

**SNAPSHOT
Educational Engagement
of Children and Young People
in Out of Home Care in NSW**

Preliminary Findings

**Association of Children's Welfare Agencies
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Foreword

ACWA's report suggests that children in out-of-home care in New South Wales suffer from forms of institutional educational neglect that very often disadvantage children in care around the world. The narrow focus of child welfare agencies on preventing child maltreatment and providing stable out-of-home care too often results in a lack of attention to the overall well-being of children in care, including the appropriateness and quality of the education they receive. Likewise, schools and education systems too often either ignore the needs of children in care, or, more problematically, actively exclude them from receiving the help they need. ACWA's report highlights the need for greater attention from and coordination between the child welfare and education systems when it comes to the proper education of children in care. ACWA's recommendations follow logically from the report's findings and are consistent with reform efforts around the world.

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Executive Summary

Educational outcomes for children in care are frequently impacted by complex personal histories and challenges¹. Many facets of disadvantage and experiences of trauma occur prior to children and young people entering child protection services and can often persist once in care, negatively influencing their educational trajectory, and in turn their future life outcomes.

The implementation of the Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW², resulted in the transition of services to the NGO Out of Home Care (OOHC) in NSW. One of the effects of this was to change the roles and relationships between the schools and the NGO caseworker and Community Services (within the Department of Family and Community Services). Relationship and capacity need to be developed for these three entities to work together in education support planning in order to achieve positive educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

ACWA's data snapshot³ from a small-scale exploratory survey of NSW service providers gives some indications of the level of engagement in education by children and young people living in OOHC. Key findings from this study are:

- Of the 2,581 school aged children and young people included in the survey one in five students in the sample were absent during the survey period, including more than one in three residential care students. Of particular concern is the risk this presents of producing and exacerbating disadvantage, given that students living in OOHC may be performing below their grade level, over-represented in special education, and less likely to progress to post-

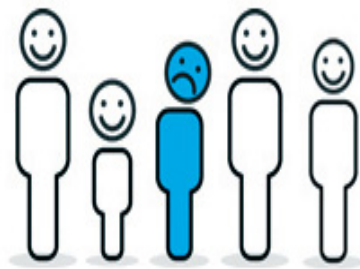
¹ AIHW (2015). *Educational outcomes for children in care: linking 2013 child protection and NAPLAN data*. Cat. no. CWS 54. Canberra: AIHW; O'Higgins, A., Sebba, J., & Luke, N. (2015). *What is the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children. An international systematic review*. Oxford: University of Oxford.

² The Hon James Wood AO QC. (2008). *Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW*. NSW: State of NSW.

³ ACWA wishes to acknowledge its members who identified the issue, then agreed to participate in a survey, and provided feedback to Dr Wendy Foote on the preliminary draft survey questions. Barbara Taylor and Kat Kicuroski (social work students) administered the survey tool. ACWA also acknowledges the research assistance of Gillian Brannigan, Melody Stack and Lottie Harris, who completed the fieldwork and preliminary data collation and analysis for the consultation; and Dr Robert Urquhart for supervising the analysis and compilation of the research.

- secondary education than their non-OOHC peers⁴.
- Close to one third of our sample, or 864 students in care, did not have an Individual Education Plan. This is in spite of the requirement that all children should have an individual educational plan prepared for them within 30 days of entering care, that is reviewed annually by the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) and their responsible caseworker.

These findings indicate cause for concern regarding the educational experiences of children and young people in care in NSW and the need for reliable data and increased targeted support for this comparatively small cohort of students who have very specific and identified educational needs. Urgent action is needed for an integrated system-wide approach to ensure their educational progress is monitored and they achieve their full academic potential.



1 in 5 school aged children and young people in care were absent from school during the Snapshot period

The ACWA Snapshot Survey

The Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies (ACWA), as the peak body for the child and family welfare sector in NSW, is committed to promoting better understanding of the extent and scope of issues facing highly vulnerable children and young people within the education system.

At the time of planning the research, no distinction was made between students in care and their non-OOHC peers in publicly available NSW education data, making any accurate comparisons difficult.

