

Submission

No 93

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

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NSW Parliamentary Inquiry Submission.

Beverly Hills Girls' High School is a comprehensive school with a diverse cultural student and teacher population. The school is part of South Western Sydney Region and draws students from the Canterbury and Hurstville Municipality as well as out of area students as far as Campbelltown, Minto and Cronulla. The school also attracts international enrolments from such areas as China, Hong Kong and Vietnam. In June 2008, BHGHS Student Representative Council accepted an invitation to participate in the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry addressing the needs of children 9-14.

The Research

The research was conducted by five junior and one senior counsellor who acted as the team's mentor. The school's leadership coordinator was the teacher facilitator. Our research consisted of:

- Extensive surveys of our school community's 12-14 year olds (girls), the region's SRC student members (boys and girls) and two of our local primary schools' students aged 9-12(boys and girls). Primary schools surveyed were Beverly Hills North Public School and Hannans Road Public School. Students from Beverly Hills Intensive English Centre (IEC)(boys and girls) were also surveyed as were siblings of Beverly Hills High School students.
- Data was also collected and collated after interview with Head Teacher PDHPE, selected parents of children aged 9-14, Head Teacher Welfare, both Deputy Principals and Principal of our `school, and the Deputy Principal of the IEC.
- Statistics and information were also collected from the World Wide Web and books.

All three areas were addressed by our research, i.e. the needs of children and young people, services and support and workplace issues. In addition, there were matters raised under 'other issues' and this will also be included in this report. Note that 77% of students surveyed were female.

Our Findings

Needs of young children in the age group 9-14

By surveying the children in this age group we have discovered that the main needs they highlighted were:

- Education
- Supportive and loving family unit
- Strong friendships
- Representation

Professionals and Parents

Childcare professionals (teachers, counsellors) and parents perceived the needs of young children as follows:

- Safe environment, home, school, community
- Feeling of acceptance
- Respect
- Education
- Voice, having representation
- To be informed about environmental issues, global, technological, health (body image) and drugs.
- Support networks and increased awareness of services
- Structured after school care
- Parental education

Needs varying on age, gender and socioeconomic status.

9-11 year olds.

73 % of 9-11 year old primary school students indicated that family and education were their primary needs. Other needs included were, the need to be valued, to be listened to and to have a voice in society. A very small percentage, (5%) showed that they needed friendship and to have more freedom and independence.

12-14 year olds (85% female).

The 12-14 year old age group presented some interesting results. We surveyed 154 students in this age bracket. 31% said that having friends and being accepted by their peers was a key factor in their wellbeing, while 69% said family was still one of their main needs. 47% of these students had also listed being respected, having input into decisions, having a sense of belonging and a need for a society without bullying.

From these results it can be concluded that at a young age, children tend to need their parents more than friends but as they grow older their priorities change and they see friends and acceptance by others as their main needs.

Professionals and Parents Needs depending on age

- The Head Teacher of Welfare said that as children become older, they develop higher maturity levels and are more conscious of their surroundings. Consequently, they react differently to situations and have an increased need for acceptance by their peers.
- The Deputy Principal of Beverly Hills Girls High School said that younger children tend to need more supervision. He also said that most young children don't have enough experience to make big decisions nevertheless they still need to know that they have rights and should be listened to. Older children in the age group (12-14 years) are more independent and place more trust in friendships.
- The Head Teacher of PD/H/PE said that older children are more prone to experimentation because they are keen on 'myth busting'.
- The Deputy Principal of the Beverly Hills Intensive English Centre noted that children aged between 9-11 years tend to value their need for family more and as the children grow older these requirements reverse and their need for friends takes priority.
- A parent of a child aged 9-14 years said that as children grew older their need for independence, representation and respect became more essential.

Needs according to gender.

The ratio of female to male students in our survey is 41:12. The percentage of male students is 23% and the percentage of female students is 77%. All of the female students surveyed

indicated that friendship and being accepted was one of their major needs while all of the males highlighted sport or more availability of sporting facilities as a necessity. Males said that education was a primary need, however, research from the state wide English, Language and Literacy Assessment showed that the results from males were substantially lower than the results of females. This could suggest that the need for education indicated by males was not being facilitated in a way that could impact more on their learning or there were other factors which influenced their outcomes in education.

Professionals and Parents *Needs vary depending on gender.*

- The Deputy Principal of Beverly Hills Girls High School noted that state wide literacy and numeracy data indicated that boys on average don't achieve as highly as girls.
- The Head Teacher PD/H/PE noted that boys were bigger risk takers and were more focused on "the now" instead of taking future consequences into consideration.
- A parent of a child aged 9-14 years said that males preferred outdoor activities like sports which meet their physical demands.

