important for young people who may otherwise fall through the gaps in a mainstream education setting.

⁶Where contributing life refers to “a fulfilling life enriched with close connections to family and friends, good health and wellbeing to allow those connections to be enjoyed, having something to do each day that provides meaning and purpose – whether it be a job, supporting others or volunteering, and a home to live in, free from financial stress and uncertainty” p.4 National Mental Health Commission (2012) *A Contributing Life, the 2012 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*. Sydney: NMHC.

⁷ Te Riele, K. (2012) *Learning Choices: A Map for the Future*. , Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Victoria University, Melbourne

⁸ Holdsworth, R. (2011). *Learning Choices national scan. Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education*. Sydney: Dusseldorp Skills Forum

Our own experience in delivery, and understanding of, education provided in alternative settings is that they can assist young people to attain Year 12 or equivalent qualifications – particularly those young people who were unlikely to do so in a more conventional education setting. Alternative education is also important because it allows young people to re-engage with education at a time that is right for them. This provides students lacking basic education and skills with a second chance to gain their education⁹.

These alternative education settings – however you might define them – therefore play a vital role in improving educational attainment and the other outcomes that are the intention of the *Bill*. We would therefore like to see formal recognition of alternative settings in the *Bill* and consider it vital that equitable funding arrangements, based on the needs of the student as proposed in the *Bill*, apply to these settings as well.

In addition we are concerned that the *Bill* places no onus on schools, as currently defined in the *Bill*, to more effectively maintain children in education to ensure young people complete their schooling. This is a salient point given the Commonwealth bears the financial responsibility for young people who fall outside the education system.

Part 1 - Preliminary

Section 3 - Objects of this Act

Mission Australia is fully supportive of the goal for *Australian schooling to provide an excellent education for school students*. In our view this goal must be supported by a definition of ‘excellent’ that will inform the range of measures against which excellence will be determined such as those proposed in *Section 8 – Developing benchmarks and supporting improvement*.

We are also highly supportive of the goal for *Australian schooling to be highly equitable* but are again concerned about the lack of definition of the term. This omission must be rectified given the lack of equity present in the current Australian schooling system. Australia now has a school system in which “schools that enrol mainly children from low income and poorly educated families record reading scores that place the average child at about two years behind the average child in a school with mainly high SES students”(p.3)¹⁰. Sadly this gap tends to grow during school years. The disparity is even greater for students in disadvantaged areas who are up to three years behind those of the same age who live in wealthy areas¹¹. Public schools in poor urban areas, for example, tend to "over-reflect" the social profile of the area so have a disproportionate share of the poorest families, and also children who are the most educationally disadvantaged¹².

The definition of equity in schooling provided in the *Review of School Funding*¹³ report should be considered for adoption:

⁹ OECD (2008) *Ten Steps to Equity in Education. Policy Brief*. Available online <http://www.oecd.org/education/preschoolandschool/39989494.pdf>

¹⁰ Teese, R. (2011) *From Opportunity to Outcomes – The changing role of public schooling in Australia and National Funding arrangements*. Centre for Research on Education Systems, University of Melbourne: Victoria

¹¹ Gonski, D., Boston, K., Greiner, K., Lawrence, C., Scales, B. & Tannock, P. (2011) *Review of School Funding – Final Report*. DEEWR; Canberra.

¹² Teese, 2011.

¹³ Gonski *et al* (2011)

“...ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. Equity in this sense does not mean that all students are the same or will achieve the same outcomes. Rather, it means that all students must have access to an acceptable international standard of education, regardless of where they live or the school they attend” (p.105).

Mission Australia acknowledge the goal *for Australia to be ranked, by 2025, as one of the top 5 highest performing countries based on the performance of Australian school students*. In our view there are more meaningful indicators of success that could be considered and that more closely align to the goal of equity. For example, in 2008 all Australian Education Ministers agreed two primary goals in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People¹⁴ – the first was that Australian schools promotes equity and excellence; while the second was that all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. While they are worthy goals it is the commitment that Australian governments made *‘to working with all school sectors to support the senior years of schooling and the provision of high quality pathways to facilitate effective transitions between further study, training and employment’* (p.12).

This lack of inclusion of any specific mention in the *Bill* about effective transitions between school and study, training or employment concerns us. In our view it is vital that such measures are included in both the development of a national plan (as per Section 6) and reflected in the benchmarks suggested at Section 8.

Part 2: Improving the performance of schools and school students

Section 6 – Developing a national plan

We note the intention for Commonwealth to work with States and Territory Governments to implement a national plan. Mission Australia would like to see a role for the participation of young people built into development of such a plan. For example, individual school improvement plans could and should involve young people in their design and implementation in order to gain a truly inclusive view of the school and how improvements can be made. This input could extend to contribution to any national plan also. Young people need to be offered greater opportunity to shape their learning environments given the increasing importance they place on their education and learning environment.

