

Student Behaviour Strategy Team
Behaviour and Student Participation
Inclusion and Wellbeing Directorate
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October 16 2020

Dear Student Behaviour Strategy Team,

NSW Department of Education Draft Behaviour Strategy

Thank you for providing Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) with the opportunity to input on the Department of Education's draft Student Behaviour Strategy, which is currently open for consultation.

As a leading not-for-profit children's social care organisation in Australia, achieving significant permanency outcomes for children and young people via both family preservation, foster/kinship care and open adoption work, Barnardos is pleased to have the opportunity to share direct practice insights from our frontline experience. Our experience includes systemic issues regarding student behaviour support, as well as the innovative and successful approaches we have also experienced.

Barnardos welcomes the shift by NSW Department of Education in behaviour support and management towards a preventive, student-centred and positive approach. Our comments below are focussed on the first two key reform directions to support the new Strategy, notably integrating student behaviour within broader approaches to learning and wellbeing, and providing targeted support to vulnerable student cohorts through evidence-based interventions and a dedicated expert workforce. We have also focussed on the heightened vulnerability of two particular cohorts; namely, children in the care system, and children living within families where child protection concerns are present (see for example (5) and (6) below). In our experience, it is these children who are most disadvantaged in terms of educational continuity over time and who experience the poorest educational and life outcomes.

1. The experiences of children, families and services within education settings for families that we are trying to keep together

- The children and families we are working with to keep together feel suspension is punitive and a punishment.
- The school setting is difficult for children and families in preservation services to navigate and they feel they are constantly being judged.
- For example, for families in Western NSW, schools may have had a long history of dealing with the disengaged parents either because the same teachers were present when the parent was at school and/or parent has lots of children who are now at or recently have been at the school. If the child or young person is expelled there may be only one other or no other option to enrol locally.

- For children living in households where routines are erratic due to parental drug and alcohol abuse, domestic and family violence, incarceration and mental health issues:
 - They often lack basic school uniform and equipment.
 - They go to school hungry and tired; without adequate nutrition and sleep for their brain to optimise learning.
 - They are teased and/or ostracised for poor hygiene, and not having food, uniform and equipment.
 - Their families do not have internet and/or other computer related infrastructure at home, and it becomes increasingly difficult for older children to complete their schoolwork and adds to likelihood of disengagement.
 - If they miss the school bus, there are no other transport options.
- Families perceive that the role of school counsellors is to do assessments, but they don't provide significant help with dealing with social or emotional problems.
- For families in Western NSW, children may not attend school for significant periods of time (months/years) and there is limited follow up from the school in regard to the non-attendance.
- The Home School Liaison Officer (HSLO) role as limited in that it has no flexibility to see children outside the school.

2. The targeted behaviour supports and approaches that are needed by students in out of home care (OOHC) or who are in contact with child protection

- A program that provides social support and care to children with emotional and/or trauma reactions to the normal school environment. For example, the Barnardos South Eastern & Northern Sydney (SENS) Family Referral Service (FRS) currently runs the FRS in Schools program that work closely with the schools by providing a worker within the school to provide inschool help and home visiting so the children and the family are getting a holistic service. This program will be defunded under the new Family Connect and Support Model. Hot desking at schools will still occur. Schools need support from NGOs to provide social care while they provide an educational environment. The Student Support Officer (SSO) role (social workers in schools) is being rolled out which should be across both primary and high schools.
- In pre-school and early school years, all Aboriginal children have speech and hearing assessments plus referral to speech therapist as needed and costs of transport and fees are paid.
- In early, primary and high school years:
 - Provision of breakfast and a packed lunch; transport; free internet or improved access to internet; and school uniforms.
 - Homework/learning centre after school enhanced with nutritious meal and tutoring with qualified tutors (online or in person).
- In high school years, early referral to services such as Reconnect to support school engagement and prevent homelessness.
- Inclusion of culturally affirming education material at all stages and with scope to localise for example inclusion of community elders, local history, visiting local sites of cultural significance, family tracing skills and culturally safe practice and flexibility.
- Improved communication and co-ordination between schools and NGOs via a single protocol for all NGOs/regional centres (noting that this is not an issue in the small towns).
- Schools may not have access to the funding, staffing, training, mentoring/supervision and resources required to meet children's complex needs in the standard classroom.

