

Submission

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## INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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# Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW: a submission by Education Foundation Australia

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Resilient children possess social and problem solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose. One of the most important preconditions for resilience and for social and economic participation is school engagement and success. Such engagement and success can be strongly determined by what happens during the critical transition from primary to secondary school. The middle years of schooling (Years 5-9) are clustered around this transition and have a long history as a context for efforts to improve educational outcomes including important life skills, wellbeing and resilience.

A chief risk factor for students during these years is disengagement from school. For many students, these years are characterised by a decline in satisfaction with learning, passivity or cessation of effort, underachievement or lowered achievement, disruptive behaviour, poor attendance or leaving. All of these effects tend to be more pronounced in schools with many disadvantaged students. Research shows that young people from low socio-economic backgrounds are the least likely to be satisfied with school and are the least well-served by traditional educational curricula. It has been suggested that all middle years students are at risk of disengagement, but it is clear from the research that disadvantaged young people are most at risk. Disengagement happens earlier for these students than for their more affluent counterparts and can become almost intractable by the time they start secondary school.

Extensive Australian research conducted since the early 1990s shows that classroom teaching and learning practices are the single most critical factor in the achievement and engagement of middle years students. This is in line with other findings that at least 60 per cent of the variation in student learning outcomes is attributable to what takes place in the classroom. As the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority has noted: "*students most acutely feel lack of a clear purpose or focus in the middle years of secondary schooling. It is also in the middle years of schooling that current schooling structures and classroom practices appear to be contributing to rather than ameliorating many students' negative feelings about their own worthiness and about the value of their continued involvement in schooling*" (2004).

A strong policy response across a number of Australian systems has seen some schools significantly change their structures, timetables and teaching approaches to better cater for the needs of middle years students. At the heart

of these interventions is the introduction of a student-centred or personalised approach to teaching and learning. A student-centred approach to teaching and learning has become synonymous with good educational practice:

- It is based on a challenging curriculum connected to students' lives
- It caters for individual differences in interest, achievement and learning styles
- It develops students' ability to take control over their own learning
- It uses authentic tasks that require complex thought and allow time for exploration
- It emphasises building meaning and understanding rather than completing tasks
- It involves cooperation, communication and negotiation
- It connects learning to the community.

Education Foundation Australia's ruMAD? (Are You Making A Difference?) program has been identified by researchers and government systems as an exemplar of this approach. At least 1,000 Australian schools, including New South Wales schools, are using ruMAD? as a key tool to improve educational outcomes for middle years students.

The ruMAD? framework is divided into three phases. Initially students examine their own values, interests and vision for the community in which they would like to live. They analyse the needs of the community and develop a project to address a particular area of concern or create a new possibility. The second phase involves moving through a project management methodology to develop practical skills and harness resources to put the idea into practice. The final phase involves reflecting on what was learned from the experience, celebrating the achievements and sharing the outcomes with other schools and communities. An independent evaluation of the program shows that it has a positive impact on student learning, engagement and participation. It also provides a strong model for enhanced teacher practice.

An example of ruMAD? in practice comes from middle years students in a small primary school serves an agricultural township in the King River Valley northeast of Melbourne. Jessie's Creek, which runs through the town and alongside the school, had become an eyesore. It was overgrown with exotic weeds and used as a dump for rubbish. The community had abandoned attempts to regenerate it.

Using the ruMAD? framework, students at the school took up the challenge. They started by trying to clear and revegetate the creek, but soon recognized that the task was too big to tackle alone and began to raise community awareness about the issue. After carrying out a biodiversity study to analyse the

environmental values of the creek, students surveyed community attitudes and produced a brochure promoting the challenges and future potential of the site. They issued a press release, shared their findings with the Wilderness Society, Greening Australia and the local government council and made presentations to groups like the King Basin Landcare group and the North East Catchment Management Authority. The Authority responded by conducting a comprehensive assessment of the work required to bring about change. With the assistance of the Authority and its Water Watch program, students helped to trial the effects of regeneration activities including extensive replanting.

The students' campaign attracted funding of \$26,000 from the Commonwealth Environmental Fund and Australian Geographic that has been used to transform the creek. It also attracted the interest of the Governor of Victoria at the time. As he said after his visit, "while the results speak for themselves, the intangible benefits from such a project are equally valuable. In particular, the sense of pride and ownership which the students now feel towards the area – their local environment – will ensure that the creek environment is valued for years to come".

After a number of other local organisations came on board, what began as a small, student endeavour became the focus of a large, formal and sustainable community collaboration. Work is ongoing and the students have continued to be key partners in a project that delivers rich learning as well as community and environmental outcomes. Students participate in the project steering group, contribute to community newsletters and have a continuing role in the maintenance of the creek. As one student said, "you have to believe in what you are doing and make a fuss to get things moving. People were surprised that kids could do this stuff." The project won the 2005 Westpac Landcare Education Award and was nominated for the 2006 Award.

The Centre for Applied Educational Research noted in 2002 that: *"many schools still have significantly more to learn in terms of establishing the pre-conditions for students to become literate, to become connected to school, to engage with learning and to become independent and thoughtful learners"*. This statement still holds true for many schools, especially those located in disadvantaged communities. For student-centred learning to flourish in more schools, it needs to be better understood as a rigorous practice. Work is needed to develop sharper definitions of what student-centred learning constitutes, collate the evidence of its positive impact on student outcomes and disseminate workable models and supportive tools to all schools. ruMAD? provides a powerful opportunity for this to take place in New South Wales schools.

Other work is also indicated. Initiatives like ruMAD? have had proven success in changing the middle years learning landscape, but in disadvantaged contexts, the pre-conditions for middle years achievement include a raft of other factors such as student wellbeing that stem from and can only be mediated outside the school. A 2007 report by Education Foundation Australia, *Crossing the Bridge: Overcoming entrenched disadvantage through student-centred learning*, found that schools that have had success in improving outcomes for middle years students have a strong focus on both learning and wellbeing. It also showed that schools are inadequately resourced to support student wellbeing internally and that even the most committed and innovative schools struggle to maintain relationships with the external agencies that could provide needed support.

A new report being prepared by Education Foundation Australia, *New School Ties: Networks for success*, argues that schools cannot do their work alone. Instead, school systems need to provide structures, support and incentives:

1. For schools to work together. All schools located in any given geographic area should be able to identify and develop a shared response to the particular needs of middle years students in their area. They should be able to share resources, strategies, knowledge and best practice so that no child slips between the cracks. This would include monitoring participation and tracking movement so that all students remain engaged in school
2. For schools to work with other sectors. The community, business and philanthropic sectors offer the possibility of enormous new resources for the work of schools, especially those operating in disadvantaged areas. These resources are currently offered in an ad hoc and largely unsustainable way. Work is needed to mobilise, formalise and universalise the contributions of these sectors to improved educational outcomes for middle years learners.

*New School Ties: Networks for success* includes numerous Australian and international examples of this kind of collaboration. One Victorian example is specifically designed to engage middle years learners in one of the state's most impoverished areas.

Doing It Differently: Improving Young People's Engagement with School is a collaborative project of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Anglicare and the Centre for Adolescent Health at the Royal Children's Hospital. It works with seven schools - two secondary and five primary - in a disadvantaged community in outer-metropolitan Melbourne to improve students' connectedness to school during the transition from primary to secondary school.

The project focuses on communities of greatest need, where student disengagement from school can often be exacerbated by lack of opportunity for community involvement, family poverty and low parental engagement with education. It recognises that disengagement is influenced by interaction between a young person, his or her parents/carers, teachers, and the school and community contexts in which he or she lives. It also recognises that disengagement is best addressed by “multiple, integrated strategies involving students, schools, families, and other organizations within the community” (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle & Seal, 2005). One of its priorities is to assist families in the development of active partnerships between home and school to improve student engagement, learning, health and well-being, and to explore ways in which community organisations can support these partnerships.

Doing It Differently is not designed to create a universal solution but to help communities draw on what is already known to construct strategies that work for them. It starts with the recognition by research that disengagement from school is not just about school but responds to a complex range of factors both within and outside the school environment including personal and family issues, drug and alcohol issues and mental health issues. The project recognises that strategies to deal with such broad ranging issues require interconnected school-community planning and action. As an early statement from the program explains: “such approaches steer us away from looking for the ‘magic bullet’ program and towards recognising the importance of paying attention to the conditions and contexts for successful reform, such as responding to local needs and demands for change, ensuring local advocates for as well as widespread ownership of the reform, adequate resources and ongoing support” (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle & Seal, 2005). For this reason, the project creates connections at several levels: with the local cluster of schools (through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s previous Innovations and Excellence Program), with teams of students, parents and staff in each school, and with community agencies.

The project also recognises that creating sustainable, positive change in the face of disadvantage takes time. For this reason, Doing It Differently is a three year project and focuses on strengthening sustainable connections between schools, families and community organisations. None of the participating schools have previously worked together, but all share common challenges that affect their ability to meet students’ educational needs.

The network includes formal partnerships with other organisations working to improve student and community outcomes. These include local government, the Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development and Human Services, the School Focused Youth Service and the Red Cross. Initiatives

developed for students to date include breakfast clubs in some schools and vegetable and herb gardens in each school, with links to various curriculum areas. Doing It Differently aims to create a support model that can be applied in other communities as well.

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