

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9 TO 14 IN NEW
SOUTH WALES**

At Lismore on Wednesday 6 August 2008

The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon C. M. Tebbutt (Chair)

Legislative Council

The Hon. C. E. Cusack
The Hon. K. F. Griffin

Legislative Assembly

Mr S. R. Cansdell
Dr A. D. McDonald

CHAIR: I will declare the meeting open and thank everyone for coming. We try to keep the proceedings reasonably informal but there are certain things that we need to do in order to be able to use the evidence that you provide to the committee in our committee report, and that is why we have Hansard reporters here. You all have to be sworn in. First of all the committee will hear from Associate Professor Anne Graham. I thank everyone who has made our visit so easy here and for hosting us and also providing us with the capacity to use your facilities, which are excellent. I thank all the young people for coming along because I know some of you are doing your trials. It is fantastic that you prioritised giving evidence to this committee when it is such a difficult and busy time, but it is really important to us because in this area that we are looking at, the nine to 14 years, there is not a lot of research so we will rely a lot on the evidence that has been provided to the committee for its final report.

ANNE PATRICIA GRAHAM, Director, Centre for Children and Young People; and Head, School of Education, Southern Cross University, Lismore, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from the Centre for Children and Young People. Do you want that submission to form part of your evidence?

Dr GRAHAM: Yes, we do.

CHAIR: And to be made public?

Dr GRAHAM: Yes, we do.

CHAIR: Do you want to make an opening statement?

Dr GRAHAM: Thank you. In my opening statement I would like to do a number of things. I would like to give you a context for the submission that you received from us, that is, the work that we do at the Centre for Children and Young People and the particular emphasis that that centre has such that we have the committee of young people here before you today. I have included a summary of notes in your folders. The centre was established at the university in 2004 to contribute to the improved wellbeing of children and young people, particularly in regional and rural areas. We wanted to do this through interdisciplinary research, education and advocacy activities.

The centre is unique. We do not know of another centre like this in Australia because it is unashamed in its emphasis on some important things that I think are of interest to this inquiry. The centre is based on an understanding that practice and policy around children and young people should be evidence-based. We should not best guess what works and does not work for children and young people. We should rely heavily on the evidence that is available to us and we should be engaged in generating some of that evidence. It is also based on an understanding that participation and collaboration are intrinsic to improved outcomes for children and young people. So that collaboration needs to take place between researchers from different disciplines, those working in education need to talk with those working in health or in community services.

The collaboration also needs to take place with the lead between researchers and practitioners. The research does not help too much if those that can use it do not know it is available and cannot translate it. So that is really important in terms of our work. We also believe fundamentally that children and young people are entitled to the provision, protection and participation rights that are afforded to them under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. So those three keys: protection, provision and participation really form the basis of our work. What is our work? There are three functions of the centre. The group of young people that we have here today are integral to those three functions.

Our research includes a number of projects on topics including things like children's involvement and young people's involvement in decision-making in family law, the impact of technology in classrooms, improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home-care, mental health in schools, transition to school for Aboriginal children, experiences of grandparents raising grandchildren, children's spirituality, children's conceptions of citizenship, rural childhoods and so on. A defining interest of those research projects are the ways in which we progress our understanding and practice of children's participation. The centre is also involved to a large extent in evaluation. It takes a capacity building approach to working with services in this region and beyond to evaluate programs for children and young people and their families. To date I think we have been involved with about 35 projects involving 29 organisations in the region. We learn a lot about what works and does not work for children and young people and for their families. That is the first function of the centre. I will come back shortly to talk about how Young People, Big Voice [YPBV] is involved in that.

The second function is education. We provide seminars and conferences where we bring together researchers, practitioners, policy makers and young people. So that is where we see that collaboration most at work. We try to get our seminars and conferences generating conversation between stakeholders. Our third function is around advocacy, and that advocacy is essentially about promoting the critical importance of children and young people having a voice in the issues and decisions that shape their lives, and the key to this, of course, is this group that you have here today, the YPBV. We have a very distinguished advisory board that gives us a lot of time in guiding the strategic priorities of this centre, and it is chaired by Associate Professor Judy Cashmore from the University of Sydney. We have a national as well as a regional focus. We are one of

only two institutions in Australia that are members of the Childwatch International network. That network has an emphasis in strengthening child and youth centres research such that it might contribute to children's wellbeing.

I want to move to the evidence on which we have based our decisions for our work in this centre. In other words, why an emphasis on young people's participation? What is the evidence that that participation is important in activities like this inquiry? There is now a substantial body of interdisciplinary research, generated largely over the past decade, involving psychology, sociology, anthropology, geography, educational research and environmental research that is telling us quite clearly that involving the participation of children and young people, and having their involvement and voice in decision-making, is not only important but has started to identify what kind of difference that might make in terms of outcome.

Much of the research has emphasised the importance of affording children their claim to have a say and for us to listen to the voices of children. It is no longer and ideal just to talk about children's participation but rather accepted as strengthening the status of children in social and political life, raising issues associated with their social exclusion, challenging the accountability and responsiveness of institutions like schools and health care systems with which young people interact, as well as contributing far reaching benefits for children's wellbeing.

For young people, the research tells us that it contributes to the positive development of individual identity, or competence and a sense of responsibility. Children and young people report that being recognised, respected and valued as individuals with opinions and feelings and able to able to constructively contribute to and shape decisions facing their everyday lives is important to them. It is important because it gives them a sense of belonging to their community, gaining new skills and experiences, meeting new friends and building a sense of their own agency. The Committee will probably get an insight into that this morning.

Children's participation in research is not only important for children, it has also been shown to be important for families and for family life. The research suggests that children and young people who feel respected and heard are more likely to respect others, be more committed to the decisions that are made, feeling responsibility for those decisions and to differentiate between and accept what they can influence and what they cannot influence. For communities we know that children's participation is important, we know that the research tells us and a lot of research around young people's citizenship and their rights and responsibilities, much of which is being done in schools in the age group of interest to this inquiry, we know that the research is saying that children and young people are critical resources in the development of a better society, otherwise we would not be doing it and the schools would not be teaching civics, citizenship and participation and related issues.

For governments and institutions such as schools, encouraging young people to participate allows for them to influence policy and practice. Children and young people are more engaged, they feel they have a stake in improving conditions, they can more readily identify as part of a community and they can recognise the complexity of both the problems and the solutions. We think that is a really good basis on which to have them involved in this Inquiry as well.

Young people tell us some important things about their participation. Those things are consistent in the research. They say that if we are to engage them in participatory processes that it should be respectful, but it should be genuine and focused on change, that it should be about an attempt to make a difference in policy and practice, and it should involve giving them access to information. We also know that children and young people are asking for more participational opportunities, or opportunities for participation, not because they want their way but because they want to have a say—and there is an important difference. There is an important difference in the way that influences policy because the key issue that we have come to is that if we are to facilitate participation in that way, dialogue with children and young people is a key link in facilitating that participation and in ensuring that what they have to say counts in terms of evidence-based policy and practice.

There are a couple of pink elephants in the lounge room and I will name them very briefly because it is important to this inquiry. One thing that the research points to time and time again is that as adults whether we're researchers, practitioners or policymakers, we query the concept or idea of whether children and young people really do have the capacity to be able to participate in a meaningful way. Until we come to terms with that we might be a little limited in the ways in which we can utilise what it is that children and young people have to tell us.

