



Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Training

Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions August 2009

1. The NSW Commission for Children and Young People

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People ('the Commission') promotes the safety, welfare and well-being of children and young people in NSW.

The Commission was established by the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* (NSW) ('the Act'). Section 10 of the Act contains three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:

- a) the safety, welfare and well-being of children are the paramount considerations;
- b) the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account; and
- c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children.

Section 12 of the Act requires the Commission to give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable children. Children are defined in the Act as all people under the age of 18 years.

Section 11(d) of the Act provides that one of the principal functions of the Commission is to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services affecting children.

2. Introduction

The Commission is pleased to make a second submission to the *Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions*. This submission is informed by the Commission's research into children and young people's experiences of work¹ and our research on children and young people's well-being.²

¹ NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2008) *Ask the Children: I want to work*: <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/publications/askchildren.cfm?itemID=15E1569BEA7D9677907E9375B1A996FA>.

² NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2007) *Ask the Children: Kids well-being*: <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/publications/askchildren.cfm?itemID=DF4533BCDBDB63DB3B6C3F2840809C55>. NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2008) *Ask the Children: Children speak about being at school*: <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/publications/askchildren.cfm?itemID=14CCA302E03B43EA4DF3014E6A34CD02>.

In 2003 the Commission surveyed almost 11,000 children and young people in years 7-10 from 22 NSW Government, Catholic, independent and other non-Government schools to learn more about their experiences of work. We then followed this up with a survey of 1,567 children and young people aged 12-16 years in NSW Government schools in 2007.

In 2005 we asked 126 children and young people between 8-15 years across NSW about what well-being means to them. The well-being research was conducted over three stages and included individual or group interviews, as well as activities to facilitate further discussion. We designed this study so that we could come to an understanding of children and young people's well-being that is informed by their experiences.

3. *Children at Work Research: Summary of findings*

From the Commission's research with children and young people in NSW we know that a greater number of young people do some form of work while at school. We also know that:

- Work is a positive experience for most of these children and young people and provides opportunities to learn and develop competence, independence and interdependence which complements school and learning.
- The nature of children and young people's work reflects the development pathway of childhood. As they grow, young people transition from informal work arrangements (i.e. family and friends) to formal work arrangements (i.e. retail or fast food) with a critical turning point occurring at 14 years of age.
- Children and young people have a different understanding of work to adults. Unlike adults, children and young people often do not separate the notion of 'work' from other parts of their lives. Chores for family that are done before school, whether for remuneration or other forms of payment, may be seen as no different to working in a store serving customers on the weekend.

Ask the Children: I want to work and *Ask the Children: Young people speak about their experiences of work* provide further information on the Commission's research findings. These documents are attached as Appendix A and B for the Committee's information.

4. *Building better pathways between school and work*

To help children and young people benefit from work, strategies need to be put in place to create better pathways between school and work. Improving these pathways will support children and young people's development through participation in work now, as well as make the transition to future work easier. There are four aspects to this:

1. Recognising that school and work are not in conflict.
2. Adopting more flexible arrangements within the schooling and vocational education systems.

3. Building and maintaining a school culture based on promoting students' well-being.
4. Developing solutions through local partnerships.

The following section discusses each of these aspects in more detail.

4.1 *Recognising that school and work are not in conflict*

Governments, the broader community and schools need to recognise that work and school are not necessarily in conflict, as the Commission's research has shown. In fact, the benefits that work can provide for children and young people, such as helping them develop self-confidence, creativity and to be active participants in their communities, are consistent with the national goals of schooling.

The Commission is currently developing strategies to inform NSW schools and vocational education providers about our research findings. However, more research is needed at a national level about how children and young people combine school and work to better inform national, state and local strategies and initiatives.

4.2 *Adopting more flexible arrangements within the schooling and vocational education systems*

Flexible schooling arrangements can enable children and young people to better balance school and work as well as provide a pathway to future work through opportunities such as vocational courses and traineeships. There are a number of flexible arrangements already in place in NSW that allow children and young people to balance school and other commitments. For example:

- the Board of Studies allows students to do their HSC over a period of up to five years, allowing them to combine studies with employment;
- the Department of Education and Training provides school-based part-time traineeships as part of the HSC, so that students receive paid training while studying; and
- some TAFEs provide part-time and flexible delivery options for students doing their HSC.

The NSW Department of Education and Training's *School to Work Program* also has a significant take up by high schools since its statewide rollout in 2004. Schools use the program to help students recognise their work related skills and transition from school to work. A 2006 evaluation of the program received positive feedback from the broader community, teachers and students.³

However, there are also arrangements in other states and territories that could be of benefit to NSW children and young people. For example, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, which gives students in Years 11 and 12 an alternative to school-based learning, recognizes the skills gained through part-time work.

³ NSW Department of Education and Training (2007) *NSW School to Work Program – Evaluation Report 2006*: <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/vetinschools/about/reports.html>

To fit with a national curriculum and provide equity for children and young people across Australia, a broad range of flexible arrangements should be available nationally.

