



ACWA 2018

Education and Out-of-Home Care Roundtable Report



This report was produced as part of ACWA's Let Them Learn Project

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November 27, 2018

Background

For the past three years, the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) has been working with its members to identify and map the educational experiences of children and young people in care in NSW. ACWA has undertaken this work as part of its *Let Them Learn* project, which aims to improve the learning outcomes of this vulnerable group of students.

The results of research conducted in 2016 formed the basis of ACWA's [2017 Snapshot Report into the educational engagement of children and young people in care in NSW](#). This report found that one in five NSW students in care were absent from school. The reasons provided for the high rate of absence by students in care included ill health, suspension, chronic disengagement and expulsion. Additionally, the report identified that one in three NSW students in care did not have an Independent Education Plan (IEP) despite this being a policy requirement.

Prompted by the findings of this report, and by member concerns around this issue, ACWA convened its first Education and Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) Roundtable on October 17, 2017. Hosted by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), this roundtable brought together key stakeholders.

2018 Roundtable

The second Education and OOHC Roundtable (2018 Roundtable) was jointly convened by ACWA and the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP). Held on November 27, 2018 at the ACYP office, sector leaders and experts were again invited to gather, track progress, consider potential initiatives and discuss the next steps forward in keeping the spotlight on this issue.

The agenda for the 2018 Roundtable included a keynote presentation from Professor Judy Sebba from the Rees Centre at Oxford University on relevant research projects in the United Kingdom (UK), followed by a second keynote presentation by Ian Wren, who is the first principal of a Lookout Centre in Victoria. The Lookout Centre model has been adapted from the 'virtual school' model that is already well established in the UK and was the focus of one of the research projects outlined by Professor Sebba.

These presentations set the tone for an event that looked beyond traditional silos and professional differences across sectors, to the issue of what it might take to develop an effective collaborative approach in NSW that successfully supports students in care, along with other children who need additional supports.

Keynote presentation – Professor Judy Sebba, Rees Centre, Oxford University

Professor Sebba gave a brief overview of the following Rees Centre projects:

- **The Educational Attainment and Progress of Children in Need and Children in Care**
The Educational Attainment research builds on a previous study - [Educational progress of looked after children: Linking care and educational data](#) - and is focused on in-depth interviews with 16 Virtual School Heads (Principals) and the different ways these Principals interact with social care teams.

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- **Reading Together: The Effectiveness of an Enhanced Book-Gifting Intervention for Improving Reading Outcomes for Children in Care**

The Reading Together project is aimed at evaluating supported reading interventions through the provision of fiction and non-fiction books for 7-9 year olds who are children in care and/or children in need. It is also focused on providing specialised training for their parents or carers to assist them to engage in reading with their children. This project has just commenced and is the largest random controlled trial of its kind in the UK, and possibly within the European Union. This project aims to build on findings which demonstrate that foster carers' educational aspirations for those in their care are a key driver for success.

- **Exclusions of Looked After Children from English Secondary Schools**

This longitudinal study will consider the reasons for exclusion of children in care from school, the outcomes by the age of 16 and the perspectives of the involved young people, their foster carers, social workers and designated (OOHC) teachers. National care and education databases will be linked to track the histories of a complete cohort of children in England from 5-16 years.

- **Alex Timpson program on attachment and trauma in schools**

This five-year research program will consider the role of attachment and trauma in children's education. It will support and build the evidence base around staff development on attachment and trauma across a minimum of 300 schools nationally. This training consists of short but continuing professional development of one-day, whole-of-school, training with additional 'emotion coaching'.

- **Evaluation of the Attachment Aware Schools Program**

The Rees Centre evaluated this program in three local authority areas (Bath, Leicestershire and Stoke on Trent) and involved 52 schools, ranging from infant to secondary schools, as well as special and alternative school settings.

This research found that there was a reduction in school exclusions as a result of the program and identified four areas that need to be targeted:

- Initial teacher training;
- Professional development of all school staff;
- Training for School Governors – informed senior leadership is essential; and
- Consistent and related support for children impacted by trauma, which is provided by trained adults (parents, carers and social workers).