The second issue that comes up quite a bit in the research is: Can we trust children's accounts of things? Do children and young people—and those present should cover their ears—tell us the truth, whatever the truth is in that concept? Recently at an international conference there was a lot of debate about that. I think it is time we got over that. It is time we came to grips with the fact that adults sometimes do not do that either. However, because it really calls us, if we are asking for children's involvement, we are seeking their views about what is important to children, and in the context of today that is children and young people nine to 14 years of age.

We have to be prepared that their accounts might differ from ours and what we expect, sometimes what they have to say might be complex, or contradictory, or ambiguous and sometimes it might be painful. The question for us as adults as we try to influence policy and practice around what we do is: Can we live with that and can we utilise that well? That is a fundamental challenge. We can have all the research in the world telling us that children's participation is important in forming the way we might do things in the future, but if we are not trusting their accounts we have a problem in where to take it towards policy.

That brings us to the Young People, Big Voice group and their contribution to the centre. In 2004 when we started the centre we invited a group of eight young people to speak on the day and to engage with an audience. We did not know that more than 300 people would attend, who were very impressed with what the young people had to say and also by the ways in which they thought differently about a few issues as a result of having them involved. That really formed our first YPBV group, which was named by that first group and this particular group of people present who stayed with it.

Building on what I have said about the importance of participation for us, having the YPBV involved in our centre and centrally involved in making a submission like one to this inquiry is because we believe and trust deeply that they can help us identify and fine tune research questions that really matter for children and young people, the survey instruments we use, the questions that we ask, the focus groups that we run, the seminars that we hold and the conferences that we hold, the writing of submissions. Our group is facilitated by Jen Parke, who is present today. She convenes and guides the activities, providing education and training for the YPBV. The kinds of issues that our YPBV members have asked for are whether we could support them a little more in the communication and relationship skills, meeting processes, interview skills, group facilitation and needs assessment.

In terms of the links to the current inquiry we put out an invitation to YPBV to have input into the Inquiry regarding the issues that they had observed or experienced for nine to 14-year-olds growing up in regional New South Wales. That is the basis of my submission and I thank you very much for the opportunity to hear what they had to say today.

CHAIR: Before we move on to the presentation from the committee we will ask some questions. In your view how well is Australia doing in the participation of young people compared to internationally? Earlier we had a presentation by a fellow from Ireland who had participated with young people and it was very impressive. How do you think we measure up?

Dr GRAHAM: The UK and Europe are a long way ahead of us. We have initiatives happening in NSW and Australia generally that are really important. For instance, the work of the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People is doing some really lighthouse work around this issue. The challenge for us is how we would look at bedding that much more deeply in the institutions and organisations where children live their lives. We have a lot to learn from what is happening in the UK and Europe. We have a lot to learn about what is difficult and what we are endeavouring to do but also about what has worked elsewhere, but there is work still to be done.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: Almost by definition, the young people here are engaged. What evidence is there of what works with disengaged youth? What actually works for these people?

Dr GRAHAM: Our position would be that the starting point is to go to them and to ask them. We think that some of what is developed in response to children and young people who experience difficulties across the spectrum is that some of the decisions about what works for them is made in isolation to actually talking to them. So the emphasis that we put on them and the research that is being done in our centre by people like Robyn Fitzgerald and others in the centre around dialogue with children and young people is really central to that. If I could give a very brief example of that. Some time back I was asked by a school system to come in and do a consultation with them around children with difficulties at school. Those difficulties were more around behavioural difficulties and learning difficulties, but sometimes the two are related. What they wanted to know

was what would work so that they were addressing those more effectively. When I looked at who was involved in that consultation, I asked the head of that system, "Have you asked students in schools about this?" This person said, "Why would I do that?" I said, "Because you might be surprised by what they have to tell you."

So all credit to that particular system. They allowed us to go through the process, and it is not always an easy process to scaffold young people for participation in that. But when the question was put to the children and young people in that context "What would help you when things get tough at school?", the overwhelming theme was "A teacher that knows me and likes me." That particular school system was about to tip \$2 million into school counselling for students who were experiencing difficulties at school. They did a rethink. They rethought what kind of professional development they might need to do with their teachers such that they might be able to engage a little bit more effectively with those students.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: Everyone asks about boot camps. Do they work?

CHAIR: What is a boot camp?

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: Taking the kids along the Kokoda Trail. The kids know what wilderness camps are. They are probably threatened with them.

Dr GRAHAM: I am not sure procedurally how this would go, Carmel, but I think it is a fabulous question to ask the young people themselves.

CHAIR: Does Dr McDonald want to hold that question?

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You alluded to the fact that young people are telling us things all the time but we can be deaf to it. It is a question of how do we harness that valuable information. Do you think that young people are competing against the fact that we were young people once and we already know how it is and we are not engaging almost because of our own prejudices?

Dr GRAHAM: I think that is part of it, Catherine. I think there is no doubt that we are influenced by our own autobiography, some of which now goes back a little while. Sometimes adults, and adults working with children and young people in any context—whether it is in research, education, community services, wherever it is—struggle to understand and to recognise the culture in which they are growing up. Sometimes we are too ready with the responses to fix the problem, which is coming from what you just said really, out of our own sense of what might have worked or has not worked for us. What we know, and if we can trust it, is that children and young people have an incredible capacity to be able to identify and name what is going on and particularly to generate, especially if they are in a relationship with caring supportive adults, some solutions around that. I think very often we limit and constrain the conversation because we jump in too quickly. I do not think it matters whether we are parents, teachers, researchers or who we are, we have a lot of work to do around that fundamental question: How do we hold quality conversations with children and young people such that we can hold their accounts at least as equally valuable as our own? That is a struggle.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: How do you choose members for Young People Big Voice? Often to get advice from youth you get the student representative council, the higher echelons of the school rather than the general mill and the kids that really need help. How do you ensure that you get an across-the-board voice from youth, so we are not just getting input from the more privileged ones who do not need help so much?

Dr GRAHAM: That is a question we get asked a lot, Steve. I am sure the young people would be happy later to talk a little bit about themselves to you and their backgrounds. I am sure they would be very happy to share that to give you some insight into that. When we got the first group together that I mentioned for the initial conference, we were very mindful that you cannot have a so-called representative group. That is very, very difficult to do. The best that we thought we could do was make sure that we were inviting children and young people to be involved who work from a range of different backgrounds and, in a sense, could give us another part of the story of being a child or young person. So what we have endeavoured to do in trying to recruit and select for the YPBV, yes, we have school leaders, natural school leaders, but we have also got natural leaders who may not necessarily be those who put their hand up at school or even are selected at school. The age range is diverse and that was really important for us. I do not want to go into individual backgrounds but, as I said, the backgrounds are all varied. Some of the groups are hard to get. We are very conscious of that,

not to get them involved but to keep them involved and help maintain that involvement. Very often it is about resources that they do not have. We have to assist them to get to meetings, those kinds of things. It is a very difficult process. If we sent out to schools and said, "This is what we are setting up and we would like you to nominate two from your school", we would likely get too many of those we do not think will necessarily help us get the full picture for our work here at the centre.

