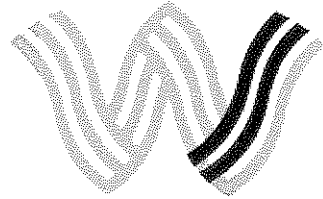


**Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements
Legislation Amendment
(Schooling Requirements)
Bill 2008**



wacoss

Western Australian
Council of Social Service Inc

*Ways to make
a difference*

**WACOSS SUBMISSION TO THE
AUSTRALIAN SENATE
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

*Addressing; the effectiveness of the proposed measures,
and the impact on children and families.*

Ms Sue Ash
Chief Executive Officer
WACOSS
City West Lotteries House
2 Delhi Street
WEST PERTH WA 6005
Email: sueash@wacoss.org.au

About WACOSS

The Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) is the peak body of the community service sector across Western Australia. Since 1956, WACOSS has been developing and strengthening the non-government community services sector's capacity to assist all Western Australians.

With over 300 members, WACOSS has strong relationships with the social services sector and seeks to represent their interests, and those of the disadvantaged individuals and families they assist at a service level. Given this relationship, WACOSS is in a unique position to comment on issues in our society that socially impact upon disadvantaged members of the community.

In assessing the *Social Security and Veterans Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008*, WACOSS draws upon our experience in the sector; the comments and feedback provided by our members and stakeholders; and our own research.

The central focus of our feedback is on the effectiveness of the proposed strategies in meeting the needs of Western Australian children and families who are disadvantaged. This includes indigenous people; young people; carers; people with disabilities; people from a culturally and linguistically diverse communities; low income earners; the homeless; and men, women, children and families in crisis.

Background

The Social Security and Veterans Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008 will apply across six Northern Territory Aboriginal communities and to schools within the Cannington district in Western Australia. Initially it is expected to affect some 3,300 children.

Schools residing within the WA Cannington district will be asked to provide student attendance information to Centrelink. The Government is proposing a benchmark of not more than 5 unexplained absences per school term.

When truancy is identified and where parents are identified as failing to take 'reasonable' steps to ensure their child's school attendance, 100% welfare benefits will be suspended, potentially leaving families without money for food, bills, transport or housing for a period of 13 weeks. Full back pay will be provided if parents meet their responsibilities within the 13-week period.

'In the most extreme cases of parental non-cooperation, where there is no evidence of a reasonable excuse or special circumstance, and only after a minimum of 13 weeks of suspended payments, it may be appropriate to cancel income support payments. If any parents find themselves in this situation they will have the normal rights of appeal guaranteed by the social security law, and payment will continue pending the outcome of any appeal'¹.

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, of which Australia is a signatory to, requires governments to introduce measures to limit school drop-out and also to make primary education compulsory, it is also a requirement that measures to reduce truancy must be 'positive' rather than 'punitive'².

ACOSS President Lin Hatfield Dodds has cited a lack of basic education and support services, poor quality education programs, bullying, insecure housing and health problems as some of the factors that lead to truancy and has commented that "Suspension of income support payments is a harsh penalty which itself poses a serious threat to family and child wellbeing. Many of the families affected by these proposals are already living on low incomes and the suspension of payments will increase hardship and poverty."

¹ The Hon Julia Gillard MP. 27 August, 2008. Speech
Second Reading Speech, Social Security And Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008. House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra

² United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 28.
Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989

Effectiveness of the Proposed Measures

If the purpose of the proposed measures is to reduce truancy, then presumably we need to measure the effectiveness of the bill not only against whether it will lead to greater attendance and participation of all children in school, but also against whether or not it will reduce the causes of truancy, so that the effect will be sustained.

WACOSS suggests that the proposed measures will not be effective at increasing and sustaining school attendance for the following reasons:

Fails to address underlying causes of truancy

Research shows that there are a myriad of reasons for poor school attendance.

The WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey found that poor attendance at school was a result of a number of factors including;

- A low level of education of carers,
- Difficulties in getting enough sleep,
- Emotional and behavioural issues,
- English as a second language,
- Having a parent or primary care giver arrested or charged with an offence; and
- Having a parent separated from their natural family.³

Other factors influencing school attendance include;

- Poor health,
- Poor nutrition,
- Poor housing and/or homelessness, and
- Poverty.

The reasons for child school truancy are all complex contributors; which will not be addressed by welfare suspension.

This truancy measure does not address the factors that we know contribute to poor school attendance. Penalising families by cutting welfare payments will not help improve parenting skills, provide much needed support or make school a more attractive place. In fact, cutting a family's income may well exacerbate existing poverty related issues such as poor health and nutrition and generate other problems, like homelessness and further social exclusion.

Applies to a limited scope of truancy

This initiative is directly aimed at low-income and disadvantaged families. It fails to acknowledge that truancy is not confined to families that struggle financially, but rather occurs across all classes and income brackets, including middle and high-income families.

Working families, even those that do receive Family Tax Benefits will not be affected, unless they also receive unemployment, disability or parenting payments.

Therefore the measures will be ineffective in dealing with truancy in 75% of families around Australia that are not reliant on welfare payments.

³ WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey, 2006

Inadequate monitoring and evaluation

The Government has characterised both these measures, and the Compulsory Income Management for Child Protection program, as trials that will inform a potential national rollout. However there is very little information about how the trials will be monitored and evaluated, other than school attendance levels.

At what stage will the trial be deemed successful, how will the negative impacts of income suspension on families be monitored needs to be made clear.

Lack of an evidence base for effectiveness

The measures proposed in this bill are new, untested, unproven strategies. There is no evidence to suggest that these proposed truancy measures will be effective at increasing the participation of children in schools, or reducing the causes of truancy.

Evidence of ineffectiveness of similar measures

There is evidence that suggests that similar measures have been ineffective at increasing school participation in Western Australia.

The Halls Creek School trialed a voluntary program that linked welfare payments to school attendance in 2008 and the evaluation, undertaken by Professor Robyn Penman, found that school attendance of the children did not improve over the course of the trial.⁴

The quality of teaching, the culture at the school and parental attitudes were significant. Overcrowding in houses makes it more difficult to provide an environment in which families can be "school ready" or a culture of learning can be created.⁵

Evidence of effectiveness of alternative measures

There is evidence to show that linking families with supports and services and engaging the whole family unit in the life of the school community can reduce truancy⁶.

There are a range of successful strategies to address school attendance, particularly for Aboriginal students, that could be adopted instead of this punitive approach. The common link has been an approach that works with and includes families, home visits, community liaison, consistent follow up and relationship building, creating an educational environment that children, and families, want to be a part of.

The measures in this bill are resource intensive processes and punitive actions that will draw attention and resources away from proven long-term solutions and supports that will make a difference.

⁴ Rethinking Indigenous Policy, Larissa Behrendt August 25, 2008
<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/rethinking-indigenous-policy-20080824-41ce.html?page=-1>

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Wheatley S and Spillane G (2001) *Home and away: a literature review of school absenteeism and non-engagement issues*, Victorian Statewide School Attachment and Engagement Planning and Inertest Group.

Impact on Children & Families

Western Australia is experiencing a sustained economic boom which is driving up the cost of living and introducing a number of compounding pressures on families that are struggling to keep up.

A new introduction of a punitive measure that exacerbates financial hardship in already struggling families adds will add more complexity and difficulty to people's lives.

Impact on Aboriginal and CALD Families

The measures in this bill are likely to disproportionately impact on Aboriginal and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families.

The proportion of Aboriginal people living in the Cannington district is higher than the general Perth metropolitan region. This is even more stark for children under the age of fifteen.

CANNINGTON		PERTH	
Indigenous	Non-indigenous	Indigenous	Non-indigenous
TOTAL			
3480	220,222	17,796	1,256,234
1.6%		1.4%	
Under 15yrs			
1,203	37,574	6,772	238,784
3.2%		2.8%	

Source: ABS 2006 Census of Population and Housing

While this data is not available by the same district for CALD communities, we understand that a similarly higher proportion of CALD people live in Cannington, particularly newly settled humanitarian migrants.

