

29th April 2002

Inquiry into Education of Children in Out Of Home Care
Committee on Children and Young People
Parliament House
SYDNEY 2000.
children@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN OUT OF HOME CARE

Barnardos Australia provides out of home care services and family support to children at risk of entering out of home care. We provide out of home care to approximately 1,000 children and young people in New South Wales each year: almost all of these young people are in placements in the community. Many children come into crisis foster care placements, but over 130 are State wards (under Parental Responsibility to the Minister) in long-term care. We have only one specialised residential care unit for up to six older adolescents from refugee backgrounds.

Barnardos each year spends over \$65,000 on supplementing Government support for education, in addition many hours of caseworker time is spent negotiating with the educational system trying to keep children in school. Carers are often called on to substitute for the education system when students are not allowed to attend school or are suspended for extended periods, and this can cause huge stress in placements. This is a particular issue with the Find a Family program

Educational outcomes for young people in care are poor¹ and requires greater commitment by Government. We believe that reform can be achieved through:

- Stronger management, greater training and encouragement to encourage schools, Principals and teachers to “own” children with challenging behaviour to maintain commitment.
- State funding of Kids Friends programs to ensure mentoring and encouragement with education for children “at risk” of entry to care
- Student Services and Equity Programs Substitute Care Teams and Individual Education Plans being actively involved in the assessment of resourcing of students no matter what school is attended ie whether Catholic, State or private school.
- Student Services and Equity Program: Substitute Care Teams being able to provide services to children following an adoption order, and services should

¹ Child and Family Social Work 2000 “Research Review- The Education of looked after children” J.Goddard. 2000 5.pp79-86

Literature Review. Educational Outcomes of Children and Young People in care in ACT. 2001 A joint research project by Australian Catholic University and Family Services, prepared by Sally Gilles Children in residential care Research Project Evaluation Report auspice by Kildonan Child and Family Services “Getting an Education in Care” prepared by J.Cavanagh March 1995.

South Australian Report to the Children in Residential Care Task Force “The Risk of Educational Disadvantage for children in Substitute Care” Sue Ellen Carey December 1986

Caring “Children in Care: At risk of Educational Failure” Vol 13 (1) p12

National Children’s Bureau and Barnardos United Kingdom Highlight No 177 “The Education of children in public care”.

British journal of Social Work “Failure to Escape: A longitudinal study of foster Children’s educational attainment”. Heath.AF, Colton,MJ, Aldgate,J 1994 24, pp241-260

Children and Society “Residential care and education” Jackson, S 1988-9 4 pp335-350

not be withdrawn when a child leaves care and is restored to their family. This resource should also apply to children beyond their first year in care.

- More resources, particularly teachers aids, to meet the needs identified in assessment
- Closer monitoring of children who have been assisted through these teams.
- Class room support which is longer than 5 weeks and faster decision making on its availability
- The Looking After Children (LAC) program adopted by DOCS and supported by the Education Department,
- LAC used as a research tool to monitor education of children in care, if necessary review of the NSW could be specified.
- Non Government education program initiatives to be funded to ensure that children “at risk” of entry into care have received remedial assistance, in non school settings. These programs should address the issue of “school refusing” adolescents and offer alternatives to Schools for Special Purposes.
- Non-government community groups should be funded to develop outreach educational support for “at risk” children and young people. Examples of programs include mentoring, community tutoring and homework support.
- Children that are deemed at risk of entry to out of home care, need paid access to childcare and preschool, integration support to school and to better coverage to establish school readiness.

THE MAJOR ISSUES AND BARRIERS RELATED TO EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUT OF HOME CARE.

Damage done to educational progress before entry into care

Most children who enter out of home care suffer significant educational disadvantage. Because of disruptions in their past, transitory lifestyle and parent disinterest in education even very young children have significant educational disadvantage. This is a situation which is true at an international level with children who enter care for example Francis (2000)² Scottish study shows children entering care have educational and behavioural problems which significantly disadvantage them further in life. In NSW not enough has been done to prevent this disadvantage before entry to care. There is a lack of services both within the education system and in the community generally to address the problems of children “at risk”.

We have a growing body of evidence about the impact of abuse and neglect at critical periods of a child's life on the development of skills required to attain educationally, such as concentration. Barnardos believes that the most effective, non stigmatising way of ensuring that “at risk” preschoolers are best prepared for education is through utilisation of the existing childcare provisions. Unfortunately³ this resource is rarely utilised with such families as it is seen as a workforce related issue.