CHAIR: Thank you, Anne, that was a great introduction to the work of the centre and thoughtful issues you have raised for us. Do you give the Committee permission to make public what you have said at the hearing today?

Dr GRAHAM: Yes, I do.

CHAIR: The Committee has resolved to make public the evidence of the witness and to publish a transcript of the witness's evidence on the Committee's website after the necessary corrections have been made. A copy of the transcript will be forwarded to you for corrections before being published on the website.

We now turn to the committee of young people. As I said at the start, we thank you for coming along and being part of this process. It helps us greatly. We have had young people present to us in Sydney and it is great to be able to hear from young people in regional New South Wales. First of all, have the processes and proceedings of today's hearing been explained to you?

ALL: Yes.

JENNIFER PARKE, Facilitator of Young People, Big Voice, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Post Office Box 157, Lismore, and

BROOKE AVERY, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore,

BEN COOPER, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore,

BEN STEVENS, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore,

MAIA RYALL, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore,

SARAH HORT, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore,

TULLY RODWELL, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore,

CASEY CLEAVER, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore, and

AHRI TALLON, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore, affirmed and examined:

Mr TALLON: Good morning, my name is Ahri Tallon and on behalf of the Young People, Big Voice [YPBV] group I would like to thank you all for bringing the Inquiry to Lismore. We hope that the passion and enthusiasm in youth issues of the YPBV members will assist in the development of social policy that adequately provides opportunities for young people to influence further policy that service our concerns in society. YPBV would like to express our concern for issues surrounding the partial segregation of society in regional areas attributed to past injustices against the Indigenous population. Although we have come to the decision that this issue is too big an issue for us to comprehend completely, we believe it requires a separate inquiry within itself.

Miss CLEAVER: Today we are showing you Hart's ladder of youth participation, as enclosed in your YPBV information pack. This is to personify the approach taken by adults to involve youth in decision-making. Based on a cooperative group experience, we would hope that this inquiry function on rung five as we felt that this is the most successful rung of participation specific to this event.

Mr TALLON: Manipulation happens where adults use young people to score causes and pretend that the causes were inspired by young people.

Miss CLEAVER: Rung two is called decoration. It happens when young people are used to help or bolster for a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people.

Miss HORT: Rung three is tokenism and this occurs when young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate. When rungs one to three occur young people can feel disenfranchised and silenced. An example of this type of participation is some student representative councils that can feel like tokenism. Young people generally have respect for the processes if they feel their views are being respected.

Mr STEVENS: Rung four is assigned and informed. This is where young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved. This level of participation is sometimes appropriate. It can let you learn to understand processes and how to participate. There is a danger of feeling like it is tokenism.

Miss RYALL: Rung five is consulted and informed. It happens when young people give advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. The young people are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults. We would hope that this inquiry sits on rung five of the ladder as we are being consulted and at the same time informed. However, unless our points are being properly considered this rung of the ladder is the same as rung four.

Mr COOPER: Rung six is adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people and occurs when projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people. This rung

involves sharing power with young people and can be challenging for adults. It requires mutual trust and respect between adults and young people.

Mr RODWELL: Rung seven happens when young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role. There are some examples of this happening locally such as activism or environmental and sexuality issues. If, as sometimes happens, young people-led activities fall over, this should not be seen as a disaster but as an opportunity for both adults and young people to learn how to do it better next time.

Miss AVERY: Rung eight is young people initiated, shared decisions with adults. This happens when projects or programs are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and adults. These projects empower young people while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults. This rung allows youth to influence the decision but not make it. Youth feel like their voice is being heard and that they are participating in important decisions. In conclusion, you have our submission, as you know it emphasises the key issues of transport, education and employment. We are happy to take any questions you have concerning anything in this Inquiry.

CHAIR: That you very much for that: it was very impressive. You have given us a much better understanding of young people's involvement and participation in how we can do it better. In relation to participation, one of you said that young people need to feel listened to and respected and that their points need to be properly considered and that is really like the difference between rung four and rung five. In your mind if your points are listened to, but not acted upon for whatever reason, either because it is not possible or it is because the people who are making the decisions do not agree with what you have raised, do you believe that is proper consultation or do you feel that in fact it also needs to be the case that not just you are listened to but there is also action on what you have put forward?

Miss HORT: Well, if you are just listened to, and then nothing comes out of it, what was the point in being listened to in the first place? When you voice your opinion you generally want to make a change so for people to take the time to listen to you, it is kind of, even something small they could do to change, if that makes sense?

CHAIR: What about if people listen to you but they do not agree with what you are saying and therefore do not act upon what you have put forward, is that still consultation?

Miss HORT: I suppose it kind of depends on the situation. For a situation like this I feel that whether you agree or not you are kind of in a position where your personal views and opinions should not strongly influence the decision-making because you are representing the people.

CHAIR: That is a good answer.

Mr TALLON: If I could add to that. If we were being consulted about something that is specifically to do with youth issues, and our responses are very subjective views from the perspective, then if that is decreed to be wrong by whoever is consulting with them, then they should probably get, look for a broader perspective on what they are saying, or the youth is saying, in how they should be perceived.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: What should the committee know about what it is like to be young person in Lismore in 2008? What do you think the Parliament of New South Wales needs to know?

Miss HORT: Shall I give an example of every day-to-day life?

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: What it is like to grow up—the good bits and the bad bits.

Miss HORT: Okay, well the negative things are, as mentioned in our submission, that there is a strong lack of public transport so it is very difficult to get to different events and venues. We can feel isolated and somewhat confined. Also there is an environmental impact in public transport. It is very important with global warming looming. Also there are few events and venues to attend. A lot of things like movies, bowling, for example, do cost money. There are a lot of financially disadvantaged citizens in Lismore who do not always have the resources to attend these things. That is just one negative aspect.

Mr COOPER: There is a big drug culture also in the Northern Rivers. Lots and lots of people do recreationally use marijuana and other illicit drugs. I think it is pretty obvious why that has a negative effect. Also, being a gay man I found it very difficult growing up in the Northern Rivers. There are no youth groups. There are no groups for gay people to meet other gay people outside Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong. I got that culturally socialised notion at 15, that was one of the biggest issues I have ever dealt with in my life.

Mr TALLON: What I said in the introduction about the feelings between indigenous and non-indigenous youth, we feel very strongly and have to agree, but we find it hard to put a finger on the problem. The population is still dealing with past injustices but because the two cultures are not really assimilated from almost every youth I know the main thing to fear is the separation, the segregation. This inquiry needs to look into that. We cannot understand it. We do not have any solutions to the problem or where exactly it is coming from. We know it is a big thing in our lives.

CHAIR: There are many processes; there is a parliamentary inquiry into Aboriginal injustice ongoing by another Committee.

Miss HORT: It is probably not confined to just Lismore, but public education is a pretty big issue. Lismore High School, which I attended, is fairly under resourced. A lot of teachers teaching subjects that they are not qualified or trained to teach, and that can be an issue for students and teachers alike. A lot of equipment is severely outdated. For example, we have science textbooks from the 1960s. A lot of core science has not changed since then but the books are falling apart and new discoveries have been made in the past 40 years.

