

Submission

No 74

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

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Submission

Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW

**From: Blue Mountains City Council
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File no F00688**

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Partners in the compilation of this submission are Blue Mountains City Council, the Blue Mountains Child and Family Forum and the Blue Mountains Out of School Hours Forum.

Service Provision

Young people in the 9-14 year age group fall between service providers who either focus on younger children (early childhood and family support services) and those that work with youth. Out of School Hours (OOSH) Services experience significant difficulties in catering for the needs of over 9 year olds who require different programming and supervision to under 9's. Some Blue Mountains OOSH services are not taking children in this age group because they are not resourced to program effectively for them and find that they are disruptive to the activities of young children.

Government funding programs often focus on younger children or youth who are older than 12 years. The Families NSW program deals with 0-8 age group, early intervention programs such as Brighter Futures prioritises families with children under 3 years of age, and while the Better Futures program focused on 9-18 year age group, Better Futures is no longer funded.

Funded youth services are only accessed by young people over 12 years. There is also an issue with weekend and after hours access to youth services which operate on minimal budgets and are often staffed by sole workers.

Children under 12 are too young for the youth centre model, and require specific support and services to meet the needs of middle years. Once a child turns 12 there is no formalised child care. There is an expectation that they are old enough to care for themselves. There needs to be a *different OOSH system for the 9-14 year age group* with programming relevant to this age group.

The middle years are accentuated by the transition from primary to high school, which is identified as being a particularly vulnerable time for young people. Service delivery needs to be based on the principles of building social capital in communities, in families and within and between children and young persons. Transition the High School programs have been successfully run within Schools as Hubs or School as Community programs.

Schools as Hubs or School as Community projects operate at both primary and high schools. Community programs can be offered within school grounds, and there can be a flow on of programs out of school hours. Some Blue Mountains primary schools currently offer out of school hours cultural and sporting activities. Programs need to subsidised to be low cost and need to be located at the school.

This can give the real sense that someone is "at home" at school, so to speak. The school environment becomes more of a community one. Current models in the Blue Mountains involve a Community Worker as facilitator of the Hub, and a planning group involving the school Principal, community service workers, Department of Community Services representative, local groups including churches and parent representatives.

Activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience

As outlined by DoCS reporting on their 2003 Transition from Primary to High School Program at Kempsey and Campbelltown:

"Resilience is promoted through and with the involvement of the student, the family, the school and the community. Identifying characteristics of resilient adolescents include such things as social competence, problem solving skills, mastery, autonomy and a sense of purpose and future. The approach to developing resilience is a holistic approach. The response must involve the young person and be provided in the context of their family, peer group, school and community and not in isolation from these factors. Programs need to emphasise the notion of youth development and focus on developing skills and strengths in young people".

This will involve very close association with the school community, families and the wider community. Transition from school to high school programs play an important role in facilitating the smooth movement of children between primary school and high school. There is currently insufficient resourcing for these important programs and thus they remain isolated. The Blue Mountains LGA has a program at Katoomba High School and other Blue Mountains high schools would benefit from the roll out of the same model.

Resilience programs though schools are very valuable. It is important that all schools offer these opportunities through personal development programs and youth services are also actively resourced to assist with resilience building. There needs to be specific funding programs available for youth services to offer community based resilience building opportunities. Outdoor Explore programs such as the current program offered by MYST (Mountains Youth Services Team) for young men and the Better Choices program offered to young women are important examples of effective resilience building initiatives for young people who are not able to gain from mainstream education. There needs to be additional funding opportunities for this type of program to be developed.

Involving the community with schools can also support young people and access to public space, where they are often perceived as threatening to public safety. Stronger interaction between community members can send important messages to counter perceptions that young people present problems in the public arena.

Another area of local significance in community involvement with young people aged 9-14 years is the environment. Many young people in the Blue Mountains are passionate about wildlife rescue, bush regeneration, and environmental issues but there are limited opportunities for engagement. Bush regeneration groups could actively engage this age group. Connections from within schools would address the issue of access for parents that cannot drive children to programs.

Recreational opportunities such as skate parks are often not suitable to this age group. They need adjunct systems introduced for parental or other supervision to assist access by younger age group.

Changing Workplace Practices

Longer hours of work for parents have a profound impact on this age group. Parents in the Blue Mountains can spend up to 4 hours a day commuting to and from work and this combines with longer work hours and weekend work. Together with the lack of access to non-home care and OOSH being geared at a younger age group, longer working hours can mean that young people are unattended at home and often caring for younger siblings as well.

The casualisation of work also means changing working hours from week to week, having to work public holidays and working weekends – all meaning more difficulties in locating and accessing organised child care and younger people more likely to be at home unattended. There are consequences in terms of the safety of the younger person as well as in their relationship with their parents or care-providers. It would be preferable to see government promoting child friendly work place practice incorporating flexible working hours, parental leave conditions, working at home options and working part-time / job share arrangements.

Health issues and levels of disadvantage

Child obesity problems – canteens still have a lot of rubbish in them. Primary school canteen policy may not apply to older children. Young people's access to sporting facilities is often hindered through the high cost of fees. Subsidisation mechanisms would address this issue for low income families.

Youth suicide is an issue for over 12 year olds. There is lack of counselling for children that age outside school setting, and adolescent and family counselling services are only available for young people aged 12 years and older. There are only two services in the Blue Mountains LGA to cover the whole area and this does not offer an adequate spread. Allied health services offering counselling are still not affordable for young people even after the introduction of the Medicare mental health scheme (counselling practitioners charge over the scheduled fee). There needs to be free or low cost access to psychological counsellors.

Asthma is also a significant issue for young people in the Blue Mountains LGA.

Boys in this age group can be disadvantaged because of lack of access to men, and the opportunity to attend activities that are suitable to them.

Children and young people of Aboriginal background benefit from access to ways of connecting with their culture. Cultural camps and mentorship opportunities have been demonstrated to be useful. There needs to be formal networks within communities for young men to develop identity.