Impact on existing services

The non-government community services sector delivers critically important services in areas such as health, disability, employment and training, aged and community care, family support, children and youth services, drug and alcohol assistance, indigenous affairs, support for culturally and linguistically diverse people and housing. The number of people who need help from agencies is increasing each year, as is the complexity of clients' needs. Agencies are not able to assist everyone, as evidenced by the fact that 9,750 people were turned away from overloaded community services organisations in 2006-07, even though 80% of these people were eligible for help.

WACOSS is concerned about the capacity of the non-government sector to cope with a further increase in demand for help from families who have had their payments suspended under these measures.

Expectations of Children in Families

Children and young people should not have to be responsible for the wellbeing of their families or parents, yet increasingly this burden is placed upon young family members, who may be the carer of another family member with a mental health problem, disability or experiencing some form of hardship that reduces their capacity to be responsible for themselves or their family.

Young carers are a vulnerable and at-risk cohort. Without ongoing funding young carers will continue to fall through the gaps of services, including education and schooling.

40,000 young carers currently live across WA, according to research conducted by Curtin University in 2004. Young carers as a target population have one of the highest school drop-out rates. Only 4% of young primary carers between the age of 15-25 yrs are still at school, compared to 23% of the general population. This is doubtless a contributor to truancy for younger students as well as the over 15s.

The National Young Carer Summit in 2006 identified 4 key areas for young carers which were discussed with key stakeholders again at the WA Young Carers Forum in August 2007. The areas identified are; Identification, Education, Respite and better collaboration across government.

Disability Service Commission (DSC) has provided one-off grants for young carers programs since 2004, however, \$500,000 annually across a variety of agencies in WA is needed.

Ongoing and re-current funding across WA will support the efforts to develop and implement appropriate services for young carers as well as provide opportunities for young carers to meet with and develop peer support networks, like many other young people of their age enjoy.

This proposed bill does not address the needs of young carers, or diminish the pressures they are under which may prevent them from attending school.

To help protect and improve the wellbeing of our children, Child Expert Dorothy Scott said recently that we must "build the capacity of adult-focussed services such as mental health, alcohol and drug treatment services, disability, family violence, corrections, homelessness and resettlement services so that they can see, hear and respond to the needs of vulnerable children in the families they serve"⁷.

Housing & Rental Churn

Without doubt, the most critical need of vulnerable families in the WA community is access to safe, appropriate and affordable housing. The ACOSS Community Sector Survey identified long term accommodation as the service most needed by recipients of community services. Crisis and supported accommodation was the second most needed service. The crisis is even more acute for people in regional, rural and remote areas. There is a scarcity of social housing in WA, and insufficient funding for crisis and supported accommodation to meet the demand for services.

In the last decade, median house prices have gone from 3-4 times the median wage to 7.6 times the median wage, one of the highest rates in the world. This has put home ownership beyond the realm of possibility for West Australian on low, fixed, and increasingly middle incomes.

The prolonged Western Australian housing crisis continues to see rental prices increase more rapidly than average earnings, and vacancy rates remain near historic lows.

⁷ "Think Child, Think Family, Think Community: Building the Capacity of Adult Services to Respond to the Needs of Vulnerable Children" ABSTRACT. Professor Dorothy Scott, Director Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia. <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/seminars/seminars.html>

Tenants struggling to find and keep accommodation are faced with weak regulatory protection of their rights.

Over the 12 months to June 2008, rents in Perth increased by 17%⁸. A recent AHURI study on the impact of housing affordability problems on financial and social wellbeing found that 70% of low income renters are experiencing difficulty in paying rents and 40% had been in arrears at some time in the last three years. Some 40% of lower income renters in the study moved annually in search of cheaper rents. Lower income renters in housing stress reported depriving themselves of basic goods and services in order to meet rental repayments, including meals and adequate health and/or dental care⁹.