Ms CLEAVER: There is a lack of making learning and literacy appealing in this area. In a metropolitan area there are massive newspapers and other things, for example a competition for journalism with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, whereas those competitions do stretch to this area, they are not really advertised as well or made as appealing as they are in a metropolitan area.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you feel that you do not have as many opportunities compared to those living in Sydney?

Ms CLEAVER: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Your presentation was fantastic. I feel that the question I should ask you is: in the local papers there seems to be a lot of feeling by adults that kids are breaking the law, harassing and acting disrespectful. The common theme in newspapers is "bored youth" in a fairly sarcastic way. What is your reaction to that? Why is that happening? How does it make you feel?

Mr TALLON: In years 8 and 9 I went through a stage where I was a bored youth. I am now in year 12. There was not much to do in Lismore so I hitchhiked to Byron and stayed overnight and probably got into trouble. I would have slept somewhere not very nice. Basically it has to do with bored youth, that is number one. Public activities for kids are needed and changing the activities so they do not seem to be not cool. Number two is transport, the ability to get to places and home, that is very important.

Miss HORT: And safely.

Mr RODWELL: I can admit to being a bored youth as well. Ask yourself how many youth actually are in the northern rivers? You only need to look around and see how many public events and facilities there are to facilitate use: it is ridiculous. They have nowhere to go, they go through puberty and go crazy. They have nothing to do. There is no public transport so they end up in Byron. They end up drinking, falling over people and doing stupid stuff. The words "bored youth" is not sarcastic, it is real, it is a real fact, ask any news here today and they will say, "Yes". Everyone has gone through it.

Mr COOPER: There is a unique problem. In populations such as Newcastle with 200,000 or so people, there are a lot more services in those places than in Lismore and Coffs Harbour and Grafton. We are not rural like Bourke, but we are not like Newcastle either, we are in the middle. A lot of young people come to Lismore to go to uni and there needs to be recognition that we are missing out.

Miss RYALL: We often just think of them as bored youth, but we do not ask why they are bored. Something needs to be done so they are not bored and there may not be as many problems.

CHAIR: Any ideas about what should be done? What types of things are people looking for?

Miss RYALL: Public transport; there needs to be a train.

Miss HORT: A train to Byron would be so good. We could catch it in the morning, go to the beach there and come back. And just like a general meeting place to hang out and be safe and play music or a game of pool. We are not asking for a sports stadium. Facilities are not widely publicised. You can only go on certain days and they are not accessible for all people because we cannot get to them.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: On a show of hands how many will leave this area at some stage?

Mr COOPER: Do you mean for good, or to come back?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Not necessarily leave forever, but do you envisage leaving this area in order to pursue opportunities. Could I have a show of hands—that was five who admit thinking about it.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: What family and youth services are needed to give support to youth and family's that are in trouble? We have all been through rough times as kids when we used the "bored" excuse for rebelling. Sometimes that comes back to family dysfunction and isolation. We talk about family support services all the time. Where do you think it should come from and what is needed for families and youth that are troubled?

Mr TALLON: My parents split up when I was very young. One of the main family troubles I have had all through my childhood was their lack of communication and lack of understanding of how I felt between their lack of communication. There should be some sort of process where parents who do split need to be informed about hassling their son about the other parent giving money. That puts a lot of pressure on the son, which there should not be. There should be education with the parents who do split up about what pressures should not be exerted on their children in the process of their growing up.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: More family counselling?

Mr TALLON: Yes.

Miss RYALL: I agree.

CHAIR: Better family support for parents who have separated and how that impacts on children.

Mr TALLON: I would not have had any problems if they had not hassled me to get the other one. It was because they did not communicate.

CHAIR: They were using you as a point of communication?

Mr TALLON: Yes, that was the problem.

CHAIR: Anyone else want to respond to the need for other support services in the family?

Mr RODWELL: In a divorce situation when parents go through a divorce, when you go to court to do the final settlement there should be a standard set where you have to see a counsellor for so long, maybe if you have a child for the first three years or the first five or however long. Then as the child starts growing up you start asking the child's point of view and the child starts coming in so you can mediate on how that is going and how the communication is going and the respect between father-son, mother-son, father-daughter, father-daughter. They should find a happy medium for divorced families and find a mediator who could bring that communication and respect back even though there is a divorce situation.

Mr STEVENS: I am thinking more when parents are actually breaking up they do it and bring the child in and ask from the child's point of view what they think they see happens.

Mr RODWELL: That is the same if there was a separation or a divorce.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It can change though. What is agreed on initially the child is fine and it can be different later.

CHAIR: Tully, you say counselling should be ongoing over a period of time and Brett, you say think about what is practical at the time and perhaps do it at the point of separation.

Mr RODWELL: You do it at the point of separation and then—

Mr STEVENS: Not just once. Like Tully said, just keep moving along and bringing the child in and trying to get what they think.

Mr TALLON: Counselling could be really helpful. If that is not possible, I think it needs to be made clear to the parents what problems have been arising from past divorces for the children so that they understand that in 10 years' time if they are hassling their son to talk to their dad because they do not want to that is a problem and the many other problems in communication, just so they know for the future.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: In your submission you talk about school counsellors and issues that children 9 to 14 have in terms of making an appointment or wanting to see a counsellor and their peers knowing about it. There were further comments about some of the school counsellors and their ability to be able to assist young people with their problems. Would you care to make some comments about that and also the aspect of transition from primary school to secondary school and the importance of counselling in that regard?

Mr RODWELL: School counsellors are textbook. You walk in, you sit down, they patronise you. They ask you a question, "Do you have daddy problems?" They do not actually listen. They read from the textbook, they get you out, they get the next kid in. They do not actually understand what you are going through.

Mr STEVENS: They are not qualified for the job, I think. They are meant to counsel you but they do not. They just sit there and ask you question after question after question and say, "All right, see you next time." When you come back in the next day they ask you your name again. They do not even know you. It is just like classes, it is not actually helping out.

CHAIR: These are counsellors at school?

Mr RODWELL: Yes. They put a band-aid on. It is the band-aid theory. Put a band-aid on it, get the kid out, and get another one coming through because they have got so many kids. There is one counsellor in a public school with nearly a thousand kids. One counsellor. And there is a huge transition period between primary school to secondary school. I remember when I went from primary school to secondary school I was a public school student. I remember sitting down and doing my first lessons in maths and English and just going, "Holy crap, what is this?"

CHAIR: Because it was work you did not recognise?

Mr RODWELL: Yes. That is an issue for a young person. You are in a new school, everyone is so big around you and you are sitting there going, "Oh suck". All kids like that are going to have a problem and some people deal with it better than others. You go to a counsellor who is not going to listen and is going to read from a textbook. You have to tell him what you think is right, this is what he wants to hear just to get you out. There should be more of them, they should be better qualified and they should probably be a little bit younger.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Would it be your preference to talk to a teacher you trust rather than a counsellor?

Mr RODWELL: Yes, because the teacher would know you as well. The teacher would remember who you are. The teachers that we have know us by name, they know everyone by name because they teach them every day, day in day out. They know them. They know them from years 7 to 12.

Mr TALLON: I really support the idea that they are younger and there should be male for males—male and female—and the male should remember what it was like to go through puberty only five or six years ago so it is still fresh in his mind.

Mr RODWELL: And they are enthusiastic.

