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The Secretary
House Standing Committee on Education and Training
PO Box 6021
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CANBERRA ACT 2600

Inquiry into Combining School and Work: Supporting Successful Youth Transitions

The Federation of Parents and Friends Associations of Catholic Schools in Queensland appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission to the inquiry into 'Combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions'. The Federation represents the parents and carers of 125,000 students in 289 Catholic schools throughout Queensland.

The Federation is vitally concerned with the progress of this inquiry as it directly affects the futures of our students. Parents not only wish to be informed of measures being undertaken in schools to prepare students for life and work but should also be recognized as critical stakeholders in the transition from school, to further study and work. They wish to be involved in the decisions affecting the education and employability of their children as they are the vital link between the school and the wider community.

The following is our response to the inquiry's Terms of Reference and the Federation would be willing to provide further information if required in the future.

1. Recognise and accredit employability and career development skills gained through work

Many students, particularly in the senior years, undertake part time or casual employment for various reasons. Some would see the advantage in developing financial independence from the family situation whilst others may see it as an imperative to assist with obtaining the necessities of life and completing their secondary education. It is difficult to assess the

importance placed by students on developing career oriented skills as many of the opportunities occur in the services sector, predominantly retailing, and these will not be directly associated with future career planning, particularly if the student's aim is to complete a tertiary qualification.

It is generally conceded that the skills required by employers are not taught or assessed to any significant degree in schools and that students acquire employability skills in an out of school environment. To recognize such learning would require extensive coordination between the school and the employer, many of whom would find the recognition process difficult and an intrusion into the operation, and hence the profitability of their business.

There are great variations in the availability of casual employment throughout the state and the ability of employers to provide relevant experiences which will serve the students well later in their lives. Some large employers are able to provide accredited training courses which could be recognized and accredited whilst the vast majority of small business owners would have neither the expertise nor time to provide such opportunities.

Yet parents and educators believe that those skills acquired in the workforce such as working in a team, developing personal responsibility and financial management are of significant importance in preparing students for a productive life.

Opportunities for combining school and work would appear to be greater in the metropolitan and provincial cities where the number and size of businesses are more substantial.

If recognition is to be given to the work undertaken by students in a part time or casual employment then it must also be afforded to those who contribute, mostly unpaid, to the success of family businesses such as in the agricultural sector and also to the significant number of highly motivated and principled students who make outstanding contributions in assisting organisations and disadvantaged individuals in a voluntary capacity.

Over the years and particularly with the introduction of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE), the state government has attempted to recognize the contribution of such individuals but it has proven difficult to recognise and identify the value to be placed on this contribution to the community.

Recommendation:

That further investigation be undertaken to provide an effective method of recognizing relevant employment and personal development skills which can lead to success as an individual and contribute to the strengthening of the community.

2. Identify more flexible innovative approaches to obtaining a senior secondary certificate

Queensland has been recognised as a leader in the development of vocational education options for senior students and the majority now undertakes courses which will contribute to their Year 12 certification. In extending the period in which a QCE may be obtained, the authorities have added a flexibility which allows students to investigate options and to undertake studies which will improve their educational qualifications and their employability skills.

The introduction of school based apprenticeships and traineeships in this state has meant that many students are able to effectively combine their career aspirations with their school commitments.

Improved relationships with, and accessibility to, the TAFE sector have the capacity to allow schools to provide flexible options in the transition from school to work. However, despite encouragement to be more community oriented, school operations are still oriented towards a 9 – 3 timetable which inevitably restricts options available outside the classroom.

In relation to those students who have difficulty with school attendance and the restrictions of the curriculum yet who thrive in a practically oriented environment there appears to be few options available. Senior curriculums remain oriented towards tertiary study and those subjects are given greater status in certification than vocationally oriented areas.

Most importantly, we must ensure that learning is seen as a lifelong process and options for training and upgrading qualifications are able to be accessed easily at any stage of life and that a certification at the end of secondary schooling is a passport to further learning and qualification for every student.

