

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Education and Employment
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

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15 February 2013

Re: Inquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House Standing Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012.

In response to this Inquiry, AYAC believes that there are some fundamental principles that should underpin the funding and provision of education to all young people, but particularly disadvantaged students throughout Australia. Passage of this legislation will result in the most significant changes to the Australian education system for many years. We believe that as the primary recipients and key stakeholders in education, it is vital that young people should have the opportunity to be consulted, in order to gather their views on the proposed changes.

In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, young people have the right to be directly engaged in decisions that affect them. As young people have the most to gain when it comes to any reforms to education funding, AYAC strongly urges the Australian Government to be a world leader in delivering quality education enriched through meaningful and ongoing engagement of young people. Furthermore, there are significant benefits for decision-makers in engaging young people in policy-making processes, to properly ensure that policies accurately meet the real needs of young people. Also, young people can 'encourage organisations and government bodies to think laterally about how to solve complex problems.'¹

¹ Comrie, C., 2010, 'Where are you going with that?: Maximising Young People's Impact On Organisational & Public Policy', The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, p4

When AYAC consulted young people about the 2011 Review of Schools Funding, one young person told us:

“Young people have more to say than is generally believed. A student, if asked about decisions that could affect them, could supply a lot of helpful information.”

Young people in Australia are routinely under-consulted on policy matters, including those that directly affect them. Young people continue to report that when it comes to input in school decision-making, “adults discourage their input and fail to give weight to their opinions”.² There is mounting evidence that youth involvement in the development and delivery of policies and strategies increases the relevance and effectiveness of the implementation of services.³

AYAC therefore calls for young people to be given appropriate recognition as a key stakeholder within the education system and their perspectives to be given equal value with other stakeholder groups at each stage in the education reform process.

Disengaged young people

Funding allocation mechanisms need to ensure the most disadvantaged and disengaged groups of young people can access an education system that is flexible and youth-friendly, in order to meet their complex needs and allow them to receive a superior education that effectively prepares them to thrive – both in school and beyond school.

In 2012, AYAC conducted in-depth interviews with young people who have disengaged from the education system. During these consultations, one young person said:

“Education is a right that everyone deserves - it's too bad that more effort isn't put into making it as accessible as possible.”

We need to particularly consider young people most at risk of disengaging, including those with disabilities, those struggling with mental health issues, homelessness, dysfunctional home lives and those with Indigenous and CALD backgrounds. For students with high needs, a one-size-fits all service delivery model is not adequate. The education system needs to significantly increase investment in flexible education programs and service delivery both within and outside of schools.

In AYAC's recent research report “*Beyond Learn or Earn*”⁴, young people who had disengaged from education were found to need intensive, individually tailored and flexible programs to help them overcome barriers, and re-engage with education.

One young person put it like this:

“I was going downhill for a while with a lot of outside problems. If it wasn't for this flexible learning centre and its services I'd probably be in jail or dead. If it

² Child Rights Australia, 2005, 'The Non-Government Report on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Australia', The National Children's and Youth Law Centre and Defence for Children International (Australia), p10

³ Inspire Foundation, 2010, 'Submission to the review of the Commission for Children and Young People Act', Inspire Foundation

⁴ Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, November 2012, "Beyond Learn or Earn: Young People Tell How Policy Can Better Support Those Who Need it Most", AYAC.

wasn't for these types of services that are willing to help people in my situation it could've been a lot worse, so I'm lucky that I'm still here... This (flexible learning) school has changed my life dramatically in every way possible."

The *Beyond Learn or Earn* research identified that there is a significant need to invest funding in particular areas, in order to significantly improve school attainment rates.

These include:

- flexible and inclusive learning models connected to schools, that are accessible to all young people who need them;
- access to high-quality well-being support services throughout their learning years
- better teacher training so that mainstream schools are better equipped to meet the needs of the least engaged students including those with learning and behaviour difficulties;
- structured programs that support young people from their earliest secondary school years, offering individualised assessment and flexible interventions before they disengage

For Indigenous young people, research indicates that they need to be supported in 'a culturally relevant learning and training environment in order to maximise their individual and community potential.'⁵ In addition, reports show 'that programs to improve Indigenous education should address students' attitudes, engagement, motivation and beliefs.'⁶

It is similarly vital that newly arrived young people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds have access to appropriately targeted, high quality educational and vocational support during their initial settlement period. The absence of intensive English language support for refugee and newly arrived young people can result in young people within this group leaving the formal education system with insufficient literacy and language skills. They are then unable to participate productively in the workforce or pursue further education and/or training.

Young people with disabilities

Young people with disabilities need to be recognised as a key stakeholder group within the education system. We recognise that state and territory government and non-government education authorities are responsible for the allocation of funds to individual schools. However, we would urge the Australian Government to strongly advocate for the particular educational needs of the vast number of young people with disabilities in discussions with state and territory governments.

When AYAC consulted young people with disabilities about their educational experiences in 2012, they said they needed more external support services, equipment, in-class assistance and adapted curricula, as well as improved support and training for teachers.

⁵ Pitman et al, 2002, 'The Senior Certificate: A New Deal', Queensland Government, p147

⁶ ACER, 2010, 'Turning up and tuning in key to Indigenous education', Wednesday, Media release 19 May 2010, <http://www.acer.edu.au/media/turning-up-and-tuning-in-key-to-indigenous-education/> accessed 25/3/11

One young person told us:

“Education should be accessible to all. People with a disability should have the support and technology required for them to participate in education just like everyone else.”

As such, any funding model needs to take into account the very specific schooling needs of young people with disabilities.

Our recommendations for this cohort include:

- dedicated regional disability officers within relevant education departments to facilitate the coordination of disability services for students, and ensure the provision of information and advice to students with disabilities;
- increased funding for teacher’s aides and participation assistants;
- expanded eligibility criteria for educational support to encompass a broader range of intellectual disabilities and complex needs.

In summary, AYAC would like to see that any education funding reform legislation include specific strategies for engaging disadvantaged groups of young people. These strategies should be evidence-based, and include significant consultation with young people from these groups. AYAC is keen to work with the Australian Government to ensure the implementation of a policy framework that helps vulnerable young people – such as those at risk of early school leaving and those with disabilities – to overcome personal barriers to successfully participate in education.

We look forward to the outcomes of this Inquiry and would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss this further. Please do not hesitate to contact myself or Josh Genner, Deputy Director (Young People) for further information or advice.

Andrew Cummings
Executive Director

We acknowledge the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the elders both past and present.