To support these flexible approaches teachers and career advisers need to be properly resourced with information, knowledge and adequate time. Teachers also need opportunities to develop their teaching skills so they can integrate children and young people's experiences of part-time work into classroom learning. To complement these approaches the 'work skills' component of the school curriculum should reflect what we know about children and young people's experiences of work from research such as the Commission's.

4.3 Building and maintaining a school culture based on promoting students' well-being

From the Commission's research into children and young people's well-being and consultations undertaken with kids in 2005 as part of the NSW Department of Education and Training's *Education Futures* review, we know that children and young people's experiences at school strongly affect their overall well-being.

A school culture that focuses on children and young people's well-being rather than the curriculum goes hand-in-hand with flexible approaches to schooling. From the Commission's well-being research we know that a school culture that supports well-being is one in which children and young people:

- participate in school life and decisions;
- have positive relationships with teachers and friends; and
- where negative influences, such as pressure to do well academically, are minimised.

In order for children and young people's participation in decision making to be effective, participation needs to become part of the culture of an organisation.⁴ Opportunities for children and young people to participate need to be identified within the broader education system, for example at the level of curriculum development, teacher training, evaluation of teacher performance, and policy development.

The role of teachers and other adults in schools, such as school counsellors, can be critical when children are going through difficult times at school, for example if they have trouble balancing school and work. Children and young people often tell us that they want teachers and counsellors who they can talk with, who are respectful and who will be fair. By supporting teachers to develop positive relationships with students, for example through appropriate training and smaller class sizes, teachers will be better able to provide assistance to young people who may be struggling with school and work. Children and young people can then turn to teachers if, for example, they are having issues with their employer or need advice about finding work.

A school culture also needs to include parents if it is to support children and young people's well-being. There is much evidence that students' learning, social skills and school attendance benefits when their parents are involved in

⁴ NSW Commission for Children and Young People, *TAKING PARTicipation seriously*: <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/participationkit.cfm>

their education.⁵ Some strategies proven successful in involving parents include running parenting programs, inviting parents to be involved in school activities, involving parents in school decision-making and initiatives such as Schools as Communities. The involvement of parents in schools is also important in the context of helping children and young people balance school and work.

4.4 Developing solutions through local partnerships

As employment conditions differ between local areas, local approaches are needed so that schools are more relevant to their communities and students. A one size fits all approach does not provide the flexibility local communities need.

To support local approaches, school systems need to support and reward flexibility so that individual schools can develop appropriate strategies to engage children and young people, families and formal employers. The development of networks and information sharing opportunities for all schools can also help support each school.

To engage with schools and children and young people, local employers, particularly small businesses, require support financially or in other ways, such as training. Appropriate support may be provided through government grants or tax incentives.

5. Breaking the cycle of disadvantage: supporting children and young people who want to work, to find work

As the Commission's most recent research shows, many children and young people who want to work while at school cannot find work. Children and young people in the most disadvantaged areas are most affected by a lack of employment opportunities. Not being able to find employment further compounds the disadvantage these children and young people face.

Given the benefits that work has for children and young people's present and future well-being we need to develop ways to support those who want to work to find work. For those children and young people from low socio economic areas, the long term benefits of part-time work are even more salient in order to break the cycle of disadvantage. As research has shown, access to education, employment or training are key factors in reducing the risk of unsuccessful transitions from education to full-time work and a life of disadvantage.⁶

5.1 Developing youth employment strategies

The influences on youth employment at the community level, such as local unemployment rates and access to public transport, require efforts amongst all levels of government. For example, employment strategies developed at each level of government need to include a specific focus on the needs of children and young people. However, we need research that further investigates the factors that influence youth unemployment so that we can find the best ways to

⁵ Henderson, A. T. & Mapp, K. L. (2002) *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Texas: <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/fam33.html>

⁶ Zevenbergen, R. & Zevenbergen, K. (2007) *School to work transitions: final report*, Griffith Institute for Educational Research, Griffith University: <http://www.griffith.edu.au/education/griffith-institute-educational-research>

support children and young people find work and break the cycle of disadvantage.

5.2 Improving the accessibility of transport

The Commission's research highlighted the difficulties many children and young people experience in finding work because of inaccessible transport. To better support children and young people in both their personal development pathway from school to work, we need to also focus on improving the accessibility of transport so that young people can find work and keep their jobs. The provision of local transport development officers, as exists in NSW, is one initiative worth further consideration. These officers work in partnership with governments, local organisations, schools as well as children and young people to develop local and long-term solutions to transport issues.

5.3 Supporting disadvantaged children and young people within schools

Schools can play a significant part in assisting children and young people to find work while they are studying. Flexibility within schools and the vocational educational system is of particular relevance to children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who may struggle to engage with their education. If children and young people are not academically inclined then they need to be provided with other learning opportunities that will keep them engaged.

