

JULY 2020

Delivering better outcomes for children: A statement from the Vulnerable Children and Young People Collaborative Sector Group

In March this year, ACWA convened the Vulnerable Children and Young People Collaborative Sector Working Group to address critical issues affecting children in light of COVID 19 and the imperatives of social distancing. The group identified the need to build connections between the community and education sector to help promote positive educational outcomes and using data to identify and prompt action for those children and families in most need of support.

These issues are not new. COVID-19 has simultaneously exposed the fault-lines with siloed systems and the genuine desire of stakeholders to work more collaboratively to improve outcomes for children and their families. The working group sought advice from stakeholders from early childhood education centres, schools and the broader services sector, to articulate a modest reform agenda that will build on the many examples of good practice that have emerged in this unique period.

Simultaneously, the working group was aware of ACWA's advocacy around the establishment of a standing committee of government and NFP stakeholders that would consider critical practice and policy challenges relating to meeting the educational needs of vulnerable children, along with tracking the related outcomes, to ensure that solid progress is being made. This proposal is currently being considered.

Key service system reform priorities identified by the working group include:

- Establishing overarching governance arrangements that deliver efficient, genuinely integrated, and outcome-focused responses, and providing agencies with a mandate to act collaboratively based on data including, but not limited to:
 - attendance in ECEC and schooling
 - use of suspensions, expulsions, and restrictive practices, and
 - educational outcomes.
- Using data to flag risk points and track the progress of individual children.
- Identifying and mobilising the type of collective responses needed to address long-standing concerns facing specific cohorts of children, including Aboriginal children, children in OOHC and children with disability.
- Facilitating the proactive exchange of information between agencies to identify and support those who need it most.
- Using schools and other key service points as 'service hubs' with NGOs working within and around the school or other service setting as much as possible.
- Developing shared performance indicators across the non-government community services and government sectors.

COVID-19 has brought the inequities in education to the fore and created real momentum around collaboration and innovation. There is wide recognition that schools and early childhood education centres adapted to become a strong anchor for families during the pandemic. Similarly, service providers and governments found new ways of connecting with local communities. There is a real risk that with schools reopening we will all 'snap back to normal', rather than continuing to work 'outside the box'.

The ACWA group sees the effective engagement of vulnerable children and young people in education as one of the stand-out issues in developing longer-term strategies for tackling disadvantage and inequity across NSW. The sector is also keen to start discussions with senior representatives of lead government agencies about how we can collectively create the authorising environment for place-based system transformation that delivers tangible outcomes.

We would welcome the opportunity to identify suitable locations for government and non-government partners to model effective place-based service delivery using schools as service hubs – leveraging off existing initiatives and promising practice – and exploring together what's needed to effectively scale-up this type of work across the state.