As a first step towards addressing this information gap, ACWA sought information from members (NGO OOHC service providers) about children and young people’s inclusion in education to provide a ‘snapshot’ of the broad level of educational engagement of students in care. First, an online survey asked ACWA members providing OOHC services to respond for all children in their care during the period 25-29 July 2016 (week 3 in the third term of the school year). Follow up semi-structured interviews with survey respondents were conducted later to elaborate on the online survey responses, and further investigate practitioners’ experiences in interacting with the education system.

Background

The significant positive impact that high quality education can have on the life trajectory of a child is almost universally accepted, and that facilitating access to education for students in care is critical for their future health, welfare and wellbeing.

⁴ Queensland DCCSDS (2013). *Improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care*. Practice Paper. Queensland, DCCSDS.

Education promotes improved health and wellbeing, builds positive social skills, substantially increases the likelihood of securing a professional career, is critical in breaking the cycle of poverty and is a powerful driver of national economic growth and development⁵.

Children and young people in care need to be provided with suitable opportunities that are tailored to their capabilities and experiences prior to, and during their school years, to ensure their educational needs are met.

However, despite acceptance of the importance of education and the rights of children to access appropriate educational opportunities, regardless of their living arrangement, students in care regularly and uniformly perform lower, and attend less than their same-age peers. Research has shown that children in care are less likely than other children to continue their education beyond the period of compulsion while being more likely to experience substantial periods of school absence⁶. Other issues found to be more common for children in OOH include spending significant time away from school, behavioural issues, social issues, suspension, expulsion, bullying, early school leaving and leaving without qualifications⁷.

Findings

The snapshot findings are based on survey information provided by 23 ACWA members and 11 follow-up interviews with survey respondents, who reported on 2,581 school aged children and young people in their care.⁸ Whilst not a representative sample, survey responses were received from a broad range of OOH service agencies, including those providing specific services for Aboriginal children and young people as well as those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Responses were also received from agencies based in rural, remote and urban areas as well as from both smaller and larger agencies.⁹

Data collected from both the survey and interviews highlighted a number of concerns in relation to the education of the children and young people in care. These include a seemingly significantly higher

⁵ See <http://www.schoolsandhealth.org/Pages/education.aspx>

⁶ Osborn, A. L., & Bromfield, L. (2007). *Outcomes for children and young people in care*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies; Townsend, M. (2011). *Are we making the grade. The education of children and young people in out-of-home care*. E-published Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, Southern Cross University, Lismore.

⁷ Australian Institute of Family Studies, Chapin Hall Center for Children University of Chicago, & New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services. (2015). *Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of children and young people in Out-of-Home care in NSW. Wave 1 baseline statistical report*. Sydney: N.S.W. Department of Family and Community Services.

⁸ Of the 15,856 children in statutory OOH in NSW, 53.5% or 8,078 were placed in NGO care as at 30 June 2016. Approximately eight out of ten (6,396) of these children were aged 5-17. Of the 6,396 compulsory school-aged children in statutory OOH with NGOs on that date, 73.7% were in general and intensive foster care; 9.2% were in residential care; 15.6% were in relative and Aboriginal Kinship care; and 1.4% in other types of care. (FACS Statistics, Objective 1, Dashboard 8, *NGO Partners - Breaking disadvantage*).

⁹ 63.7 per cent of the survey sample was living in general foster care (GFC), 10.3 per cent in intensive foster care (IFC), 16.5 per cent in residential care and 9.3 per cent within kinship care arrangements. The relatively higher survey response rate for residential care providers, when compared to the overall distribution of other types of placement may be due to their early involvement in and awareness of the survey project, which directly arose out of concerns they had raised in the member consultations for the development of a framework for therapeutic out-of-home care in NSW. The lower response rate for children in kinship care may relate to lack of funded casework and hence fewer number of member agencies who are able to fund doing this work ("Kinship care 'drop and run' placements leave children at risk: DHHS report". Neelima Choahan. *The Age*, 11 June 2017)

number of absences than the average rate reported for their non-OOHC peers¹⁰, and the need for better-informed and targeted support for these students as indicated through the number of students without Individual Education Plans.

Reported rate of absence

One of the primary goals of the snapshot, in the absence of official data, was to provide some indication of the average absence rate of school-aged students in OOHC at a point in time. Respondents were asked to report how many students in their care were absent during the selected week. Survey responses indicate that as of week three, term three 2016, 537 children and young people in care were absent from school or 20.8 per cent of the surveyed population.