The broad range of pathways, such as traineeships, apprenticeships and VET courses, available to children and young people can be overwhelming and difficult to understand. In particular, research shows that disadvantaged children and young people have fewer resources to draw upon to help them make decisions about their career options. Providing trained mentors, including Indigenous mentors for young Indigenous people, to assist children and young people navigate these opportunities has been found to be a useful strategy.⁷

Children and young people seeking work would also benefit in their personal development from advice and support to find not only future work, but also part-time work now. To be of benefit to children and young people, this advice and support should not be only in their senior high school years and not only about long term career goals. This may require the role of career advisors to be broadened from a focus on future employment to providing support for children and young people looking for part-time work and assisting them with workplace issues from their junior years of high school.

A school system that supports relationships between schools and employers at a local level may also be beneficial for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not typically have access to employers. At a school level this could involve local employers visiting schools to participate in teaching about work or developing relationships so that schools and employers can work together to create appropriate employment opportunities for children and young people. The Australian Government's Business-School

⁷ Long, M. et al (1998) *The School to Work Transition of Indigenous Australians: review of the literature and statistical analysis*, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs Task Force on School to Work Transitions for Indigenous Australians:
http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/publications_resources/profiles/school_work_transition_indigenous_australians.htm

Connections Roundtable initiative has potential to lead the way in developing these partnerships between schools, employers and students.

5.4 Supporting disadvantaged children and young people through targeted programs

Throughout Australia there are a range of local programs of an intensive and comprehensive nature that seek to support school and work pathways for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some factors that are commonly identified as good practice include programs that are relevant to children and young people's interests, their experiences of work and support children and young people to have positive relationships with teachers and support staff. However, there is a lack of information available about the outcomes achieved from these programs. Further investigation into what aspects of these programs provide the best outcomes for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is needed. Once this evidence is obtained, consideration should be given to the development of such programs nationally.

6. Reforms needed within the industrial relations system

The Commission's work with stakeholders, both within NSW and throughout Australia, in implementing the *Children at Work* Taskforce recommendations identified the need for a consistent and simpler approach to the regulation of children and young people's employment across Australia. The Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ACCG) have taken this issue up nationally and have been working to influence governments and agencies in their respective jurisdictions on the need for national regulation.

In order to support better pathways between school and work, reforms are needed within Australia's industrial relations system. The current changes nationally within the industrial relations system provide an opportunity to consider how we can better protect children and young people who work, while promoting their well-being. National regulation and better information services will help children and young people to have more positive working experiences.

6.1 National regulation of children and young people's employment

Current mechanisms for protecting children and young people who work are inconsistent, and sometimes non-existent, across Australian states and territories. Many children and young people, parents, schools and employers are unsure about their rights and obligations in relation to work.

To support children and young people balance school and work the regulation of children and young people's employment needs to be nationally harmonised so that it fits with a national curriculum. National regulation will also provide a simpler system for children and young people's employment, thus promoting greater compliance.

National regulation is preferred over voluntary codes of practice. The complexity of our industrial relations system and lack of protections for young workers requires a consistent national approach designed with children and young people's schooling in mind.

In addition, national regulation will promote greater compliance than a code of practice as there are mechanisms to enforce it, such as the Fair Work Ombudsman.

The findings from the Commission's research provide some guidance on the features that national regulation on children and young people's employment should have in order to promote children and young people's well-being. For example, given the transition that children and young people make from informal to formal work, rather than regulating for a minimum age below which children and young people cannot work at all, it may be more appropriate for regulation of children and young people's work to be explicitly limited to formal work. Regulation may also need to set limits on working hours during school terms in order to protect children and young people's well-being and development.

6.2 Young worker information and advisory services

As the Commission's research shows, children and young people's inexperience in formal work means that they may have difficulty determining what kind of work they would like to do. Their inexperience can also mean that they are unaware of their entitlements. To address this, regulation may need to require that employers provide specific supports, such as additional supervision, and information to young employees.

Regulation of children and young people's employment also needs to be accompanied by an information and advisory service that is accessible to children and young people, parents, schools and employers. Such a service should be developed in consultation with each of these stakeholders so that it is appropriate to their needs.

7. Conclusion

The Commission's research on children and young people's experiences of work demonstrates that our approaches must be informed by evidence, including research based on children and young people's lived experiences of combining school and work.

There is much more that needs to be done in schools, local communities and at a government level if we want to improve children and young people's well-being. A shift towards seeing school and work as complementary, rather than in conflict, is the first step in creating better pathways for young people between school and work. To this end we recommend:

- more flexible approaches within schooling and vocational education systems;
- a reorientation of school cultures towards promoting children and young people's well-being;
- support for schools to work with local businesses and communities to develop solutions appropriate to their location;
- finding better ways to support children and young people who want to work, to find work; and
- national regulation of children and young people's employment that is accompanied by information and advisory services.