Mr STEVE CANSELL: We had similar comments from a hearing in Sydney with school students. They were saying rather than a school counsellor where it is formal and things noted are down, which could come against them later on, they wanted someone to speak to, to chat to.

Mr TALLON: Yes.

Mr STEVENS: Going to Kayee's point, there is no trust. You go to a school counsellor and you just do not know who they are. You are expected to let everything out. I would go to my roll call teacher. I have had her since year 7 and I know her quite well. I walk in the class and I go, "Hey, Mrs Crethar". You see her walking through the garden and you say hi to her. I trust her and I would go to her to talk to, but the school counsellor—

Mr RODWELL: A lot of school counsellors are not there all day, they are there for two hours. You hardly ever see them because they do not come out of their room, so there is no real bond. You do not see them in the playground and go, "Hi, how are you going? It was good having a chat." There is no real bond that is set up between seeing their face around and being able to talk to them outside of the formalities inside their room. When you are upset, when you are feeling down, when you feel like you need somebody to talk to, it is like talking to a book. That is all that it is.

Mr COOPER: The point that Ahri made before and as was said in a lot of the responses, it is like coming from a textbook. School counsellors and school staff, they seem to lack basic judgements and responses to moral instincts, like they do not read the child's body language.

Miss HORT: What the other Ben was saying, I kind of liken it to school photographers. You go in there and they say "Smile" and it is like, "What am I smiling about? Why should I pour my heart out to you? Who you are? Why should I trust you?" Maybe school counsellors are not the way to go or the current system definitely is not the way to go because you hardly know this person. You would not go up to a random person in the street and just tell them all stuff about you. So how is that any different?

CHAIR: There is debate about school counsellors, the number of them and what works. That is useful information. Ahri, you said earlier when you were in year 8 and a bored youth and you were going out and getting into a bit of trouble. Is there anything in particular that changed you or made a difference to you that, as you moved on, you thought you needed to operate in a different way? What made the difference? What made you turn the corner to become more settled—maybe still bored sometimes but a more settled young person?

Mr TALLON: No, I am never bored, I am always busy. I just went to a public school, Richmond River, and all my friends were smoking all the time and going in a downward spiral and not doing much. One afternoon my friend asked me to go to boxing at the PCYC and that kind of sets off a chain reaction where I got involved in more sport, I got involved in the PCYC. I can pretty much thank the PCYC because I went on this leadership camp—the Blue Star program, you might have heard of it in Sydney. Then I became the State youth representative and it turned into a big snowball from getting involved in a community sport. That was it, just getting involved.

CHAIR: That is very illuminating. How old were you when you started going to the PCYC? What year was that?

Mr TALLON: I think that would have been towards the end of year 8.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I want to ask about the ladder in your introduction. I found that very challenging and I feel we have a big responsibility to meet your expectations. I thank you for placing them on us. In terms of your life, which rung do you see as the one that would best describe your life experiences as young people? The world you are living in, would you say that generally adults treat you at rung one, two, three, four? Would anyone like to comment on your experiences, because it gives us a wonderful framework?

Mr TALLON: I think it is kind of like politics, as you show more interest and you move up the ladder in power and the people take you seriously you slowly develop more recognition of what you have to say.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: When you were at school, for example, what would be the one that best way to describe how adults engaged with you?

Mr TALLON: Well, it depends on the person. If the teacher knows that this kid is a joke and he is just mucking around all the time, he is not going to take him seriously but if he knows he has got serious views, he is trying to make an impact, it depends on the person concerned.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You can work your way up?

Mr TALLON: Yes.

CHAIR: It is reciprocal and not just a one-way process?

Mr TALLON: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Someone commented on school councils. Do you have any comments about councils?

Miss HORT: Student Representative Councils—for example, in primary school I was school captain and I remember parliament meetings how few there were. But the ones that were there, it was kind of like you would suggest something and then the teacher who is supposed to be facilitating would just go, you know, and it was like a reasonable idea—it was like Let's have a casual day—"Oh, no, that's a bad idea. How about we have this instead?" It is kind of just a way for the teacher to get their views across and make it look like it is the kids'. I am not on the SRC in high school but I have had friends that are. But also the way to get on the SRC it is kind of just a popularity vote. It is like, there is no real like, what do you actually stand for? What are you actually going to do? It is like, oh well, I can either vote for Anna, Giselle or Sarah. I like Anna, I am just going to vote for her whether or not she is actually going to do anything is another ball game.

Mr TALLON: That is really true.

Mr COOPER: I suppose hanging out at university quite a bit, and doing a lot of social activism like around gay rights and stuff, I have usually been culture shocked by just how active and how much the SRC at universities really participate in comparison with high school. Like when I was at high school I felt like the only thing the SRC really did was organise Jeans for Genes Day and Daffodil Day.

Miss HORT: School socials.

Mr COOPER: School socials and that was about as active as they ever got. When I went to uni it is just like "Wow!" You have all been to uni?

CHAIR: Not necessarily. I do not know actually.

Mr STEVENS: It is kind of different to our school. I think the best choice they ever made was to elect our school captain because he just pretty much does everything. He does everything from arranging socials and all that to organising—

Mr RODWELL: Fundraising for year 12. He organises the teachers as well.

CHAIR: Is that a good thing?

Mr RODWELL: You look at him and you would not think he is the most popular bloke in high school. Like he is not your popular bloke. He is a country boy. He has short hair, glasses and you would not pick him to be a popular boy. I do not really believe it is always a popularity vote. We chose him. Year 12 chose our school captain because of what we know he could have done and he has done exactly that. He has raised a lot of money for all our year 12 formal. He has done a lot of good things at school. He has organised Spirit Week. He goes up in his car—

CHAIR: What is Spirit Week?

Mr STEVENS: Raising the spirit of young children and stuff. You have music days and the free sausage sizzles.

CHAIR: Does he draw other people into the work that he is doing?

Mr RODWELL: Yes. I am part of the year 12 fundraising committee as well. He is the main guy and organises all the fundraising for that.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: He could be a future member for Lismore.

Mr RODWELL: You see him at school before 8.00 o'clock in the morning. He does not leave until 6.00 o'clock in the evening. He organises like school working bees. He is there of a weekend cleaning up the school. He is doing more than the teachers are.

CHAIR: Is this unusual for school captain?

Mr STEVENS: For the last working bee we had, we were making a new garden. The big timber pine blocks we were using he went and bought himself, put them on his ute. He had to leave them in his ute for two weeks or so because they did not have any place to put it. So he is driving around in his ute with these big timber blocks sliding from side to side. It is unbelievable how much work he does around the school.

Mr RODWELL: But we chose him because we knew he would get it done. He could do that. We knew that, so a popularity vote is not always the case.

CHAIR: It shows that people can make the right decisions if given the chance. Are there any final questions or issues that committee members want to raise?

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: I just want to congratulate them. The school captain is amazing. It sounds like he is a magnet for a lot of people to include him in progressing positives. He obviously is because you are all enthused by him. Congratulations.

Mr STEVENS: Everyone just looks up to him too. If someone walks around and they have some food and they chuck their rubbish on the ground. He says "Come on, pick up your rubbish and put it in the bin" and they will actually just do it. Like year 7 gremlins will just pick it up and say "sorry" and put it in the bin. It is unbelievable.

CHAIR: Are there any final points that any members of the young people's committee would like to make that the committee has not covered?