Table 1. Number and percentage of children and young people surveyed who were absent from school during the survey period.

	Residential Care	Intensive Foster Care	General Foster Care	Kinship Care	Other	Total
<i>Total no. absent</i>	148	29	346	8	6	537
<i>Absence as percent of care type</i>	34.7%	11%	21.1%	3.3%	100%	
Total percent of school aged students in OOHC surveyed absent from school						20.8%

Table 1 shows that 34.7%, or over a third of students within residential care placements, were absent from school at some point during the survey period. The absence rate of children and young people in General Foster Care placements was also relatively high at over 20 per cent (346 students) or 1 in 5.

Reasons for Absence

In order to adequately and appropriately tackle the absence and achievement gaps of children and young people in care, it is critical we have a better understanding of the causes of school absences.

Therefore respondents were also asked to provide reasons for absences for a subsample of up to 10 children and young people within their care. Seven categories were provided for respondents to select including expulsion, suspension, part-attendance agreements, ill health, approved leave, non-enrolment and chronic non-engagement. Respondents reported on reasons for absence for 269 children within their care.

Approximately 14.5 per cent of the total absences were attributed to part attendance arrangements (n=39) that are often enacted by the school as a behavioural management strategy. Other causes for absence of a similar proportion were suspension at 14.1 per cent (n=38)¹¹ and ill health 15.2 per cent

¹⁰ From 2006 to 2016 (Semester 1), the average attendance rate for NSW government schools has been broadly stable between 92.0 per cent and 92.9 per cent (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, *CESE Bulletin Issue 18*). In 2014, 85.7 per cent of Aboriginal students attended school on an average school day (NSW Department of Education, *2015 Aboriginal Students in NSW School Annual Report*). The data does not permit average attendance rates for students living in OOHC to be calculated separately from their non-OOHC peers. Explanations for the absences are not identified in the data. Methods of monitoring student attendance vary between schools.

¹¹ In NSW in 2015, 3.8% of students received short suspensions of up to four school days, and 1.6%

(n=41). The latter concerning rate of reported absence due to ill-health is perhaps unsurprising in that health status and educational outcomes including school engagement hugely overlap for all children and in complex ways. Students living in OOHC display higher rates of developmental, mental and physical health problems than their non-OOHC peers, and in general children with greater health needs are more likely to miss school and/or have poorer educational outcomes.¹²

Approximately 6.7 per cent of children and young people (n=18) were on approved leave, and similarly 6.7 (n=17) of children and young people were absent for other reasons (not elsewhere specified), while 2.2 per cent (n=6) had been expelled.¹³ Of these smaller percentages the most concerning is that 7.4 per cent of students in care (n=20) were not enrolled in a school.¹⁴ Further research, not within the scope of this snapshot, is required to interpret this finding.

According to the surveyed respondents, chronic disengagement was the most common reason for absence with over a third or 33.5% (n=90) of all students absent during the survey period considered chronically disengaged from school.

In the follow-up telephone interviews, a subsample of respondents was asked about the reasons they reported chronic non-engagement as a cause for student absence. Social or performance anxiety was the most common cause caseworkers attributed to chronic non-engagement related absence. Significant home-life and school disruptions as well as long periods out of the classroom are common occurrences for children in care and often lead to detrimental effects on the young person's cognitive development,¹⁵ which then become evident in school settings. Caseworker respondents commented that children within their care were regularly achieving well below their grade level, which caseworkers saw as increasing the child's fears of being singled out by teachers and/or mocked by peers. Many workers also reported that they had put in place a range of strategies to support children's learning at home and in the classroom, but that many schools still lacked information on the impact of trauma on children living in OOHC, particularly influencing their response and ability to manage challenging behaviours in the school. This finding was echoed in the recent NSW Ombudsman Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools¹⁶, which reported that many school staff did not have the necessary skills to support students with complex trauma backgrounds but emphasised the need "for an increased focus on trauma-informed approaches".¹⁷

received long suspensions of up to twenty school days. (NSW CESE, *Suspensions and Expulsions 2015*). Suspension data is not reported separately for students living in OOHC from their non-OOHC peers.