Our experience of the Early Transition Service program is that its coverage and effectiveness is patchy. Whilst it can be good, only a limited number of our services have used it. This included our long day care services. Our childcare services also expressed concern over the impact of administrative changes which took Federally funded “Supplementary” assistants out of long day care centres and used on a regional basis, they believe that quality of assistance declined.

² Literature Review of Children and Young people in Care in ACT- A Joint Research project by Australian Catholic University and Family Services 2001 unpublished draft. Referring to Francis, J (2000) Investing in children’s futures: enhancing the educational arrangements of “looked After” children and young people. Children and Family Social work 5, 23-33

³ The Social Policy Research Centre at University of New South Wales has undertaken work for the Department of Community Services in this area.

For school aged children who are struggling in the education system there are a number of initiatives which should be considered. In order to address this problem Barnardos has established mentoring/tutoring programs⁴ which aim to address the social functioning of “at risk” children, this has educational importance. We have operated a mentoring program called Kids Friends funded by the ACT Government for many years and this has led to some education specific programs including community tutoring and homework groups.

There are four small mentoring programs being operated from our Children’s Family Centres in NSW. There is no State Government funding for such programs and Barnardos has born the financial risk of piloting these programs in NSW. These programs have not been able to develop education-specific focus because of lack of funding (although some experimentation is going on in the South Coast).

We believe that there is another critical period where educational support would be most significant: this is at the time of transition to High School. Assessment of literacy and numeracy and additional remedial work would greatly assist children to adjust to High School

CASE STUDY 1.

In April 2002 we have a 14-year-old girl in a community placement, she has a long history in care and of school refusal. Barnardos has worked with a private Catholic school and now has her settled, trusting the school and regularly attending. Educational testing reveals that the cost of remedial education will be \$58,000. As this young person is not in the public system there is no funding for any part of this expense and it would be difficult to move her into the public system given her educational background. Barnardos does not have the funds to meet these costs.

Barriers to getting educational help while in placement

Education Department Student Services and Equity Program Substitute Care Teams limited in coverage-

Generally our experience with these teams with respect to assessment of young people and getting resources has been positive, although variable across regions. There are a number of issues of concern with the operation of these teams:

- Our Find a Family program has found that being a State Ward is frequently no guarantee of assistance from these teams and that some children have been deemed as “not disturbed enough” to warrant assistance although we knew that they have needs that were effecting placement and future outcomes.
- A major problem is that these teams do not extend outside the public school system and we have many young people in care who are in private or Catholic schools. Barnardos either uses volunteers or pays for private tutoring, and use private psychologists to meet their needs, however this is not always financially possible.
- Once young people leave short-term care they do not have access to resources that they would have in care. This clearly undermines restoration to birth parents. Furthermore, withdrawal of the team’s support when the child is returned to their birth family, appears to our caseworkers to undo the work of the team to that point. Assistance should not be withdraw from young people after they exit care as their situations may be very marginal at reunification and withdrawal of educational support may adversely effect reunification. Time

⁴ See Barnardos Australia Website www.barnardos.org.au/HSBC Kids Friends

limited continuation of the program is justified on the basis that it will assist to prevent re entry to care.

- Services are withdrawn from adoptees. Barnardos has a specialised service aimed at permanently placing children and this has led to adoption of many children and young people who have been long-term wards. Such options are very important to young people who hope, after years of rejection, to have the legal and social recognition of being a member of a family. A number of these adoptions are being subsidised by the State Government. Currently the Substitute Care Teams resources are removed when adoption is finalised. Many of these adoptees are emotionally, behaviourally and educationally disadvantaged, the need for educational resources to go into stabilising their new family is clear. Barnardos must attempt to pay for whatever resources are needed, but has difficulty in coordinating the educational response, and finding the funds necessary.
- Our Find a Family team has found that financial decisions by the Substitute Care teams can take a long time to resolve and necessitates the agency providing bridging funds. Whilst we are often in a position to do so, this can create barriers to assistance for wards. It also raises issues of concern about children with welfare agencies, which cannot afford bridging funds. Workers state that the buck is often passed between DoCS and Education
- Whilst information from these teams can be good, resources are often hard to get following an assessment according to Find a Family *“Transition money and money for itinerant teachers is very hard to access and is provided for a short period of time”*.
- Our long-term care programs report that assistance from these teams does not usually go beyond the first year of care. Many of our long-term wards have ongoing difficulties and it will take a great deal of time to remedy problems of the past.
- The teams do not monitor the progress of the child sufficiently, it is often left with Barnardos workers and carers to follow up outcomes.