- Consistent access to the same support staff, frequent opportunities to practice emotional self-regulation strategies throughout the day, use of quality resources to help with anxiety and regulation – all of these measures are important alternatives to the sole reliance on suspension. Children in OOHC, especially high school students, do not want to be treated differently from their classmates, and therefore need opportunities to engage with support people in a safe, private and confidential way.
- Regular meetings of the team around the child to plan shared consistent approaches (i.e., a whole of team approach) are also an effective measure. A trusting and secure relationship can be built with a readily available person (a key worker) attuned to the child’s socio-emotional needs at school. The key worker needs access to ongoing training and support to enable them to continue doing this hard work, as well as also having the opportunity to share small successes.
- Access to classes with smaller groups of children where the focus is on social and emotional skill development/play skills (aimed at the child’s level of development rather than chronological age), may assist meeting unmet student needs that impact on classroom and playground behaviour. Offering a safe nurturing room and garden space at school, staffed by a small team of school support workers who act as garden instructors and teach mindfulness and grounding skills, as a path toward emotional healing for children is another effective strategy.
- Barnardos South Coast STAR-IC program is an example of this type of targeted behaviour support approach, including providing trained school support staff to work with children in schools.

3. Local behaviour support approaches that help young people receiving child protection services to remain engaged in at school

- Our SENS Family Referral Service worked with Rockdale Hub and Green Square behavioural school in their set up stage and have had students in both their programs:
 - *Rockdale Hub (one stop shop concept)* - The Hub offers playgroups, family support, parenting information, transition to school activities and resources, child and family health services and support for families with children with additional needs, as well as links with childcare, pre-schools and Rockdale Public School.
 - In our view there should be a model of this type in each area of need across the State.
 - *Green Square behavioural school:* Yudi Gunyi School caters for students from 10-16 years of age who need additional support with a range of behaviour and mental health needs. The School supports equip them and their referring school with skills and strategies to experience success in a mainstream school.
 - The School, in collaboration with Health & Allied Health has developed a new model of care, creating a set of universal teaching skills, collegial support channels and clinical services to improve outcomes for children, ages 4-17, and their families.
 - The scope of services and support use agreed common-language to collaborate, is trauma-informed and grounded principles of neuroscience.
 - A team including psychiatrist, senior psychologist, psychologist, paediatrician, occupational therapist, speech pathologist, social worker, art therapist, nurse and specialist teachers all work together to develop teaching practices and approaches to wellbeing that is innovative and integrative.
 - Our Family Referral Service Program Manager provides Social Work Supervision to the social worker in Green Square school to ensure trauma informed practice is being maintained.
- Services that provide case management and case worker services, e.g. an independent person (case worker) to act as a mediator between the school and parents in order to promote parent/school

communication and to prevent a communication breakdown (e.g. Barnardos Beyond Barbed Wire program, Western NSW).

- Aboriginal focus camp “Warrior Spirit”, a partnership between Parkes High School and TRYP consultancy, took a group of Aboriginal children who were repeatedly suspended on camp. They went bush and did empowerment, self esteem activities and taught them Aboriginal culture and customs. Uncle Colin - who runs the camps - also provides mentoring ongoing for some time on their return to Sydney. Anecdotally the camp is getting good results.
- PCYC NSW has programs for students who have been suspended and provide an important alternative to school suspension. Students respond well and often stay in touch with the service post suspension.
- We further note that:
 - In our experience ‘in school’ suspensions don’t work - due to a lack of constant supervision young people (who do not care about the consequences) often abscond.
 - Network Specialists (who work with schools around children with complex needs) need to engage with childcare centres that are feeder schools to primary schools and identify children in need of support at any early stage then put an educational and social support system around them as soon as they enter primary school. The same process should be used with students transitioning from primary school to high school.
 - Flexibility and help to navigate vocational pathways are needed for older children as an alternative to and pathway out of school education.