Mr COOPER: I would like to make a point about multiculturalism in comparison with rural and regional areas. I find that in rural areas men and women would more likely conform to traditional stereotypes about what is male and what is female. Anywhere where there are shades of grey in that you can really experience a lot of isolation and marginalisation in small country towns because you are not used to difference, you do not walk around town. Yes, I think that is quite a big issue. I also think bullying is also a big issue. Recently, only last week, at Lismore a kid committed suicide. I think bullying is really rampant in schools. I just did not make that point before.

Mr TALLON: I want to talk about young people in the workforce. There needs to be a better eye kept on franchises especially, and the AWAs or the situations they had with young people. I had a job and did not know what was going on. They just told me to sign this and I signed it and then I was kind of ripped off.

Mr RODWELL: I worked for \$5.80 or \$6 an hour. Whenever I worked overtime I got paid food.

CHAIR: Eventually how did you deal with those situations?

Mr TALLON: Got sacked.

CHAIR: Got sacked when you took it up?

Mr TALLON: They would expect you to come into work to find out what times you were working and then they could change the times when you do not know about it.

Mr RODWELL: I got too old and they had other people that I had trained took over all my shifts so I just quit because I was a trainer. I trained all the new people and the young ones are on \$5.80 an hour whereas I should have been on about \$10 an hour, and they gave my shifts away because it was cheaper.

CHAIR: Have other people had bad experiences in the workplace?

Mr STEVENS: Especially fast food. They put my shifts on the Internet. I would print it out and I would know when I was to work next week. I would go to work then and I am not working. "I checked it on the Internet. Here is the sheet".

Miss HORT: Often young people do not know what their rights are. Like we are not educated. You know, you can try to decipher a government document and what not, but there is a lot of jargon in it. So there needs to be lots more education for young people about what are your rights at work, and what should and should you not stand for and what can you do.

CHAIR: Thank you so much, you have been fantastic. You have really given us a good insight into a lot of the issues for young people in Lismore but also some fuller and deeper issues to think about as well. We appreciate your time. I know some of you are doing your trials and everyone has got lots on. The committee report is expected to be finalised by the end of November. We will certainly make available copies through Anne so that you can have a look at the committee report. We hope that you will be happy with the way we have reflected some of the issues that you have put forward. Are you happy to give the committee permission to make public what you have said at the hearing today? You will be sent a copy of the transcript so you can check it and make sure that it is accurate and reflects what you said. Are you happy for that to be made public?

(Agreed by all)

(Short Adjournment)

CHAIR: I welcome Herb Roberts and ask him to conduct the Welcome to Country ceremony.

Mr HERB ROBERTS: I personally acknowledge to everyone for asking me to come along and acknowledge that we are on Bundjalung ground. I belong to the Bundjalung nation of the Widjabul tribe. I do not stand here to say that this is my land, I do not stand here to say that this is your land. I stand here today and say that this is our land and together we must share this fond land and look after it. In saying that, I formally welcome you in my native tongue of the Widjabul tribe, which I belong to, which is the Lismore area:

Jingi-Walla blagganmirr Bundjalung Jogun.

In English, that is basically, everyone here today welcome and thank you for coming along and welcome on Bundjalung land.

CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. My name is Carmel Tebbutt, I am the Chair of the Committee.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am Catherine Cusack, a member of the Legislative Council, the upper House.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: I am Andrew McDonald, the member of Parliament for Macquarie Fields in the south-west of Sydney.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Steve Cansdell, the State member for Clarence.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: I am Kayee Griffin, a member of the New South Wales Legislative Council.

CHAIR: As you are all aware, the Committee is inquiring into the needs of children between the ages of nine and 14 years. Yesterday we were in Casino largely and then went to Lismore. Later today we are going to Ballina. Thank you all for coming to this roundtable discussion. We have found that this is an area in which there is a lot of interest. There seems to have been some research, but not as much as there is into earlier years, adolescents and teenagers. The evidence from people, along with service providers that we meet with is an important part of the Committee putting together its report, which is expected to be available by the end of November.

I welcome also the local member of Parliament for Lismore, Thomas George, to this roundtable proceeding.

The Committee has resolved to publish the transcript of the witness's evidence taken this morning. We will try to keep the proceedings as informal as possible, but in order to be able to use what you say and table our Committee report we need to have it recorded in *Hansard* that you agree to that and for you to swear an oath or affirmation. Please give your full name and address and the capacity in which you are appearing before the Committee.

PETER GERARD CARROLL, Principal, Trinity Catholic College, 1 Dawson Street, Lismore, and

LEE-ANN EMZIN, Aboriginal Community Development Officer, Lismore City Council, 43 Oliver Ave, Goonellabah, sworn and examined:

ROBERTO KENK, Social Planning Co-ordinator, Ballina Shire Council, corner Tamar and Cherry Streets, Ballina,

FRANCES TRIMBOLI, Regional Manager, YWCA New South Wales, 101A Rous Road, Goonellabah,

BRETT PARADISE, Reconnect Regional Manager, Northern Rivers Social Development Council, 22 Cathcart Street, Lismore,

DON JACKSON, Client Services Manager, Community Connections North Coast Inc., 17b Keen Street, Lismore, and

DANIEL PROKOP, Spokesperson, Pathways Foundation, Suite 2, Level 1, 44 Burringbar Street, Mullumbimby, affirmed and examined.

CHAIR: This proceeding is similar to the roundtable at Casino held yesterday. We will take evidence until 12.35 p.m. and discussions can continue over lunch. The Committee will ask you questions but you are free to make any comments about the people in rural and regional areas. What do you think are the issues for children and young people in the nine to 14 years age group in the Lismore area.

Ms TRIMBOLI: Transport.

Mr PARADISE: Activities, associated with transport.

Mr PROKOP: Safe places to go.

Mr PARADISE: Early intervention, right way through to crisis, particularly prevention, in a diverse way.

Mr PROKOP: That is my cue. We are a registered charity. We perceive the greatest challenges are the loss of a system to help our young people grow up. The nine to 14 years is when that was traditionally done. We live in Neverland, no-one wants to grow up. Last week I walked the streets of Byron and asked students, "When are you going to grow up?" Guess what the answer was?

CHAIR: Never?

Mr PROKOP: Yes, never. This is the age group that we focus on for rites of passage. We have young people who will grow up and have to leave Neverland at some point.

CHAIR: What do you mean by we have lost the rites of passage? What have we lost?

Mr PROKOP: We know traditional healthy societies all had a rite of passage for boys and girls from childhood to young adulthood. They managed that transition period which is so difficult, not just for the children but also for the parents. We understand that they spend more time, energy and resources on the rites of passage than on any other aspect of community life, more than planting, more than harvesting, because they recognise the survival of their community depended upon them having grown men and women as members rather than overgrown boys and girls. Whilst the way that they did it varied from different cultures, the main elements of the rites of passage were the same across all societies that we have studied.

CHAIR: Any other comments?

Mr KENK: Part of the issue is that the age group is almost forgotten in terms of the programs that we offer. Often youth services target 12 to 25s and they are developing programs for 15 and over. That earlier age group just gets left out.

Ms TRIMBOLI: In terms of our responses from Community Services there is no funding available specifically for that age group to be able to provide both activities and continuity of service.