¹² Nathanson, D and Tzioumi D. (2007). Health needs of Australian children living in out-of-home care. *J Paeds & Child Health*. **43**, 695-699; Horwitz, SM et al. (2000). Specialized Assessments for Children in Foster Care. *Pediatrics*. **106**(1), 59-66; Kaltner, M & Rissel, K. (2011). Health of Australian Children in out-of-home care: Needs and carer recognition. *J Paeds & Child Health*. **47**, 122-126.

¹³ In total 325 students in public schools were expelled across NSW in 2015 (NSW CESE, *Suspensions and Expulsions 2015*). Expulsion data is not reported separately for students living in OOHC from their non-OOHC peers.

¹⁴ In 2016, for students aged 5 to 17 inclusive, the participation rate in NSW is close to 100 per cent (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, *CESE Bulletin Issue 19*). Participation rates for students living in OOHC of compulsory school age are not reported separately.

¹⁵ McLean, S. (2016). *The Effect of Trauma on the Brain Development of Children. Evidence-Based Principles for Supporting the Recovery of Children in Care*. CFCA Practitioner Resource. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

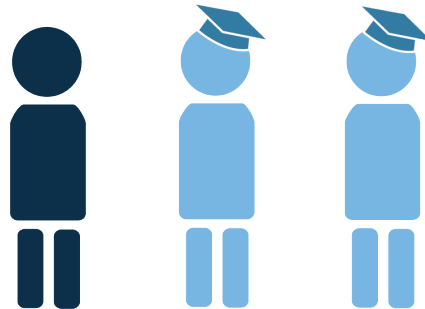
¹⁶ NSW Ombudsman. (2017). *NSW Ombudsman Inquiry into behaviour management in schools*. NSW: State of NSW.

¹⁷ See also Wall, L., Higgins, D., & Hunter, C. (2016). *Trauma-informed care in child/family welfare services* (CFCA Paper No. 37). Melbourne: Child Family Community Australia Information Exchange, Australian Institute of Family Studies; for the increasing recognition of trauma-informed approaches across a range of sectors and services.

Individual Education Plans

All children that enter into out-of-home care and are enrolled in a school must receive an Individual Education Plan (IEP) within 30 days of their change of placement. To have an IEP is a requirement of the Department of Education and is to be developed by the school principal in collaboration with carer, caseworker, child or young person and other, appropriate stakeholders¹⁸.

The purpose of education plans is to identify and manage the academic, social and behavioural needs of children and young people in care. The Department of Education's Out-of-Home Care in Government Schools – Education Plan Procedures document outlines the content and delivery requirements of IEPs.



1 in 3 school aged children and young people in care did not have an Individual Education Plan

Of the 2,581 children and young people reported in this survey, only 1,717 or 66 per cent had current and complete IEPs. Given that education plans are a crucial part of a young person's overall care plan, the low numbers of existing and/or active IEPs is concerning.

This finding is similar to that of research conducted by NSW Community Services, as part of their Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study, (POCLS) which reported that a high number of children in care did not have an education plan.¹⁹

In the study's follow-up interviews, some respondents perceived education plans to be under-utilised and under-valued by schools. Considerable variation between schools in their willingness to develop and implement IEPs was also reported by interviewees as a major hindrance to the educational progression of children and young people in care.

"They [education plans] add no value unless the school is involved and engaged."
(Interviewee 2)

¹⁸ See <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/out-of-home-care-in-government-schools-policy>

¹⁹ One quarter of caregivers of 6–11 year olds and 30 per cent of caregivers of 12–17 year olds reported that an OOH education plan was in place for the child (Australian Institute of Family Studies, Chapin Hall Center for Children University of Chicago, & New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services, *op cit.*)

Case workers in the telephone follow-up interviews reported several areas where they perceived the approach to developing education plans for students living in OOHC could be strengthened and made more consistent:

- Using a strengths based approach to the writing of education plans;
- Better communication between school staff and care teams on the application of the plan;
- Teacher training on writing constructive education plans;
- The inclusion of extra-curricular and social activities in plans; and
- Promotion of a more collaborative approach to plans by involving all stakeholders in the students care, throughout the life span of the plan.