4. The gaps, barriers and challenges for caseworkers/providers working with schools to support student engagement in learning and resolution of behaviour issues

- In our experience the challenges include:
 - Increasing frequency of suspensions
 - High rates of long suspensions
 - Poor and limited options prior to and following suspension
 - Staff hours/capacity to provide the necessary support to ensure a positive outcome
 - Negative attitude towards school and education staff instilled in children from parents/carers
 - Stigma, racism and discrimination
 - Homelessness and the transitory nature of accommodation
 - Domestic and family violence
- We note the following gaps:
 - Education staff need to understand and be trained in trauma behaviours so they are able identify children in need of support early.
 - Schools need the flexibility to include programs in school (such as FRS and Reconnect) to work to support schools and families in school and through home visits.
 - More focus is needed on engaging NGO services in Individual/Personalised Learning Plans.

5. The impact of trauma on behaviour and the need for a holistic approach (including wrap around services)

- Schools are the central touchpoint for all children and families. They are a place where there can be constant institutional engagement for vulnerable children and families, compared to their contact with the health and child protection systems which often only occurs at crisis points.

- The impact of adverse early childhood experiences, layered trauma and undiagnosed learning disorder/disability issues on a child creates challenges for our caseworkers who are working with schools to support student engagement in learning and resolution of behaviour issues.
- In particular, we would highlight the heightened level of vulnerability due to the impact of trauma on behaviour, and the consequent need for wraparound services for two cohorts of children we support:

Children with child protection concerns but still living with family/extended family:

- Our Yurungai Child and Family Services aims to prevent family breakdown and to keep children from entering the OOHC system. It is not uncommon for children as young as five in the vulnerable families we partner with to be suspended and punished for aggressive behaviours. Often the child perceives the school as their safe place as they are given structure and consistency compared to their chaotic home environment.
- By removing the child from what they regard as a safe place (school) and the relative stability it brings and placing them back in a home environment which may not be safe, stable or supportive, the child is placed at further risk. This reinforces in the child that no relationship is safe and can lead to a breakdown in relationships rather than the strengthening of relationships with the child and the child's family/carer.
- Children in these families are often living where there is violence and drug use, and where their needs are not being responded to. Because of this brain development is can be seriously impacted. As a result their responses to situations are altered and are different from a child who has not experienced these adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Therefore, educational responses to this behaviour needs to be different.
- Trauma also impacts children developmentally; for example, children may struggle with understanding and expressing language. They may have difficulties with attention and concentration, difficulties with making sense of and retaining new information, and learning difficulties. This can be attributed to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or simply bad behaviour. However, without a holistic and considered response the child continues through the system without the most appropriate support.
- Children with an ACE may require support from paediatrician, occupational therapists (due to sensory processing issues), and speech therapists. These services and supports are not available universally to children over the age of five, therefore school staff are in a challenging position.
- There are significant gaps in service delivery for children with a disability who have experienced trauma. Often the school response is to view the behaviour through a disability lens rather than a trauma lens, and to exclude the child rather than engage services and family in addressing the concerns, especially when addressing sexualised behaviours.
- An important message for schools is that the impact of trauma comes in different shapes and forms – some can be 'big' behaviour such as melt down and/or violence, while other behaviours are easily overlooked because they are less visible such as withdrawal and avoidance in the classroom.
- In early school years one of the biggest challenges is the parents' lack of trust in the system due to their previous and existing interaction with Departments of Education or Community & Justice. This distrust diminishes the parents' ability to engage with services early and to work as part of a team in supporting their children, especially during the transition period into Kindergarten.
- Due to the parents' own experiences of trauma and whatever vulnerabilities that the parents were experiencing at the time, there is often a sense of denial when the school raises concerns

about their children in relation to learning and developmental ability. This makes it difficult for the school to engage well with parents, especially during the Kindergarten year. Kindergarten and infants teachers need more support on how best to engage parents on those topics when discussing potential learning difficulties or disability issues. The method of engagement must be trauma informed with the understanding that these parents would have experienced different forms of trauma and vulnerabilities.