Needs according to socioeconomic status.

Children in disadvantaged areas identified money as a main need and that needs were more centred on basic necessities rather than wants. Therefore our findings focused on fundamental necessities.

Professionals and Parents *Needs vary depending on socioeconomic status.*

- The Head Teacher of Welfare noted that children classified as having a lower socioeconomic status had differing needs to those children classified as having a high socioeconomic status. She said they needed money to access more information and buy school equipment rather than purchase recreational equipment. She also noted that children of a higher socioeconomic status may perhaps be better supported with their emotional and family issues and therefore may not need the

same networks as a child of a lower socioeconomic status.

- The Deputy Principal of Beverly Hills Girls High School said that children of a low socioeconomic status often didn't have the same access to information and extra education, such as tutoring. He also said that they were sometimes more likely to come to school with a lower expectation of what school can do for them, often based on the school experiences of their parents/siblings and community value of education.

Services and Support

Programs and activities that provide emotional outlets as well as sustaining a safe, fun and social environment help children develop resilience. These programs provide a level of comfort, security, belonging and the improvement of their mental health. This helps children to relax and develop skills that may not be focused on at home. These programs exist in our society, focusing on helping children through hardships and giving them skills which will stay with them for life. Some of these services are in the form of before and after school care, youth groups and other organisations such as the Kids Helpline Line, Reach Out and Headspace and Vinnie's Youth.

Through surveys, we discovered that very few participants could identify services that they could approach and rely on in hard times. We surveyed 15 IEC students (note: these students have only be in the country for a few months), 2 of these students could successfully name a support group or service.

This information reveals that 13 out of 15 of the students from newly arrived non English speaking backgrounds were not aware of organisations that helped young people. Also many of the male students surveyed could not identify a service or support group aimed at young people.

Professionals and Parents

Activities and Services to develop resilience

- The Head Teacher of PD/H/PE said that students should have 24-hour access to good information. She said that children should be taught how to distinguish between reliable information and false information. Suggested sites include reachout.com and oxygen.com.
- The Head Teacher Welfare suggested that peer support groups, transition programs and learning to learn programs helped to develop resilience in young children. She said that doctors and outside speakers such as young leaders and police could raise awareness of services available to youth.
- Deputy Principal of Beverly Hills Girls High school suggested more places for physical activity, and places for development of social skills. He also

suggested that support and counselling and education services for parents should be developed.

- The Deputy Principal of the Beverly Hills Intensive English Centre said that personal development classes which promoted self confidence and break down the dynamics of peer groups in school should be integrated into all curriculum. These services and support groups would help children in this age group develop resilience.

Suggestions:

The following suggestions were made by the Deputy Principal of Beverly Hills Girls High School:

- Promote current services available in the community through TV advertising, advertisements in teen magazines, flyers, school newsletters and in the school environment.
- Develop more services such as Department of Community Services (DOCS) because current organisations are seemingly not equipped with enough resources.
- Further education for teachers on welfare issues which affected students so they themselves can develop resilience skills in younger students.
- Learning programs for early detection of learning difficulties.
- Outside support for schools. The need outweighs the resources available.
- Community support groups need to be supported, expanded and funded.

Workplace Issues

With the introduction of work choices in March 2006, many parents were forced to accept the different work place laws and conditions. This caused a sea of uncertainty among families, for their financial security. Work choices made it harder for workers to strike, easier for employers to force their employees into work place agreements and they also banned clauses from workplace agreements which supported trade unions. Some of the laws introduced were the exemption of companies with fewer than 101 employees from unfair dismissal laws and also exemption for all companies if there was a legitimate reason for dismissal. With the overthrow of the Howard Government by the Labor Party, these work choice laws are slowly being phased out. However, with the increase of petrol prices and interest rates, parents have been forced to work longer in order to support their families. These changes have had a somewhat negative effect on children in the 9-14 age group. It has made it harder for children to develop a deeper understanding and closer relationship with their parents.

The surveyed children in the 9-14 age bracket said that their main need was a supportive family but with parents working so much this is often strained. This places pressure on many children and gives them extra responsibilities such as caring for themselves or their siblings. These children may have fewer opportunities because of these extra responsibilities.

Professionals and Parents
Workplace changes affecting 9-14 year olds.