For example, Mission Australia recently surveyed 15,351 young people aged 15-19 years as part of our 2012 Youth Survey¹⁵ - the vast majority (94%) of these were studying full-time. Almost three-quarters (74%) of the total sample said that school or study satisfaction was either *extremely* or *very important* to them. School or study problems were also a top three concern for this group of young people. A recent report from the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic)¹⁶ and identified that

¹⁴ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, (2009) *Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians*. MCEETYA; Melbourne

¹⁵ More information is available at <http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/research-social-policy/115-research/research-social-policy/658-youth-survey>

¹⁶ Randall, L., Morstyn, L. & Walsh, K. (2012) *Two Way Street: Young People Informing Improvements to schools and youth services*. Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc; Melbourne.

“young people want access to education in environments where they feel like a valued part of a learning community and are respected by both teachers and peers.” (p.5)

In relation to specific plans, Mission Australia supports the intention of the National Plan for School Improvement to ensure schools receive funding based on the individual needs of their students. We are also supportive of the additional money that will be provided for those students who need extra support¹⁷. See our response under Section 9 for more detail.

Section 7 – Reform directions for the national plan

- *Quality teaching and quality learning*

As already stated, Mission Australia is a provider of early learning services and also provide a number of what could be considered ‘alternative education’ programs. Through that experience and our research into what works we are mindful that there are two key elements to quality – structural and process¹⁸. On that basis we would be keen for greater inclusions in the supporting documents to accompany the *Bill* as to what quality is and how it will be measured¹⁹. It would also be useful to articulate how these sections adhere to the National Quality Framework including the National Quality Standard²⁰.

As mentioned elsewhere in this response, we consider a need to improve retention rates and transition outcomes for students so consider these measures worthy of consideration in any definition of quality.

- *Transparency and accountability*

While Mission Australia applaud measures around transparency and accountability, and applaud the intention to help schools continuously improve as a result of these measures, we are concerned about the potential detrimental or negative application of data collected. It is also unclear as to what support will be offered to schools whose school performance data does not show improvement over time.

- *Meeting student need*

Mission Australia has extensive experience in supporting vulnerable and at-risk young people and see a clear need for better linkages to the broader support offered in the community. For example, one of the services we offer is *Flexible Learning Options* (FLO), part of the Department of Education and Child Development’s Innovative Community Action Networks (ICAN) program. FLO provides case management, guided by our national case management framework, to young people who have been identified by their schools as at risk of disengaging or those who have already disengaged from their school environment and educational pathway.

¹⁷ As per the definitions provided at <http://www.betterschools.gov.au/docs/more-help-students-who-need-it-most>

¹⁸ Process features include adult-child interactions that help children feel safe and supported; the social environment of the service where this relates to behaviour, productivity and structural learning; and instructional support that encourages high-level thinking and learning through experience.

¹⁹ There are a number of existing tools, for example the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Tool that articulate a range of measures around the interactions with the child and would therefore assist to measure process elements of quality. More details about the sort of measures included in the CLASS are available at <http://www.teachstone.org/about-the-class/class-organization/>

²⁰ More information is available at <http://acecqa.gov.au/links-and-resources/national-quality-framework-resources/>

The service offers ongoing support to the students by meeting on a regular basis and providing case management that is holistic and incorporates all life domains (including education, health, mental health, housing and accommodation, legal and financial, and cultural identity); identifying goals and working together to achieve them. The model enables the school and case worker to work together to identify the young person's strengths and take action to support them to transform their life. The program is an excellent example of non-government agencies and schools working together to increase school retention and engagement in education and employment pathways²¹. This is just one of many of the kinds of programs (possibly viewed as alternative education) that could better meet student need and help achieve these elements of the proposed *Bill*.

Section 8 – Developing benchmarks and supporting improvement

In addition to specific comments about measures outlined elsewhere in this statement, we would seek to add detail to the s8(b)(iii). We applaud the intention to share evidence about effective methods to improve the performance of schools and school students given the beneficial outcomes that will be achieved as a result. This should be strengthened by including evidence sharing about what works with young people who have already or who are risk of disengaging with school. Ideally the emphasis should be on sharing what works to prevent disengagement, including the better identification and management of risk factors.

Section 9 - School Funding

As mentioned at the outset of our response, it is unclear as to whether or not the definition of 'school' extends to alternative settings. Our concern is that many of these settings work with young people who are not well served by the existing mainstream education model including many young people from the groups listed at s9(c).

Not including these providers in the definition will affect their ability to attract the additional recurrent funding (through loadings) that will be made to other education settings. This is despite many of their students being the very students identified as being in need of additional help in the National Plan for School Improvement²². In and of itself that would appear to run contrary to the Objects of the Act for 'Australian schooling to be highly equitable'²³.

Mission Australia would like consideration to be given for the inclusion of other groups of young people either in the Bill or the National Plan for School Improvement. Given their circumstances and resultant disadvantage, it is our view that these other groups should also be able to benefit from the associated additional funding to improve their educational outcomes. For example, young people involved with the criminal justice system or in out of home care.

²¹ An overview of ICAN Flexible Learning Options is available at

<http://www.sa.gov.au/subject/Education,+skills+and+learning/Schools/Alternative+schooling/ICAN+-+Flexible+learning+options>

²² An overview of these groups is provided at <http://www.schoolfunding.gov.au/giving-help-students-who-need-it-most>

²³ *Australian Education Bill 2012* - s3(b)(iii).