Children living in OOHC:

- Caseworkers report that schools lack understanding about why a child living in OOHC is behaving in a certain way and the relationship to trauma. A shift in school culture from “*what’s wrong with you?*” to “*what has happened to you?*” could support a deeper understanding of children’s needs.
- While there is an understandable requirement within the education system for children to have a formal diagnosis in order to access additional funding, for some children, and especially for young children living in OOHC, there may be no formal diagnosis and accompanying label available to them.
- Caseworkers report that there is also confusion within schools between trauma-related behaviour and autism traits. For example, the school may attribute the behaviour to a diagnosis of autism; however, Barnardos staff (from their knowledge of the trauma history) may understand the behaviour as trauma related.
- Long suspensions are particularly punitive as they are not an effective means to manage the behaviour of children in OOHC and do little to provide the child with a positive learning experience. Suspensions and timeouts (in and out of school) result in greater disconnect for the child, damage their sense of belonging, and limit opportunities to build the missing skills.
- Children in kinship care (i.e., who are living with extended family), are a less visible sub-cohort but still highly vulnerable. Assumptions are often made about the level and type of support they need, based on the fact that the child is still with family. In addition, there may be desire on the part of staff to not intrude, which can then result in less service intensity. These families may also have significant trust issues, as the parents or relatives may themselves have been in OOHC and also experienced childhood abuse and impoverished school experiences.

6. Our experience of teachers’ and schools’ level of awareness around the multitude of issues and experiences for children who have experienced early childhood trauma

- “*Child protection is everyone’s business*” is often not embedded as a part of the ethos of schools. Building teachers’/schools’ understanding of the heightened vulnerability and unmet educational needs of children exposed to early childhood trauma, and especially for particular cohorts of children, will be vital in gaining their support for the implementation of the new Strategy. We note our experiences about the current level of awareness among teachers and schools regarding the cohorts of children we see in our services:

Children with child protection concerns but still living with family/extended family:

- In our overall experience, many teachers are doing their best; however, it is the local leadership (school principals) and the priority they give to engaging vulnerable children and young people who drive the uptake of trauma-informed practice in schools.

- School staff frequently expect that education is solely for classroom teaching only – the child should be ready to learn, and they do not see it as their role to engage children and families in strategies to manage trauma in schooling.
- We understand that current trauma training offered by DoE is online and self-paced. The anecdotal feedback from teachers to our caseworkers is that it is theory-based and does not provide practical strategies for engaging children and young people impacted by trauma in their learning. Teachers have commented that whilst they should be released from face-to-face teaching to complete this module, many are having to do the module in their own time as principals are not prioritising completion.

Children living in OOHC:

- The school may have expectations of the student that they are developmentally unable to meet.
- There may be limited opportunities for students to access curriculum that they enjoy (e.g., arts, sport and music) which would help them with emotional self-regulation.
- The level of teacher and school awareness of the impact of early childhood trauma on behaviour for children living in OOHC is mixed. Some schools are exemplary and go ‘over and above’ to engage with Barnardos caseworkers and carers, whilst others are not as responsive.
- A school in the Illawarra region, for example, took up the offer of individualised training in trauma and practical strategies offered by the child’s Barnardos program manager and case manager and later invited Barnardos’ Adoption team back to inform the whole teaching staff on managing trauma response. This open and collaborative approach contrasts to other examples where the school routinely sends the child home whenever behaviour escalates.
- Due to the varying level of awareness among schools of the heightened vulnerability to poor educational outcomes for children living in OOHC, our caseworkers need to match the school and the child’s needs carefully.
- Overall, our caseworkers’ experience with new educational placements is that most schools start with good intent. Still, the difficulty arises when other parents complain about the behaviour of the child in OOHC and the impact on other children. The thwarting of this initial positive intent underscores the need for timely service provision at the point of need, from the moment schools become aware they have a student who is living in OOHC to smooth their educational journey.

