



Working together at community level for better education, training and employment outcomes

Submission to House of Representatives Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions

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Young people who combine part-time work with study towards completing Year 12 need to be supported so that they stay engaged with the educational system. Securing that support will require government investing not only in income support where this is needed but also in educational models and work-life balance arrangements that allow adults (including parents) to provide emotional and mentoring support to the young people in their spheres of influence.

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The first requirement in helping young people to combine part-time work and study therefore is to help them remain linked into supportive relationships with adults in the communities where they live. Providing young people with a sense of connection with adult mentors and models enables them to receive guidance, feedback, encouragement and help from people they feel they can trust and respect. If those mentors are linked into the part-time work and study arrangements of young people, it is more likely that young people will achieve successful transitions from education and training into employment.

Evidence from workers dealing with substance abuse, depression and homelessness among young people indicates that whenever and wherever this support is lacking, young people are at risk of becoming disconnected from positive social development pathways. They fall out of the education and training track that leads them into employment and positive citizenship, and instead are susceptible to becoming clients of the welfare, mental health and criminal justice systems. Investment in youth development and transitional support arrangements therefore makes good economic sense as well as social sense.

Providing this support is not just a job for educational institutions. Nor is it solely the responsibility of governments. And neither can parents nor employers be expected to provide all the answers and resources in helping young people to make effective transitions from school into the workplace and positive adult social roles. This is a whole-of-community responsibility. The challenge for Government is to continue investing in the development of models, protocols and tools that enable communities to engage and assist young people to negotiate safe and sustainable transitions from school into work.

One of the more influential models in this area is based on the work of the North American social work scholars, Hawkins and Catalano and their associates. They have developed a program known as the *Communities that Care* (or CTC) model.²

The CTC model is essentially preventive in focus. The aim is to recognise the societal and individual risk factors that arise in the course of child and adolescent development, which increase the chances of drug and alcohol abuse.

² J. David Hawkins, Richard F. Catalano, Jr and Associates, *Communities that Care: Action for Drug Abuse Prevention*, Jossey-Bass Inc, San Francisco, 1992

Understanding these is seen as crucial to developing effective preventive measures. Equally, Hawkins and Catalano recognise that certain protective factors can shield young people from drug and alcohol problems. A person's sense of bonding, or feeling connected to their community, is identified as a key protective factor.

Putting the CTC model into practice involves an initial phase of recruiting and educating key community leaders, conducting a community risk assessment and agreeing on an action plan. The subsequent phase involves implementing the plan and evaluating the processes used and the outcomes achieved.

The Victorian government has invested in the CTC model, and considerable research has been done through the Centre for Adolescent Health to assess the usefulness of the CTC approach.

But CTC is only one of many possibilities. Another emergent approach is the Big Picture model. This is based on the idea of designing teaching and learning experiences which meet the needs of each student. It is a personalised approach to working with young people in a school which is in and of the community, and it offers each student a mentor relationship with an adult beyond the realms of their family and teachers. The mentor helps the young person to see the big picture of workplace and economic realities as part of their education and training experience.³

The challenge which the Big Picture approach provides is that governments should help make this sort of opportunity available to all Australians through the public education systems. If this challenge is to be met, the federal government will need to provide leadership and resources to individuals, parents, community groups, schools and interested agencies throughout Australia so that they can start developing, researching and refining these new 'one student at a time' approaches to mentored transitions.

New approaches to helping young people balance part-time work and education amount to a form of **community-based learning**. They involve infants, young people, parents, local employers and teachers in understanding the learning and development needs of each young person in their community. And they allow for collaboration between all affected stakeholders to design bespoke learning and training suited to each student's preferred way of 'learning by doing' and 'doing by learning'.

³ For more on this model, see <http://www.bigpicture.org.au/first-australian-big-picture-school>

Community-based learning helps young people develop the social skills, attitudes and bonds that reduce the likelihood of them falling out of formal education and training pathways into employment and active citizenship. Finally, this sort of community-based learning gives people a chance to appreciate their interconnectedness and build strong relationships as well as skills and competencies. In this context, it needs to be seen as an investment in our social cohesion and stability.

We live in a time when democracy has taken a deliberative turn. People are expecting to have opportunities to shape the policies and programs that affect them and their future. Helping young people and their communities to design education, training and employment arrangements that will empower them to shape their preferred future is in line with the spirit of the times. The challenge for government is to resource these 'everyday democracy' opportunities that allow people to work together for better education, training and employment outcomes.