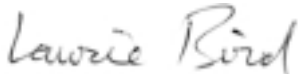Please find attached a copy of the submission from the Early School Leavers Working Party.

This group has over the last 5 years been greatly concerned with the gaps in education for students in years 9 & 10 and in particular for boys. The enquiries for alternatives in Education & Training for boys are increasing. A new trend is emerging, where providers of training have requests from schools, welfare coordinators and agencies who have students (mainly boys) in years 7 & 8 who are disillusioned with their current Secondary Schooling and are seeking something different.

The alternative programs that are working successfully all have an applied literacy & numeracy component and are usually based on a project based curriculum. However these programs are limited in number and are not available for the above age group.

Our conclusions sum up our concerns. We welcome this undertaking by this committee and we believe that a national policy on the way we educate our future young Australians needs urgent consideration.

Yours sincerely

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July 2000

House of Representative
Standing Committee on Employment Education & Workplace Relations
The Education of Boys National Inquiry.

Submission from the Early School Leavers Working Party

1.   INTRODUCTION
What is the Early School Leavers Working Party?

The Early School Leavers Working Party was established at the beginning of 1995.

It was an outcome of a forum conducted at Grassmere Youth Services at the end of 1994 to consider:

- The extent to which agencies and government departments were experiencing Early School Leavers seeking assistance and/or being referred due to the problems they were experiencing.

- Strategies to address the problem

The forum had wide representation from Federal, State and local government departments, Secondary Colleges and TAFE Colleges, non-government agencies.

The Working Party's Goals

This was to establish how the various government departments, community-based agencies could effectively address the issue of the early school leaver by:

- Preventative strategies to retain such young people within secondary education.

- Support programs for those Early School Leavers, for whom a return to school is not a viable option and who are 'at risk' due to low level literacy and numeracy skills, low self esteem, poor social skills and challenging or offending behaviour.

The Working Party has now become an information exchange network.

Membership list attached [Not reproduced]

2.   ISSUES OF CONCERN

2.1 Exclusion of students. Two systems operating Official and Unofficial

2.1.1   Parents are being asked to withdraw their child so that they will not have an expulsion on their record. Often parents are not aware of their rights in this situation and can be "bluffed" into removing their child therefore narrowing their options for further education. These students are often lost to the system because there is no record of where they may re-enrol, if at all.

2.1.2　Principal salaries are tied to performance bonuses and VCE outcomes. Students who do not attend regularly or are "at risk" of dropping out don't qualify for inclusion in school census numbers and audits and therefore schools may be loathe to use energy or time to follow them up because they are not funded to do so.

2.1.3　Schools are not encouraged financially or through the DEET publicity or media focus to provide special programming to meet the needs of these students.

2.1.4　Schools often have concerns about being labelled as a school that can cope with marginalised young people as they may become a "dumping ground" or have to cope with a disproportionate amount of at risk students from their feeder area. Other schools in the area recommend parents to send their students to that school and thereby do not have to develop programs to cater for these students.

2.1.5　The tracking of attendance and attachment to school is a grey area, whose role is it? There used to be attendance officers at the regional office of the DEET, these positions no longer exist. Student Welfare coordinators do not have the time to make large numbers of home visits and are often not encouraged to do so as it takes them out of the school and away from other students and their on-site needs. A coordinated community and welfare response may be needed.

2.1.6　Case management of the young person is crucial, to coordinate agencies and professionals involved with these young people. The families of these students are usually the least able to investigate educational options for their children and therefore the onus is on the schools to provide this information and to organise the access for the student. Who is the best person for this role? Should this role be a community case management role with the involvement of social workers, youth workers etc?

2.1.7　Welfare money should be tagged for specific purposes: recent welfare monies allocated to schools were not specifically tagged and schools were not made accountable for how this money was spent, although the minister's intention was to have student welfare coordinators in every school.

2.1.8　Careers teachers are now expected to take on a broader role than Careers counselling. They often have a teaching role and are expected to organise work placements and coordinate VET in Schools programs. It now appears some are also taking on the role of directing Early School Leaving students to the next stage

2.1.9　VET in schools programs whilst giving a Vocational pathway to students are mostly only accessible to years 11 & 12. This concept should be broadened and alternative work ready or TAFE ready programs be accessible to the later half of year 9 and through out year 10.