Case workers reported a lack of clarity of roles in some schools. For example Interviewee 2 commented that their agency had often experienced cases in which the teachers that were in direct contact with the child or young person did not know an education plan was in place for their student, and particularly did not know *“what their role in it is”*.

Ways forward

Immediate action is needed to fulfill the NSW Government’s commitment to meet the educational needs of children in OOHC. While this research is of a small-scale and exploratory nature, and included public, independent and Catholic systemic school settings, the findings nevertheless suggest that absentee and participation rates for students living in OOHC were of concern. Further research including more systematic and detailed monitoring of their educational outcomes is warranted; in order for the State education system and its partners are to better respond to the needs of this cohort. The implementation of high-quality educational planning, based on effective collaboration with child welfare services, stood out as another area where opportunities exist for immediate change.

Based on the findings, and subsequent consultations with its members, ACWA believes there are significant opportunities available for collaboration and capacity building that will promote the education of NSW students in OOHC. Some of these opportunities are briefly discussed below.

Review Individual Education Plans including their implementation

Regional protocols state that the Department of Education is to “lead the development, implementation, monitoring and review of education plans,” and this responsibility is to sit with the school principal. Our survey respondents however, reported repeated incidences where they perceived that this role had been left up to them as individual caseworkers. Interviews also highlighted inconsistencies and gaps in the understanding the responsibilities of NGO caseworkers, carers and school staff at various stages in the education process, which hinder effective collaboration. For example, enrolling a student into a new school, and receiving information on the achievement of the student through school reports etc. A review of the policies and practices involved in the design and implementation of individual Education Plans is essential in standardising the practice of educational planning across the state.

Collection of OOHC specific education data in NSW

Our participants were concerned about the lack of basic data to build evidence informed approaches in NSW. There is currently limited data on the educational outcomes and engagement of children and young people in care in Australia. The NSW Department of Education’s Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation collects invaluable data on various determinants of educational success across the state but currently does not differentiate students based on OOHC status and care type and as such, trends for the small cohort of students in OOHC cannot be revealed.

The Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools²⁰ revealed that only 11 per cent of the surveyed children in residential care in NSW had been identified as so by the Department of Education's data system.

It is crucial that schools and service providers have access to this individual level information to appropriately plan, monitor and support students in care. Additionally, having access to aggregate data on the attendance and suspension rates, social and behavior needs of students and the academic outcomes of children and young people in care will provide a necessary evidence base, essential to driving positive changes in the future.

Consideration of promising evidence informed programs and practices

These opportunities could be exploited by strengthening key interventions already in place (including the use of IEPs and relevant policies and procedures and better data collection). Consideration should also be given to drawing on lessons learned from promising evidence informed programs in other jurisdictions, where they may be usefully adapted to the NSW context.

Examples of these promising programs that build capacity include the appointment of four School Principals to lead regional LOOKOUT Centres in Victoria, which draws on the Virtual School model in England. The use of highly experienced foster carers (often with some experience of working in educational settings) who were trained and employed part-time to act as "Education Champions" to provide effective support to other carers, as was undertaken in the London Fostering Achievement Programme, may be another cost effective and customised way of improving outcomes.²¹

Recommendations

That the NSW government ensure that:

1. There is a governance mechanism established that will provide oversight of the development of processes that will ensure the provision of education for children in OOHC. This will involve independent authorities, government departments and NGO representatives.
2. There is the development of a plan that ensures the education needs of children in OOHC in NSW are met.
3. Financial provisions are made so that all children can have access to appropriate education, regardless of school or education type.
4. There is a review of policy and practice in regard to Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and that there is robust monitoring and data collection established in regard to these plans with a view to ensuring all children and young people in care in NSW have a well supported IEP that includes information on their extra-curricular school activities as well as academic progress and educational engagement.
5. There is a collection of systematic and regular data on the educational outcomes and attendance of children and young people in statutory OOHC in NSW by the Department of Education that is made available to relevant stakeholders through a regular annual reporting process.

²⁰ NSW Ombudsman, *op. cit.*

²¹ Sebba, J., Luke, N., Rees, A., Plumridge, G., Rodgers, L., Hafesji, K. and Clare Rowsome-Smith (2016). *Evaluation of the London Fostering Achievement Programme*. Oxford: The Rees Centre. See also <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/news/2016/praise-positive-impact-fostering-networks-education-champions>