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27 June 2022

Submission¹ to the Commission for Children and Young People, Victoria

Re: Inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care

Dear Commissioner,

I would like to submit this response to the Inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care (OOHC) on behalf of myself and the following academics and researchers:

- Prof Sharon Bessell, Australian National University, Children's Policy Centre
- Dr Tom Brunzell, Berry Street
- Dr Rhonda Coopes, Stronger Smarter Institute
- Dr Michael Guerzoni, University of Tasmania, School of Social Sciences
- Mr Jesse King, Stronger Smarter Institute
- Dr Joseph McDowall, CREATE Foundation
- Prof Anna Sullivan, University of South Australia Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion
- Prof Kitty te Riele, University of Tasmania, Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment
- Mr Dale Murray, Director Education, Life Without Barriers

We are aware of the difficulties faced by children and young people who are unable to live safely at home, due to risk of abuse or neglect, and who are removed and placed in care by their state and territory child protection services. These children face considerable challenges related to trauma and frequently moving to new care placements and therefore new schools. A positive educational experience would help mitigate some of those challenges. It will take major collaboration across education and child protection systems to improve outcomes for these children.

We invite you to read our submission below.

Yours sincerely

Professor Daryl Higgins

Director Institute of Child Protection Studies
[Australian Catholic University](#)

¹ Note, this submission is partly based on our article: Te Riele, K., Bessell, S., Coopes, R., Guerzoni, M., Higgins, D., King, J., McDowall, J., & Sullivan, A. (2022). Attending school every day counts – but kids in out-of-home care are missing out. The Conversation 11 May 2022, <https://theconversation.com/attending-school-every-day-counts-but-kids-in-out-of-home-care-are-missing-out-182299>

What is education like for children in care?

In June 2021, there were 36,084 school-aged children (age 5-17) in care in Australia; 41% (14,949) of these were Indigenous children², a significant over-representation.

Evidence shows that too often students in care end up having negative experiences in school, and worse academic outcomes than their peers. For example:

- 82% of students in OOHC in Year 3 meet the National Minimum Standard in NAPLAN-Reading, compared to 95% nationally. By Year 9, the proportion is 69% versus 93%.³
- 81% of students in OOHC in Year 3 meet the National Minimum Standard in NAPLAN-Numeracy, compared to 96% nationally. By Year 9, the proportion is 61% versus 93%.⁴
- 57% of young care leavers (aged 18-25) had completed Year 12.⁵ In comparison, the 85% of 20-24 year olds nationally have completed Year 12 or equivalent.⁶

There are a number of factors and circumstances that contribute to lower educational attainment for children and young people in OOHC⁷. These include:

- the impact of trauma and reduced attachment on the child
- the crisis-driven nature of OOHC services which prioritise welfare and safety over education
- lack of necessary expertise in schools and education systems
- challenges of inter-agency collaboration, in the context of child protection and privacy legislation
- placement instability.

² <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2020-21/data>

³ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/educational-outcomes-for-children-in-care-linking/summary>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CREATE-Post-Care-Report-2021-LR.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/may-2020>

⁷ <https://acwa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ACWA-Education-Roundtable-outputs-Final.pdf>

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/educational-outcomes-for-children-in-care-linking/summary>

https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2015-10/apo-nid58403_1.pdf

https://www.anglicarevic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/535_ChildInCareReport_FINAL_webv2.pdf

<http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-is-the-Relationship-Between-Being-in-Care-and-the-Educational-Outcomes-of-Children-An-International-Systematic-Review.pdf>

https://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/SVA-Perspective-Paper_Education_OOHC_cohort_lowres.pdf

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/children-australia/article/abs/educational-status-of-children-and-young-people-in-care/C960D5B1E1511437A7C88A430453F4E5>

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104835>

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/trauma-informed-care-child-family-welfare-services>

<https://cared4.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/card4page1.pdf>

Placement instability is a key concern, as it often leads to children and young people also having to move to a new school. This means having to get used to new teachers again and again; dealing with new approaches to learning, new rules, and new classmates; having to constantly catch up on what has been missed; being thought of as the kid who is “behind”; and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care also the risk of being disconnected from their culture and kin⁸.

COVID-19 created and exacerbated problems. School closures have made school more difficult. COVID-19 uncertainty may have increased placement instability, schooling mobility, and economic and social stressors⁹.