2.2 Societal change needed:

2.2.1　Middle school achievement levels such as The Intermediate Certificate have been dropped and nothing has replaced them. Students focus on the fact that they can leave when they turn 15 but there is a dearth of pathways or options when they leave and no follow-up of what happens to them.

2.2.2   Focus has been on VCE results. The valuing of alternate pathways for training is needed, not just the publicity of the top 10 students in the state. These paths need to be publicised and celebrated with the valuing of individual difference and achievement.

2.2.3   School council parent representatives tend to be the high achievers and professionals of the parent body and the school's focus is often Council driven re uniforms, academic results rather than the welfare and inclusion of all students. Issues such as school image have also become important in a situation where schools are competing for students and therefore uniform etc becomes a vital component of this image rather than attendance and participation. When staff are able to win "at risk" students back to school, they are often challenged about system issues such as uniform, jewellery, make-up etc rather than being valued for their attendance.

2.2.4   TAFE is seen as an alternative for Early School Leavers but the reality is that most pre-apprenticeship or alternative programs can only be accessed by students who have a year 10 completion and are over 15. When this age group do apply they are in competition with those students who have completed VCE or a University degree. Most of the Early School Leaving students who do apply rarely meet the entrance criteria of the literacy & numeracy test. The automatic promotion policy in schools we believe is a process that is failing Early School Leavers.

2.2.5   TAFE is set up as an adult tertiary education centre. Professional development and teacher training is needed to give staff the skills to help with these students who are in transition. Pastoral care in TAFE is limited.

2.3 Fragmentation of programs to assist these students:

2.3.1   Documentation of best practice and available programs, including TAFE courses to suit these Early School Leavers, needs to happen.

2.3.2   Changes in staffing at schools leads to a lag time in new staff becoming informed about the alternative programs available to these students.

2.3.3   Access to these programs needs looking into - what are the barriers? Eg. Available places, location, continuity of programs with only one-year funding etc.

2.3.4   Valuing staff who put in over and beyond their normal teaching duties is sadly lacking. The dedication of a lot of staff working with Early School Leaving students is not rewarded or supported. Staff burnout is a sad consequence of the lack of recognition and support.

2.3.5   Some programs in TAFE lack continuity with the employment of sessional & contract staff.

2.3.6   An aging staff population, which is evident in most of the Technical and Trade areas, is a great concern. Replacing staff by encouraging younger people to take up the profession is long overdue.

2.4 Curriculum choice:

2.4.1   Recent studies show the large numbers of students not attending school - including 12 & 13 year olds. These students do not fit into mainstream curriculum and therefore need alternative programming and alternative settings.

2.4.2   Alternative programs that have an applied learning approach, linked with a TAFE program together with Work Experience have proved to the most successful in preventing students from leaving school before completing year 10 and provide a successful transition to the next stage of their educational journey.

2.5 Funding basis for alternative programs:

2.5.1   Programs that cater for these at risk students come and go as a result of 1-year grants and Pilot programs.

2.5.2   Programs need at least 3 year funding to give continuity, to become recognised by their local communities. Financial year funding is difficult for schools who run on a calendar year with students and their outcomes.

2.5.3   Pilot programs have shown the benefit of these programs, so a commitment needs to be made to long term planning rather than more pilot programs and fragmented funding arrangements.

3. Conclusion:

As a group we feel that there are enough reports and evidence in best practice to warrant a complete change in the way we educate and provide pathways for our future generation of young people. The following issues need urgent consideration.

- Realistic financial support and resourcing for alternative programs and staff
- Teacher training - mentoring
- Intervention and prevention in the early years of schooling is needed. A good foundation needs to be established.
- We need to value our young people and provide an educational journey that will improve their self-esteem and give them a realistic and worthwhile direction for their future.

We have lost a generation of young people. We cannot afford to spend more time in discussion of what is needed. We need to work together and help these young people feel valued.