- The Head Teacher of Welfare said that mortgage rate rises and petrol price increases have led to an increased need for parents to work. This puts pressure on children to be more responsible when their parents work long hours. Children feel insecure because their parents are often out of the house and unable to help them with issues which arise.
- The Deputy Principal of Beverly Hills Girls High School said that more parents are taking up part time work and hence have fewer leisure hours with their children. He noted that in many cases families can not survive without both parents working to some extent. He said that parents have to find a balance between earning money and nurturing their children.
- The Deputy Principal of the Beverly Hills Intensive English Centre said that when both parents work they have less energy to devote to their children.
- A Parent of a child aged 9-14 years said that when both parents work the child has little or no contact with them. They have little or no quality time and shared meal times to discuss issues affecting the child. The children may also have no supervision while the parents are working.

Workplace Issues

With the legal age of employment being 14 years and 9 months, children under this age are sometimes pressured to work in order to help support their families by working in family shops or businesses, babysitting and delivering newspapers. This often deprives the children of their after school activities, leisure opportunities and valuable time with their family which has been previously discovered is the most important need for children aged 9-14 in today's society. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 'Children who Work' data, the most common reason why children work is for their own expenditure. This includes equipment and materials for school and after school activities. The Work Choices legislation placed pressure on workers making it difficult for parents and employers to pay children for their work. This means a loss of independence for the children causing them to rely on their already struggling parents/carers.

Professionals and Parents
Workplace changes affecting 9-14 year olds who are working
(unpaid & paid).

- A parent of a child aged 9-14 years said that pressure is put on children to look after their siblings while their parents are working.
- The Head Teacher of Welfare said that more children aged 9-14 are working both paid and unpaid jobs. This is to facilitate the fact that families need money due to rising costs of living.
- The Deputy Principal of Beverly Hills Girls High School said that there is an increased opportunity for children to be exploited in the workforce by being overworked and underpaid, by programs such as 'work placement' or 'work orientation'.
- The Head Teacher of PDHPE said that there is an extra burden on students because they have to look after their siblings and manage their homework without parental assistance.

Possible changes in the workplace which could benefit 9-14 year olds are:

- Flexible hours for parents/caregivers
- Job sharing between parents
- Paid holiday release when it is school holidays
- More affordable child minding in the work place

Professionals and Parents

Suggestions to improve the work place and how they benefit 9-14 year olds.

- All of the people interviewed suggested flexible working hours to accommodate the needs of the children and family.
- The Head Teacher of PD/H/PE said that there should be more opportunities for parents to 'job share' to allow for more time with children.
- The Deputy Principal of Beverly Hills Girls High School suggested that there should be more opportunities to work from home to allow time with family and eliminate time spent travelling. He also said that parents should be given time off from working during the school holidays to be in line with their children's time off. He also suggested the use of technology to conduct conferences from home or work to accommodate their family instead of travelling vast distances.

Other Issues

In our survey we discovered that most of the children would rather have attention and care from their parents than large amounts of money. Also they are extremely vulnerable and need to be given answers to their many questions.

Professionals and Parents

Suggestions to improve the work place and how they benefit 9-14 year olds.

- A parent said that children aged 9-14 years are very impressionable. They have access to inappropriate material on TV, in magazines and on the internet which can influence their behaviour.
- Head Teacher PD/H/PE said that children need their parents at home because they are in need of good role models. She said that children should have more physical activity and less homework other commitments to allow for more quality time with family.
- Head Teacher of Welfare said that children 9-14 years are very impressionable. She said that they need guidance and good role models in their life. They also need to be kept on track and have their questions answered correctly.
- The Deputy Principal of the Beverly Hills Intensive English Centre said that their opinions and ideas are often undervalued and that they should be treated more seriously.

Conclusion

With the results we have collected we can conclude that there are many needs that 9-14 year olds have and that they vary according to different factors. We were able to identify the services and support groups which helped children develop resilience but we also discovered that there needed to be more attention paid to the advertising of such groups because many students did not know of any or how to contact them. We suggest more changes to the workplace of parents in order to provide more quality time with children and more education for parents and teachers in regard to skills needed by children in this age group.

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- www.abs.gov.au
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PEOPLE

- IEC students
- Beverly Hills North Public School
- Hannans Road Public School
- School Counsellor
- Parents
- Welfare Co-ordinator
- Beverly Hills Girls High School Deputy Principals
- Beverly Hills IEC Deputy Principal
- Beverly Hills Girls High School Principal
- PDHPE Head Teacher
- Regional SRC members