Quality education is essential for wellbeing and development. Improving education outcomes for students in care is of profound benefit to them. But it also benefits Australian society – now and for future generations.¹⁰

Attendance is fundamental

In this submission we focus on the importance of school attendance, because any intervention intended to improve school outcomes for students in care has a crucial prerequisite: that these students actually are at school and in class.

Research shows regular school attendance is crucial to educational achievement. Absence from school flows on to negative effects like leaving school early, poor academic achievement, and social isolation. Even short absences – including absences that are officially allowed, such as illness – can make it more difficult for children to keep up. The effects are cumulative. Each further absence makes it harder for the student to engage with school and catch up.¹¹

Attendance is an indicator for two major government objectives: “for school education services to be provided in an equitable manner” and “that school education services promotes student participation”.¹²

Unfortunately, children in out-of-home care face myriad challenges when it comes to attending school every day. The experiences that make school harder for children and young people in care (such as trauma and frequently moving to new care placements and schools) also lead to lower attendance.

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/indigenous-children-are-leaving-out-of-home-care-to-uncertain-futures-this-is-the-support-they-need-143906>

⁹ https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1324268/Learning-at-home-during-COVID-19-updated.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/deep-persistent-disadvantage>

¹¹ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/spotlight-attendance-matters>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2014.962696>

<https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3267>

<https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/research-topics/student-attendance-and-educational-outcomes-2015.pdf>

¹² <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services>

The statistics tell an alarming story:

- In Victoria, 80% of 5-17 year-old children and young people in OOHC attended school full time, compared to almost 100% among the Australian 5-17 year-old population; and almost 20% of 15-17 year-olds in OOHC had been suspended from school in the previous 12 months, compared to 12% of Year 10 students in Victoria.¹³
- In Queensland, a 2010 report noted a range of local studies that indicated between 62-72% of children in OOHC were attending school; and 57-61% of students in OOHC had been suspended or excluded from school at least once.¹⁴
- In South Australia, based on 2007-2018 absenteeism data from the South Australian Department for Education, the mean number of school absences per term was 3.44 for students with no involvement in the Child Protection System (CPS), compared to 7 for students in OOHC with a substantiated CPS notification.¹⁵ The proportion of children with chronic truancy (defined as 10+ days absent without an acceptable reason in any term during their schooling) was 10.7% for students with no CPS involvement, compared to 46.3% for students in OOHC with a substantiated CPS notification.¹⁶ The proportion of students in care who were suspended is almost four times higher: 6% across all students versus 23% among students in care.¹⁷

What can be done?

Behind these figures sits a complex challenge. It's not the fault of these young people. They did not choose to go into care, or that their lives would be characterised by disruption and trauma. Nor should we blame schools and teachers.

Frequent absences from school of children in care is a systems problem that goes beyond the responsibility of individual schools. We've known about these problems for a long time. But several policy commitments now provide hope:

- Through the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* "Australian Governments commit to ensuring the education community works to provide equality of opportunity and educational outcomes for all students at risk of educational disadvantage". The Declaration names "learners in out-of-home care" as requiring targeted support to meet this commitment.¹⁸
- In the *National Standards for Out-of-Home Care* Standard 7 is that "Children and young people up to at least 18 years are supported to be engaged in appropriate education, training and/or employment". The National Standards require state and territory governments to work to enhance life chances for children in OOHC.¹⁹

¹³ https://www.anglicarevic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/535_ChildInCareReport_FINAL_webv2.pdf

¹⁴ <https://cared4.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/card4page1.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32166980/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/report-of-an-independent-inquiry-into-suspensions-exclusions-and-expulsions-in-south-australian-government-schools.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.dese.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

¹⁹ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/pac_national_standard.pdf

- The new *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* recognises access to education as a “fundamental right” as part of Principle 1: “Access to quality, universal and targeted services designed to improve outcomes for children, young people and families”.²⁰
- The National Agreement on Closing the Gap Outcome 5 is that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential”, with school attendance recognised as a key driver.²¹ However, the 2020 Closing the Gap report noted no improvement in terms of school attendance over the previous five years.²²

These commitments create a powerful opportunity to give children and young people in care a fair go at their education – to set them up for learning, and for life. But this will need collaboration across education and child protection systems and government departments to ensure these children are enabled to attend school.

As the Victorian Government itself tells parents: “Going to school every day is the single most important part of your child’s education”.²³

Yours sincerely

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²⁰ <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-framework-for-protecting-australias-children-2021-2031>

²¹ <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement>

²² <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/resources/reports>

²³ <https://www.vic.gov.au/attendance-and-missing-school>