The evaluation found that providing a safe space and access to safe adults was particularly helpful. It is hoped this training will be expanded to 300 schools over a five-year period.

Finally, Professor Sebba raised the issue of stability in school and care placements as an important factor for educational success. She also noted that inclusion and participation in extra curricular activities, such as sports, are essential to the wellbeing of students in care but are often too difficult to access.

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The 'Pupil Premium', which is a sum of money directly allocated to the needs of individual children in care and children in need, has remained in place, despite austerity measures in the UK. This has enabled the sustainability of certain models such as the virtual schools and individualised support.

For more information on all of these projects see:
<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/education/>

Keynote presentation – Ian Wren, College Principal, Balit Yurramboi, Doherty's Creek College, Truganina, Victoria

*"Care should be so good we want our children to experience it."
Matt Dunkley, Corporate Director, Children, Young People and Education, Kent, UK*

Ian reflected on the quote above, noting that Matt Dunkley has also commented on the prejudice towards students in care. Ian then provided an overview of the challenges and achievements in adapting the 'Virtual Schools' model from the UK to the Victorian context. Known as 'Lookout Centres', this model is being implemented statewide in Victoria. Ian was appointed to the role of first Lookout Centre Principal in 2015 and commenced establishing the first Lookout Centre in 2016 in south-western Victoria.

The 'launchpad' for the Lookout Centre model in Victoria covers a substantial geographical area that includes the south-western suburbs of Melbourne; major regional centres such as Geelong and Ballarat; coastal and rural farming towns; as well as more remote bush communities across to the South Australian border. A significant indicator of success has been the lack of any expulsions since the introduction of the Lookout Centre in the south-western region of Victoria.

The Lookout Centres also aim to ensure that, if possible, students in care have their educational needs met in mainstream schools, rather than being placed in alternative school settings. Ian noted that, for some students, alternative schools are the best option. He stressed that, in these cases, the Department of Education and Training needs to ensure these alternatives are of very high quality.

Collaborative work across the silos

Ian described the crucial importance of a strong working relationship between the Departments of Education and Training (DET) and Health and Human Services (DHHS) in driving the Lookout Centre project. A high-level Steering Committee has overseen the implementation of the Lookout Centre project, with an Operations Group overseeing the work of individual Lookout Centres. The committed support of the DET Regional Director in south-western Victoria is also critical, along with a well-articulated strategic direction and accountability measures.

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Corporate, public and pushy parents

The concept of the *'corporate parent'* or *'public parent'* has been useful in generating an understanding that students in care are the responsibility of all government and funded non-government agencies that work with them.

Ian took this a step further, saying that, in this context, there is a need to be *'pushy parents'* who will advocate and insist on the best for these children and young people. Creating safe spaces for challenging conversations has also been important to the success of the project.

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

Ian noted that a MoU, known as the 'Out- Of- Home Care Education Commitment - The Partnering Agreement' was refreshed in 2011 and signatories include DHHS, DET, the Centre for Excellence for Child and Family Welfare, Catholic Education, Independent Schools and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.

Lookout Centre Teams

The Lookout Centre teams in each region comprise a Principal, Learning Advisors, a Koori (Aboriginal) Cultural Advisor, a Psychologist Advisor, a Data Analyst Advisor, an Administrative Assistant and, more recently, an Early Childhood Advisor. There are a number of Learning Advisors who have responsibility for a cluster of schools and, along with the Principal and Koori Cultural Advisor, are employed full-time. Other roles are part-time or work across a number of regions, such as the Data Analyst, who works statewide.

Building capacity

Ian noted that long term work and commitment is required to ensure everyone 'steps up' to their responsibilities. He also acknowledged that senior leadership at School Principal level has been integral to gaining the necessary cooperation for the Lookout Centre initiative. Initial work to build capacity has included confirming that every school has a designated OOHC teacher; providing trauma-informed training for education support staff; training for teachers and education support staff in meeting certain procedures; and defining clear roles and responsibilities, such as minute taking and annual education training for DHHS staff.