7. The importance of strong collaboration between caseworkers/providers and schools to support student engagement, resolve behavioural issues to prevent suspension, poor attendance and part exemptions

- The case studies in **Attachment A** provide two salient examples of strong collaboration between Barnardos Western NSW caseworkers and schools to support student engagement, and resolve behavioural issues to prevent suspension, poor attendance and part exemptions.

Please do not hesitate to contact Dr Robert Urquhart, Head of Knowledge, Outcomes & Research on rurquhart@barnardos.org.au, tel (02) 9218 2392 or mobile 0431 404 199 if you require further information on our feedback.

Yours sincerely,



Elizabeth Cox
Acting Chief Executive Officer and Executive Leader, Practice Quality
Barnardos Australia

Attachment 1: Case studies

All names have been changed and pseudonyms used.

1. Learning Centre partners with school to support successful school engagement

OE - Aboriginal child age 6 years old in Kindergarten.

Barnardos Western NSW Beyond Barbed Wire Program (mentoring program for mothers who are leaving the correctional system).

Barnardos Western NSW Wellington Yalmambirra Learning Centre.

OE lives with his single mother and younger sister (4). They are often back and forth living with Nan however recently moved in their own home.

At the beginning of the year OE's mother and grandmother were incarcerated, OE and his sister were living in another town with their Father until their Nan was released, they then stayed with Nan until Mum was released and are now currently living with mum.

During school holidays OE and sister stay with Dad, when they return home OE's behaviour is quite chaotic and disruptive. Once OE gets back into routine with bedtime, meals, school with the support of the Barnardos Western NSW Wellington Yalmambirra Learning Centre, his behaviour starts to settle, this usually takes 3 to 4 weeks.

Despite all the chaos in OE's homelife, he is now thriving at school. OE's reading level has increased dramatically since the start of the year, the teachers aide from the school who provides us with the children's reader stated she can see the improvements in reading coming from the students who attend the Learning Centre, especially OE, he started the year on reading level 2 and has ended term 4 on level 12. OE requires little to no help with his homework and can do single digit math equations both plus and minus on his own. Feedback from his teacher also stated towards the end of this term OE has been much more co-operative in class and has had fewer outbursts.

2. Breakfast Club and Learning Centre partners with schools and Department of Community and Justice to support large Aboriginal family with complex needs

Aboriginal family with five children

Barnardos Western NSW Wellington Breakfast Club.

Barnardos Western NSW Wellington Yalmambirra Learning Centre.

Barnardos Wellington Breakfast Club and Yalmambirra Learning Centre (YLC) worked with 43 Aboriginal children throughout the 6 months to December 2019. The children in the YLC program often come from large families with complex needs as illustrated by the following case example.

We have been working with an Aboriginal family of 5 in conjunction with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, local public and high school and other local services. Historical trauma,

unemployment, poor education and intergenerational disadvantage present, at times, as significant barriers to change.

Mum, Dad and the three children have experienced severe trauma, grief and loss. This trauma has impacted the family's daily lives and the parenting capacity of Mum and Dad being able to provide a safe and secure home environment. Mum and Dad have a history of substance abuse and Domestic Violence in the home. We are currently working with Mum and Dad in our Targeted Early Intervention program, the oldest daughter is engaged in the Reconnect program and the two younger siblings are engaged in our Yalmambirra Learning Centre and Breakfast Club. With wrap around services being provided along with planned case work for this family, we have been successful in engaging the oldest daughter (15yrs) with re-entry into school as well as provide the resources for additional tutoring through our online, Need-a-Tutor program. This will enable her to catch up on her 12-18 months of missed schooling. The youngest two siblings also participate with the online tutoring program, along with our learning centre we have been able to assist in improving their educational outcomes.

By engaging the three younger children in the Breakfast Club we have been able to improve their school attendance, assist with personal hygiene and build on their self confidence and self esteem. Mum and Dad engagement in the Targeted Early Intervention program assisted them to build on their parenting capacity through parenting skills group work.