CASESTUDY

Our residential unit has previously had DoCS or Barnardos funding to get extra tutoring and English language tuition to young residents. This year DoCS have not made such resources available, and we cannot provide this service.

Class room support too limited in duration

Programs report that the 5-week support offered as classroom support is often, predicably, not long enough, and having to reapply for funds is a problem for welfare programs. Our programs report that it is difficult to get this form of assistance particularly for children in voluntary placements. Changes to the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 mean that parents will be encouraged to use voluntary placements ie not involve Court Orders. This will mean that fewer children will qualify in the future for classroom support even though the need will not have changed.

Problems in getting appropriate assistance for non “Wards” in local areas

Substitute Care Teams do not cover all children in out of home care-particularly those in short term care and voluntary placements. Reunification is enhanced if educational issues and non-school attendance are addressed.

Getting resources for these children is difficult. Comments of a Program Manager in a short-term foster care program explain this issue "We battle to get someone to take up the responsibility when there are additional supports needed. The Dept of Education says it's DoCS responsibility, DoCS says it's Dept of Education and the child misses out in the midst of this."

CASESTUDY

A rural foster care program has a boy in care attending a school for specific purpose for behavioural issues. He has been suspended but due to the stresses of his behaviour in placement and our need to maintain the placement it is not viable that he spends his suspension at home.

We suggested to the school that the boy should be isolated in the school setting but this was not possible. We suggest the Dept of Education provide someone to supervise him in another setting, this was also not possible. We then tried to get funding from DoCS to provide a youth worker to supervise him however this was very difficult.

The expectation of what this boy has to do before the school would have him back is also a major problem. The school for special purpose have very boring and repetitive work books that he is supposed to spend 6 hrs per day working on.

Our caseworker summarises "This is a boy who a special unit cannot manage but we are supposed to get him to do all that work each day with no rewards and nothing positive being used. Not surprisingly, not much work was done and the behaviour problems escalated".

Difficulties with Schools for Special Purpose.

Many of the children in out of home care have significant behavioural problems, this means that Schools for Special Purpose (SSP) are of great importance. There is however a number of issues for children in out of home care related to these schools:

- a place can be difficult to get due to demand, transport and access problems
- young people can be suspended, or allowed only limited time (for example the SSP may take the child for four days and expect that they will be integrating into their normal school however some of our charges do not have a school which "owns" them the child spends the day at home)
- These schools have variable success- we have many experiences of children in our care that are suspended from these units. The Case study above illustrates this problem. Even these supposedly expert schools withdraw from children in care with challenging behaviour, and the children's only alternative is for non-government agencies or foster carers to care for the child during the day. Clearly this is not educationally desirable.
- It is Barnardos' experience with trying to work with groups of children with behaviour disturbance that poor conduct seems to be spread, these schools themselves may add to behaviour problems
- We do not find that SSP meet the needs of motivated students who have behaviour problems. There were reports of children in care finding the work unstimulating, and the number of hours that they could spend there
- We have experienced problems with cross jurisdiction between regions, and the resultant problem of reintegration into ordinary school.
- The age range in some of these schools has caused concern, as it would appear that younger children are disadvantaged in these settings.

Barnardos would like to see more options available to young people with behaviour problems, we believe that non-government agencies could provide innovation and non-institutional settings when working with these young people.

CASESTUDY

A boy aged 13 in our South Eastern Sydney program in 2001, went to a local school and was subsequently sent to a School for Special Purpose. The boy was not happy there and our caseworkers were convinced that he should move into mainstream school. Work at the School was not stimulating and he was very bored. The School for Special Purpose was in one region, but as the boy was moving mainstream schools and was subsequently found a placement in another region co-ordination between regions became a major issue. There were different opinions between regions about what was best for this boy, and logistic problems for example transporting and waiting while the boy was reintegrated created many problems. Problems in this case become so difficult that DoCS ultimately agreed to fund this boy in a private Catholic School. He has settled in this school.