CHAIR: Does anyone offer services specifically for that age bracket?

Ms TRIMBOLI: We do, but we have to have a cap-in-hand approach to secure funds. We find it really difficult to find specific funding for that age group. Obviously there is a great deal for the early intervention programs nought to five, the Department of Community Services Families NSW nought to eight and the young people's age group, which is usually 12 to 25. So you can see there is definitely a gap for children nine through to 12 in a number of areas, whether it be after-school activities or recreational programs during school holidays because it is still an age group that needs support and supervision.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: What sort of family support services do you believe are lacking and need greater input from government?

Ms TRIMBOLI: I think that we have a number of family support services but those services attract the same funding which we all apply for. Largely that is for, let us say, community services for children nought to five early intervention programs or Families New South Wales nought to eight. With some of those services we may have a family with a child that is eight, nine or 10 and they are unable to be referred to those services because they do not meet the funding criteria. We are often trying to juggle between services or slip a few kids through that do need additional assistance.

Brother CARROLL: I am only new to the area in the last six months, so I am not in a good position to comment on the particular needs of young people in Lismore. The thing that attracts me to this particular committee and what came through in the terms of reference was the emphasis on resilience and helping students develop resilience. From my point of view as a teacher and a school principal, the general need I see is a need to support students develop that ability to cope with setbacks and to cope with transitions in life and challenges. That would be the essential need that I see in young people in this particular age group. One of the great tragedies is the increasing prevalence of depression at younger ages, which we know from research and firsthand experience.

CHAIR: If young people in this age group are to be given the opportunity to develop resilience, what activities are needed?

Brother CARROLL: There are all sorts of things. There is increasing evidence you can teach young people skills that create a more optimistic outlook and therefore help them to develop a certain element of resilience. The other thing I think is so important is good role models for young people. The idea, that young people will do as they see does happen. That is a crucial thing. Also to engage them in committees and things that are productive and give them a sense of mastery over their environment, being able to achieve something. In the previous session a young man said it was only when he went to boxing at the PCYC that he started to engage. That is great evidence of the importance of that sort of activity and involvement.

Mr PROKOP: We deliver services and our Pathways to Manhood program is for 13- to 15-year-olds and also a tiny bit older. We take some children slightly older than this group. Also for girls we do 12- to 15-year-olds. In terms of resilience, as the Brother was saying, we involve the whole family. Whilst the focus is on the child, the father is involved, or a mentor. We have a lot of single-parent families that are particularly attracted to what we do because they do not have appropriate role models. The children see role models; they connect with the community. The mothers are also involved, so we involve both parents. The mother is losing a child and gaining a young person. They also have demonstrated for them respectful communication. In terms of building resilience that is one of the features of all the strong family models that I have read about. It is about involving the whole community and it is for all children. We have to find their gifts and acknowledge them for their gifts. They all have gifts. They will find mastery in PlayStation or X-box if we do not offer them alternatives. It can be scary. I hear that children in Japan can lock themselves away in their room and never come out. Stop feeding them means they die.

Mr JACKSON: The main reason why young people present to us to seek accommodation, at 16 to 19, is family breakdown and conflict. So we need more support for families around mediation.

Mr KENK: Some of the youth workers in Ballina have identified that a lot of parents are approaching them and asking them for assistance in parenting skills. They do not know how to deal with the issues that the

young people are dealing with, looking at developmental issues, social issues. What the gentlemen were saying makes a lot of sense.

Mr PARADISE: We run a reconnect service, which works primarily for 12- to 18-year-olds. We got about 100 referrals last year from Grafton to Tweed that were under our age group and we could not take any of them. That is early intervention, mainly handling family conflicts, teaching communication skills, building resilience. It is a fairly holistic approach. We are seeing these young people are needing this support earlier and we are finding it is a little late by the time we are getting there.

CHAIR: What age did you say you covered?

Mr PARADISE: It is 12 to 18.

CHAIR: If someone younger comes you cannot offer a service because you are not funded to support that age group?

Mr PARADISE: No. We quite often would be able to take them just under the 12-year mark obviously knowing they are going to get there soon. We are getting referrals for 9 to 19-year-olds quite regularly. We are unable to do anything about that. There is a need for a community approach. I feel there is an attitude or a new mindset that parents have all responsibility. There is that old saying that it takes a village to raise a child. The more I work in the sector the more I believe that we really do need to take a community approach. Significant adults and peers that are of the same age group are just as important. More programs that work on building up those peer relationships in a formal and informal sense are crucial. We have seen Kyogle High School has done a peer mentor program where year 12 students peer mentor young students. Quite often those mentors were what were termed 'the troubled children' in that age group. They have shown their ability that they are ready to be good mentors and change their own behaviours to mentor those young people. Programs like the Auntie and Uncle program that are always struggling to find recurrent funding can barely keep up with the referrals they are getting. They have seen great results with the little that they can do. More of that connectedness in a community sense and any programs looking at that are crucial.

Mr KENK: I would like to back up what Brett is saying. In the slightly older age group at Lennox Head there have been some issues, but everybody in the community screams that somebody has got to fix it but nobody is putting up their hands to take responsibility. So a whole of community response would be preferable.

Ms TRIMBOLI: In terms of what Brett is saying, you may as well be working for the YWCA because the model of service delivery that we operate under is called It Takes a Village, or ITAV. Through research that we conducted in late 2003 throughout the State we developed a model of service because we felt that it was imperative to work with individuals at all stages of the life cycle. We have programs from 0 to adulthood with flexible entry points so that individuals can come in at any stage or be involved in a number of programs. Often members within families or extended families can be part of our services as well. We find that assists families in terms of becoming connected, seeking the service they need as they need it, developing additional skills and building resilience as you go through those individual transitions because it is different for every one. That model has been serving us well but in terms of, if you wanted to look at it as a flow chart, there are some patchy areas where we could do with some more funding to fill the gaps in those areas.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is that a pilot program?

Ms TRIMBOLI: No. We have been operating since, I think it started in 2004, but it is the model of service delivery that we use for the YWCA in New South Wales.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is clear to the committee that there is insufficient service or focus on this age group. Your comment about rites of passage was fascinating. Is it that this area has been neglected or is it because of a new demand for government to come in and fill a void that has been created in recent years? Is the task to really build it up? What should government be doing? Is it unrealistic for government to actually fill a void in a family anyway?

Mr PROKOP: There are a couple of things in that. We have not had rites of passage in the Anglo Saxon culture for a very long time. I think if we reflect briefly we can identify that in industry, some politics and in popular culture we have actually started to revere the infantile and the puerile. We make celebrities out of people who are in adult bodies but are behaving like children. The consequence is people are not taking

responsibility for their actions. We are not taking responsibility for the planet. If I could indulge, just to quote Barack Obama who recently said:

Too many fathers are AWOL, missing from too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families [and our communities] are weaker because of it ... any fool can have a child. That does not make you a father. It's the courage to raise a child that makes you a father.

Parents are struggling with the teenage years because they do not have role models to turn to in difficult times. And with the time pressure on most families the opportunity to go out and seek that mentoring—I am just struggling. My 14-year-old is just doing this. We could take it personally. What we know about this age range is physiologically they are going through massive changes and not just physical, but mentally they are rewiring. It is like they are doing a complete memory dump in the computer and they are actually creating new synapses all the time. So they will go through periods where they are pretty together and then they will regress. And the great thing is, it can happen like that. So one moment they want a cuddle and the next moment you are the parent from hell. That is difficult for parents. We also provide Raising Teenagers talks where we help talk about what it is going to be like for this period. So that is the challenge.