This is leading to the common occurrence of "rental churn" in WA rental markets. Tenants are frequently evicted, or subject to short-term leases so that rents can be raised regularly and families that can not afford the increases are forced to look for cheaper rent elsewhere, often away from employment, services, and the schools that their children are enrolled in. Rental churn in the WA market is very likely a contributing cause of truancy, which is a common issue for children in new schools, or who have to change schools regularly.

The AHURI Southern Research Centre, and other housing policy groups, have long argued that high eviction rates cost the "public purse."

At the Australian Social Policy Conference 2007 they said:

Eviction contributes to 'churn' within the system as the costs of housing and support are transferred from one section, such as homelessness and mental health, to another.

These costs include:

- Immediate costs of provision of crisis and transitional accommodation within the SAAP system
- Increased demand for services such as health, mental health, drug and alcohol, child and family services
- Increased criminal justice costs
- Lost productivity
- Costs of exclusion from education, employment and training
- Long-term costs associated with inter-generational disadvantage (Pinkey and Ewing 2006).

In going on to paint the reverse picture, it is well established that successful tenancies contribute positively to more stable neighbourhoods, and builds social capital, with "broader implications than merely providing a roof over their head."¹⁰

The reality is, that for many families in WA, a stable home is not available to them, so nor are the benefits that come with one. If we care about the education of children, and their participation in school, then we must do more to ensure that they have access to safe, secure and affordable housing.

⁸ http://www.homepriceguide.com.au/media_release/APM_Rental_Market_Report_June2008_Quarter.pdf

⁹ Terry Burke and Simon Pinnegar, AHURI, Research Paper 9, 'Experiencing the Housing Affordability Problem: Blacked aspirations, trade-offs and financial hardships', January 2008.

¹⁰ Daphne Habibis, 2007, *A Sustaining Tenancies Approach to Demanding Behaviour in Public Housing*, AHURI Southern Research Centre downloaded at http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/ASPC2007/papers/Habibis_140.pdf

Case Study

The Indigenous Education Leadership Institute Improving Attendance and Outcomes for Indigenous Students

The Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, developed by educator Chris Sarra, is committed to achieving positive outcomes for Indigenous children by building self confidence and self esteem. The Institute plays a lead role in ensuring the development and delivery of quality leadership in schools with Indigenous children, so that the teacher-student relationship is furnished by respect, understanding, high expectations, professionalism and commitment¹¹.

Approaches such as this that invest in addressing the causes of disadvantage, rather than reacting to a crisis will go a long way to ensuring good outcomes for Indigenous West Australians.

Positive support services that realistically address and provide solutions to some of the reasons that parents may not be able to send their children to school could include:

- Breakfast/lunch programs in schools;
- Programs linking members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) community, particularly elders to become part of the school community;
- Training of Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal teacher aides; and
- Curriculum development that is culturally appropriate and therefore engages ATSI children with what they are learning.

There is growing evidence to suggest that quarantining or ceasing welfare payments as a means of curbing school truancy rates is an expensive and ineffective way of increasing Indigenous children's participation in the education system¹².

Moving away from linking welfare reform to school attendance means parents and children can be supported by and connected to their communities. By creating an educational environment in which students want to remain, with high quality teachers and a strong leadership culture, educational outcomes for Indigenous children will improve, without taking out punitive measures such as welfare quarantining.

This approach to dealing with truancy is punitive and also unproven. There is no evidence to suggest that it leads to better outcomes for children. Conversely, preventative community development strategies have a strong evidence base for improving education outcomes.

Governments should ensure that proven programs such as these, which have demonstrated positive outcomes are adequately funded; with adequate standards of essential services, adequately paid teachers, proper infrastructure and an investment in human capital in order to deal with community problems in a holistic way.

¹¹ Online at <http://www.strongersmarter.qut.edu.au/index.html>

¹² Behrendt, L. & McCausland, R. (2008). Welfare Payments and School Attendance: An Analysis of Experimental Policy in Indigenous Education. University of Technology Sydney. Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning.