

Submission

No 47

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

Organisation: Central Illawarra Youth Services  
Name: Mr Nicholas Guggisberg  
Position: Manager  
Telephone: 02 4257 8080  
Date Received: 5/05/2008

---

I manage a youth service in the Illawarra, and there is one overwhelming trend that I have found that is negatively impacting on young people's development...lack access to education.

The reason why I express it as a 'lack of access' is because so many young boys (in particular, but not exclusively) have social/emotional/economic/developmental issue that makes it almost impossible for these young people to participate in normal schooling. Even the specialised behaviour units invariably can't cope with these young people because their needs are so complex, and in my experience, the staff are not adequately resourced and trained to work with these challenging young people. This affectively results in their complex needs acting as a barrier to accessing any education, that alone mainstream education.

Unfortunately the age where these issues emerge is trending down, while the range of options for reconnecting these young people and the age at which they become eligible to participate has remained static. For example, 'Links to Learning'. To participate in this program, young people need to be 15 years or older (apparently the funding for this program can be secured for young people as young as 13 years, however, I'm unaware of any service which services this age group due to the increased accountability requirements when working with this age group). Yet the reality is that young people are starting to disconnect from education as early as 8 years.

Because we have so few models of education delivery, we have many young people who simply do not fit within any of the current models completely missing out on an education.

Case Study (actual, however name changed to protect privacy)

Graham is a young man who is now 14 years old. I have been working with Graham and his mum Sandy for around 6 years. Graham has grown up in the most horrific domestic violence. When I first started trying to engage Graham and his mum Sandy, she was still in the relationship that exposed Graham to the violence, intimidation, deprivation and drug and alcohol abuse. It took me 18 months to engage Graham and Sandy, but eventually we built a rapport, and Graham started participating in activities I organised for young people and their families.

Graham and Sandy were well known to our local DoCS office. Infact I eventually learnt that DoCS had closed Graham's case file because Sandy was not able to get Steve (her violent partner) to leave. So DoCS apparently simply decided it was too hard. My understanding is that Graham was around 7 years old when DoCS closed his case.

As I got to know Graham and Sandy better, I learnt more about what Graham had been through. There are at least three occasions that Graham saved his mothers life, where Sandy was being beaten by Steve and Graham would attack him to turn the attention on himself. Graham has been programmed from an early age in the 'fight or flight' reflex. This has played out negatively in most school settings where Graham would either be fighting teachers or other school students.

Many other interventions I have arranged over time have also fallen flat due to other systemic issues. After making numerous notifications to DoCS, as I learnt more about what Graham had lived through, I eventually rang my local member to complain I couldn't get Graham's case allocated in order to get DoCS to make a referral to specialist DV counsellor (that could only be access through a DoCS referral). This worked and we got our referral.

This referral was the first successful concrete step, and over time Graham started to trust the counsellor and open up to her (after lots of hard, intensive work to get him there and to keep him there). However, the counsellor ended up leaving her job due to lack of support from her employer (Area Health) leading to burn out, so Graham was left hanging once more.

Of course there is much more complexity to this case than I can document and/or succinctly write here. But the outcome for Graham is he still can't read or write; not even his own name.

With my support, Sandy is no longer in the violent relationship, and has actually addressed many issues in her life. But Graham is now at the age where it's almost impossible to get him to consider any interventions. Graham now smokes dope, drinks alcohol, and is increasingly getting more and more involved with crime and other anti-social activities.

I believe if there were a wider range of educational options for Graham, we could have kept him engaged in education (Graham affectively stopped going regularly to school around the age of 7-8). Even if Graham had received one on one teaching while he received intensive DV counselling, with well thought through return to normal class plans, this would have been cheaper than the costs Graham will inevitably cause the state now and into the future.

However, there is a bigger issue than the costs to the state; that is Graham's Human Right to access education. This has been denied due to circumstances outside of Graham's control. This has been denied due to systemic failures. This has been denied because our education system is not flexible enough, and responsive enough to changing social and economic demographics. Graham has been denied access to education because the education system has not been resourced adequately to meet these changing demands. Graham was not able to fit in, and the school system was not able to fit him in.

Graham has a very difficult future in front of him, and there are many other young boys, and increasingly girls, in the same position. We need more resources, greater flexibility in the delivery of those resources, and more open criteria to access those resources if we want to address the growing number of young people who are missing out on an education. And we all know the outcomes associated with little or no formal education.

I would be happy to speak in person on this issue.

Thankyou for the opportunity to raise this issue,

Nick Guggisberg