Recommendation:

Strengthen the relationship between schools and training providers, particularly TAFE.

Create community learning centres in schools which provide facilities for flexibility in the transition from school to work.

3. Support that may be required to assist young people combining work and study

Many schools have implemented effective career development programs which provide information on various future employment options. However, students are also advised that they will probably change their occupation four or five times during their employment and that they will be required to continually upgrade their qualifications. Hence there needs to be a debate on what type of employability skills a student requires whilst at school because in the vast majority of instances the work or vocational choice engaged in at school will not have a direct relationship with the student's future career aspirations.

The availability of opportunities to combine school and work varies considerably throughout the state and particularly in the remote areas, such opportunities may not exist denying students the support they may need to pursue future employment opportunities and even forcing some students to leave home at a critical time in their lives. It is usually the case that families have little capacity to support the student away from home.

A small number of students live outside a family environment and independently. They will require special assistance to ensure that they are aware of appropriate ways to combine school and work

Recommendation:

Research the skill base needed for employment and adapting to changing work environments and ensure that curriculums in the senior secondary years reflect those skills.

Ensure that effective work preparation skills are available to all students irrespective of their geographical or personal circumstances.

4. The potential impact on educational attainment

It must be acknowledged that when young people are still in a school environment their primary responsibility is to succeed in their studies and to develop into a mature and productive member of society. Unfortunately, in some instances the influence of part time work tends to overshadow these responsibilities, leading to subsequent lack of academic success. In a recent study, students were asked to apportion their time for study, sport, socializing and work commitments. Where the school authorities suggested that senior students required at least 15-20 hours per week of organized study to complete their commitments effectively, some were actually working for this amount of time and school responsibilities took up fewer than 5 hours each week. Work commitments in some instances commenced on Thursday, involved weekend work usually with a late closing and some shifts on other weekdays. Add to that sporting and social commitments and, for some students, schooling becomes incidental. Parents and teachers need to work together so that students are able to balance various commitments. Part of the problem may lie with unreasonable expectations placed by employers who require their least remunerated employees to work extended hours or be on call regularly with the threat of dismissal in times when labour is readily available.

We need to investigate the student's motivation in pursuing this imbalance. Is it for financial reasons, for the independence, for the social opportunities, to remove themselves from the home environment etc?

Recommendation:

Parents and teachers work together to ensure balance in students' lives.

5. The effectiveness of school based pathways particularly for the disadvantaged.

The availability of school based apprenticeship and traineeships have offered excellent opportunities for students to combine school and work. However, opportunities are limited by a number of factors including geography, demands on employers for placements in a restricted area and the availability of suitable places in rural and remote areas. Also, in the rural areas many schools do not have experienced staff to access the opportunities and to develop relationships other schools, training providers and employers. This is of particular concern with the placement of disadvantaged students. In many instances it will be the parents who will be required to seek out suitable placements.

In recent years, despite the government's attempts to increase the rate of Year 12 completion there has been a downturn. It is difficult to identify the reasons for such a situation but it could be attributable to the ready availability of full time jobs in the state, particularly during the mining boom or disenchantment with the relevance of courses available at the senior secondary level. There needs to be some research on the destinations of those students who have pursued a particular vocational pathway whilst at school and whether they have remained employed in the field or have moved on to pursue other employment options. The longitudinal study 'Next Steps' should provide data in this area for the state.

Parents need to be recognized as the critical link between the school and the community as they provide the stability in the community both in the development of families and the provision of employment opportunities. They are the essential entrepreneurs, the financiers, the employers and employees in every community. In general, there has been little commitment given to the establishment of effective partnerships with parents at the senior secondary level.

Recommendation:

Investigate the possibility of city and country schools forming relationships where short exchanges could occur to allow students to experience real life employment opportunities.

Continue research on the destinations of Year 12 leavers and investigate if there is a correlation between their school and post school pathways.

Recognise parents as authentic partners in the development of school–community relationships.

Paul Dickie

Executive Officer

Federation of Parents and Friends Associations of Catholic Schools QLD