The Lookout Centre project has introduced an initiative to acknowledge good work, with OOHC awards for schools and individual staff members. It has also been useful to work collaboratively with other schemes, such as the [Navigator Program](#) (a three-month intensive support program for disengaged youth between 12-17, which is delivered by community agencies). Working closely with Aboriginal organisations has also proved essential, and the need to work closely with early childhood practitioners and providers has resulted in additional funding and focus in this area.

Data collection and information sharing

Data collection and information sharing are crucial components to the Lookout Centre approach, alongside the preparation of quality documentation. A review of Individual Education Plans revealed a need for substantial improvements in terms of content and clarity regarding individual needs and solutions. Ian also noted that Educational Needs Assessments (ENAs) are useful, but also need to be brought to the table alongside other relevant data and information.

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It is also important to be cautious about relying on the data that is presented, as it may not reflect the true situation. For example, enrolment might mean attendance one day a week when the goal is genuine enrolment and attendance.

Ian acknowledged that sharing data and information can be very confronting for many, especially given privacy and confidentiality concerns. The Lookout Centre teams have needed to reassure and encourage best practice in the area of information sharing, and data collection, to ensure the child's or young person's needs are placed at the centre of decision making. However, he also made the point that, to resolve educational issues for students in care, there must be an ability to drill down to track how they are doing individually and collectively.

Hope is not a strategy

Ian made the point that 'hope' is not a strategy and it is not enough to hope that good policy will lead to good practice and outcomes. Solutions must be planned and proactive, and there is a need to keep 'stepping up' to achieve the success of the UK model.

Essential components

Ian said the following three components are essential to a successful model:

- All the stakeholders are at the table;
- Robust governance structures are in place;
- A process is decided to reach agreement on the model that will be applied.

A copy of Ian Wren's presentation is available [here](#).

Local Contributions

As part of the roundtable, a series of updates were also provided by stakeholders, including Andrew Johnson, the Advocate for Children and Young People; Judge Peter Johnstone, President of the NSW Children's Court; and Lisa Alonso-Love, Executive Director, Learning and Wellbeing, Department of Education.

A copy of Judge Johnstone's presentation is available [here](#).

Following these local contributions, there was a roundtable discussion involving Steve Kinmond, NSW Deputy Ombudsman and Community and Disability Services Commissioner; Tahn O'Brien, Their Futures Matter; Louise Coe, Office of the Children's Guardian; Daniel Barakate, Department of Family and Community Services; April Deering, Ministry of Health; and Gillian Brannigan, ACWA.

Ways forward

The information presented by Professor Sebba and Ian Wren, along with the presentations and discussions that followed, clearly demonstrate that a more rigorous and evidence-based approach is needed to tackle educational disadvantage experienced not only by children and young people in care, but vulnerable children and young people in general.



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In this regard, ACWA notes that the September 2017 report by the Legislative Council into the 'Education of students with a disability or special needs in NSW' made 39 recommendations. In addition, the NSW Ombudsman's August 2017 report to Parliament, relating to his 'Inquiry into behaviour management in schools', also made 39 recommendations in regard to better supporting vulnerable children in school settings.

Against this background, it is essential that strong and effective governance arrangements are established that involve key stakeholders working together to review what should be the major areas of focus, the related strategies, and the outcomes, that we should all be working towards.

In this regard, we note the existing Cross Agency OOHC and Education Committee, which is convened by ACWA, meets on a quarterly basis to share information and discuss issues relating to the educational support of children and young people in care. This group is made up of representatives from the Department of Education, the Department of Family and Community Services, AbSec, CREATE, Their Futures Matter, and Catholic and Independent Schools.

However, for the reasons outlined above, it is ACWA's view that establishing a group with broader representation and a greater capacity to set future direction, is essential to achieving effective change in this area of practice.

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