Schools poor capacity to deal with behaviourally challenging behaviour

Barnardos has experience of a large number of schools and know that there is enormous variability in individual schools ability to deal with young people with challenging behaviour. We have had some excellent experiences with schools where staff have been committed, attended care planning meetings and found creative ways to manage behaviour. It should be recognised that the private schools and public system has done excellent work with some very damaged young people, however this is not always the case.

Overuse of suspensions is a major problem, as is lack of involvement by some schools in care planning. Very often with our very behaviourally challenging children who have been in long-term care, permission not to go to school is exactly what they want, so this tactic can be exploited.

CASESTUDY

Barnardos runs a residential unit for refugee young people with extreme forms of behaviour disturbance, many of the residents are alienated from the school system and have not attended any form of education for some time. Our workers have to work hard to get these young people to school. There is now no school that appears willing to take them.

Up to 2000 a local High School took in most of our residents, and worked as part of our team to stabilise these residents in education. With a change in Principal, this school refused to take these residents arguing that it was not the local school. This was correct but our local High School was a specialist school with very high specialist service and it was not suitable for these young people. No other High School in proximity was happy to take our residents. They are all now attending TAFE however this is not ideal particularly for the young ones eg 16 year olds, and is not the normalising environment of a school.

Suspensions are used too much and tolerance of difficult behaviour is poor

Barnardos has ongoing problems when a child is suspended. Suspension rarely works for the child, the carer or the worker because carers (who may only have a child for the short-term) work and agencies need to find, train and support someone to supervise the child. The Department seems to often be inflexible when it comes to looking at our creative solutions to keep a child engaged in education.

We note from the Create Report Card⁵ that 50% of children and young people in residential care had frequent episodes of truancy, school exclusion or suspension, with 7% not attending at all.

⁵ www.create.org.au

The following case study comes from our short-term fostering program in rural New South Wales

CASESTUDY

A girl, in primary school was in long term care but her placement of 7 years has broken down at the end of 2001. She had then been placed with her aunt and this also broke down, she came into Barnardos Temporary Family Care (South Coast) while waiting for another long-term option. This girl is described by caseworkers as possibly having the most disturbed behaviour the program has seen.

She had been at school in an IM class and doing quite well prior to the breakdown of the placement with her aunt. When our placement began the school was supportive but in the first week she went 'right off' at school (not surprising given rejection in placement). The school immediately suspended her for 20 days but said they would review it after a week or so. They then refused to meet to discuss a review, rather they made a referral to another school nearer the carers home for her.

Barnardos said that given she was only in our care for a short time it was not appropriate to change schools and then change again. We asked that they considered having her back for one hour a day with the youth worker that we were using with her at the school as a back up. The school wouldn't consider that as an option. They clearly did not want her back at the school and we were concerned that the school would sabotage any plan we put in place to get her back there. At March 2002 the girl is in a new school.

Often quite young children are subject to suspensions as with this very young child.

CASESTUDY

Harry at 7years old was suspended from school for three days due to pushing a teacher (forcefully) so that she nearly fell over. Harry was in a Temporary Family Care placement and his carer was working during the day. TFC had two options, either to place Harry with another foster carer during the day for three days or employ a youth worker/childcare assistant to care for him.

A foster carer was found to care for Harry. The carer was briefed that Harry was to follow a "school routine" from 9-3pm each day of suspension (including a lunch and recess break but no TV) This was followed with minimal success as Harry completed the (routine and boring) school work supplied within three hours on the first day of suspension!

Harry returned to school having had a three-day break, which he enjoyed immensely!

TFC 's observe that suspension does nothing to address the cause of difficult and challenging behaviours. They question whether the child needs to be removed from the school environment whilst this is being done. They believe that a more creative alternative can be found within the environment and context of the school?

Many schools do not chose to become involved with the care planning for children in out of home care

Our crisis foster care teams report that some schools are not interested when a child moves into care

CASE STUDY

Troy 11 year old boy attending local Public School in outer Western Sydney. Our Temporary Family Care (TFC) program reported that the school refused

to hold meetings to review and plan management of difficult behaviours such as running away to school boundary (but not beyond), attention-seeking behaviours and aggression towards peers. The School did not respond to offers to meet with either the TFC caseworker or the psychologist to set up strategies to manage behaviours. School appeared unable to initiate simple strategies (suggested by TFC caseworker and boys psychologist) to manage Troy's difficult behaviours.

Following repeated suspensions and after a six-month period the school met with his mother. The school did not invite TFC caseworker or psychologist. Troy's Mother tells us that at this meeting she was pressured to sign an agreement to Troy to a school that was inappropriate - a school for children with moderate to severe disabilities

This school agreed to accept this referral but they had to have a review to transfer. We believe that numbers in this school were low. A meeting was set for a time when psychologist could not attend and gave TFC caseworker 30 minutes notice - she could not attend either. At this meeting mum attended and agreed to transfer.

Consequently Troy attended the school for disabilities for about 9 weeks Troy's mum withdrew her consent for Troy to attend, as it was not meeting his educational needs. Troy returned to his local school for the remainder of the year.

The boy's mother enrolled Troy in another local school for 2002. This school has held meetings with the school counsellor, Troy's psychologist, TFC caseworker and mum to discuss and agree on strategies to manage behaviour. This school has shown willingness to work with outside agencies and access DSE resources. (Ie: a teacher's Aide has regular access to the Psychologist).

Troy has attended for 6 months now and whilst his behaviour continues to be challenging he is being managed consistently and communication between the stakeholders is regular and prompt.

Impact of a poorly functioning out of home care sector on educational attainment.

Although there is evidence which suggests that placement stability alone will not improve the educational attainment of children in out of home care (Francis, Heath, Colton and Aldergate 1994). Lack of placement stability is a major factor in righting the educational disadvantage of children in out of home care.

Many of the young people referred to Barnardos Find a Family program have experienced more than 10 placement changes, sometimes up to 20. There are many issues that can effect the stability of placements Barnardos believes that it will only be addressed by:

- Proclamation of the out of home Regulations of the Children and Young Peoples (Care and Protection) Act.
- Active permanency planning programs
- An active Children's Guardian
- Introduction of the Looking After Children casemanagement system
- Specialised work team for foster care, preferably in the non-Government system
- Supported kinship care

WAYS TO MONITOR THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN OUT OF HOME CARE

Barnardos Australia has used the Looking After Children (LAC) casemanagement system to monitor and regularly review and allocate responsibility for the education of children and young people in care and demands the construction of an educational plan for each child in care. Barnardos and University of NSW have already begun research into educational attainment of children in long-term care through use of LAC.

An electronic version of LAC (LACES) will soon be available and this will make the tool very effective for research and monitoring. Absences, exclusion, suspensions, school changes and examination results should be collected through LACES.

This tool was developed in the United Kingdom but has been adapted to Australian legislation and conditions. LAC is age related and copies of the educational components of LAC Action and Assessment records are included for your information. Many States are looking at adopting the LAC system: ACT has adopted LAC for all children in care.

Many non-government agencies use LAC and NSW Government has publicly stated its intent to introduce LAC, although there do not appear to be any advances in implementation. The importance of rapid and concerted introduction of LAC by Department of Community Services, and cooperation of schools and training agencies would be an important outcome for this inquiry. It should be noted that Barnardos Australia has license in NSW and if changes and developments in recording of educational progress and assessment were needed then it is possible that this could be included on the forms

IDENTIFY GOOD PRACTICE AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING THE EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOME OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUT OF HOME CARE.

We include information on the LAC Project, which we believe is an essential base for monitoring children in care's education.

Included is information on Barnardos ACT Kids Friends mentoring program and tutoring and homework program. We believe that such a model works well and funding should become available in NSW for such programs.

There are a number of non-Government programs that are useful with young people who present difficulties with schools, and believe that such non-Government initiatives need support (Boys Town, Burnside, Exodus, and Rosemount). We have worked with day programs for school non-attendees in ACT Specialist programs at Galilee and find this to be a satisfactory day program for non-school attendees. We would suggest exploration of the Victorian MacKillop Family Services Youth Ed-Venture Program (YEP) although we have not worked with it directly.

We have found some schools to be exceptional at managing children with very disadvantaged backgrounds. We have also had some excellent co-operation with TAFEs and have a number of young people in programs currently

I thank you for taking the time to put this issue on the public agenda.

Yours sincerely

Louise Voigt
CEO and Director of Welfare