Can government help? Absolutely, because I think in delivering talks on raising teenagers, on growing up that that is a conversation that needs to happen. Neverland is not where we are supposed to live forever. The rites of passage programs were once done for every child. It would be elders who would say "This one is ready". Because they are not all ready at the same age, it is a range of ages. And if we do not invest something for them in this age range then we bear the consequences, like Obama said, later in life. We put children behind the wheels of cars. They do not grow up and then we try to restrict the child with more and more things—they can't do this, they can't do that—but we have not addressed the fundamental problem, they have not grown up.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In trying to create a more diverse society with more options where more people are valued and given life choices, are we losing some sense of accountability and responsibility, particularly for fathering?

Mr PROKOP: There is a big juggling act. We have generations of men that have not been able to communicate particularly well. Their role has changed dramatically. We have one of our trustees here who has heard men say at 50 that they do not know if they are a man or not. They are not sure whether they have grown up and that confusion is sad. To be a man in this society, what does it look like? We do not have many role models for it. I think I am getting a little bit lost here.

CHAIR: It is interesting and it is not really something that has been said by any of our previous speakers. It goes to the heart of what we are talking about in terms of kids making that transition through to adulthood and doing that well.

Ms EMZIN: Can I just add to the rites of passage, I know I am probably preaching to the converted but we have got to remember that for this age group the choices that they are making now in terms of their circle of friends, their choice of action, defines almost where their life path is going to go.

CHAIR: Do you say more at this nine to 14 years age group?

Ms EMZIN: Nine to 14 is where they have got a little bit more independence and a little more freedom. At nine you think you are going on 21. These days I see the difference in children who are nine. They used to be babies at nine, with the girls playing with dolls and boys with trucks, but it is different now. The world has changed. At nine they are wearing, I do not know whether it is a short skirt or a very wide belt but they are wearing things that they possibly should not be and there seems to be a lack of guidance around those sorts of issues. It is about how they make choices. A little girl of nine wearing a short top with a mini skirt is not giving her a sense of herself, and what being dignified is. Short skirts and short shirts are okay in the right setting but it is also sending a message for older boys to take notice. Is she able to deal with that? I do not think so.

CHAIR: What do you think we should be doing about that? There has been a lot of focus on the early sexualisation of children. Is it up to parents, the community or government?

Ms EMZIN: As a community I think it is about the village growing up the child but there are also a lot of village idiots around and that concerns me. Personally I was really lucky as a single parent. I had a 14-year-old. I have had her by myself since she was 18 months old. Wherever I have lived I have been lucky enough to

live in a village that were her parents as well. Really incredibly lucky that she had safe people who treated her like their own, and that was my choice in seeking out the people that I wanted to influence her. The rite of passage is about the message that I give to her. It is about the message that she is getting from her community.

I come from a culture where the community does raise the child. I do not know how many mothers I have got but there certainly are a lot. I may not have had a father around to grow me up but I certainly had good role models. The thing about this nine to 14 year age group, or any child for that matter, is that it is about the messages that they are getting. If they are hanging around with a pool of people who are questionable in the choices that they are making, it is okay to have the conversation with them. I know what these kids are doing in my town. I know all the kids in my town because I make it my business to know who they are. I know their parents and I know some of the homes that they come from. It is about being able to say to my child and her friends, you know this lad here might be a nice looking lad and he might be all of these things, but what are his actions? What does he do? What does he say about himself? It is the conversations that adults have with kids. I do not think children are stupid.

CHAIR: Do you think adults are finding it more difficult to have those conversations in a meaningful way with their children?

Ms EMZIN: I think that some adults are really scared to talk to young people. It is like, is there a question about, are you on the same page? What do you talk about to young people? It is okay to have conversations with a young person about themselves, about their own self-image, about what is going on for them and kids need to feel safe that it is okay to have those conversations. I am lucky enough that I live in a small town and I can do that. I do not know how it would go in the city. You do not get to see the same faces every day.

One of the local lads from where I live was here playing up on the school holidays. It was very nice for him to hear me say to him, "You come down to where I work and I will have to take you home, personally", but that sort of engagement with the kids in our community does not exist any more. There are people who are scared of: "If I am seen to be doing this, what does it say about me as an adult?" It places questions, and that is damaging for people who have the right intention to care about people in their community.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: The Committee had a discussion this morning in relation to school counsellors and whether children and young people feel comfortable talking to their school counsellors. Some of the comments this morning were that they did not feel the counsellor knew them; they did not know them as their teachers knew them and were not there for the school day and so on. The students were very reluctant to talk to the counsellors and felt that many did not listen to them. They would be more comfortable with other people.

That leads on to mentoring and the transition from primary to high school and the support that young people need when moving to a new school, being the new kid on the block and the changes in the operation of the education system in high school as opposed to primary and the type of work that they have to do as a student. Do you have any comments in relation to that?

Ms TRIMBOLI: Yes. In our role in the community, we are doing some scoping consultation around in-school mentoring programs. We have done mentoring previously, but we feel it is paramount—and from the evidence we are gathering now we would like to have a program to start in years 5 and 6 and transit the kids through to years 7 and 8. In year 8 the wheels tend to fall off. We will have that relationship with those students, instead of it being part-time counsellors or a counsellor who has to work with hundreds of children. If we have a presence we can work with the school counsellor and with the support of the school staff, we can identify the kids that potentially will have challenges with that transition. We can work with them in the longer term during the transition period when they do reach high school years.

CHAIR: Any comments on the education system?

Brother CARROLL: In terms of transition from primary to secondary, there are stresses in almost all transitions. Sometimes stress is overstated. By the time students get to the end of primary they are quite ready and looking forward to a change. In most cases the period of stress is rather short lived. A lot of time they adapt quickly and successfully to high school. The novelty factor helps. It is often after year 7 where difficulties arise, because there is that novelty.

Some schools have very successfully made some adaptations to their high school programs and reduced the number of teachers that the years 7 and 8 students deal with each day. So the transition is not as great and the change is not as great as going from primary with two teachers to high school with eight teachers. In the middle school years, there are programs which are not so readily available in New South Wales as in other places. You could put that as a primary focus for the early years in high school.

I know counsellors copped a bit of a beating in the earlier session. I suppose it depends largely on the counsellors in particular schools. I do not think we can underestimate the difficulty of their role. It is a very underresourced area. I have a school of 1,200 students. We have one full-time counsellor and then a part-time person who is not strictly speaking a counsellor, more a home school liaison officer. The students respond very positively. It depends on the personnel I suppose. There are a lot of stresses in the role and if there were more resources counsellors could be involved in more programs that are more preventative, instead of just reacting to what is going to them. That is very important, that schools have programs that are proactive, dealing with issues that they know are there and that they know will arise.

I suppose it just depends, but there were interesting comments from young people about the approachability of counsellors. For many young people it is a matter of having someone who they know and who knows them and is a caring figure and who they are happy to talk to.

CHAIR: Any other comments?

Mr PARADISE: I work closely with school counsellors right across the region. In their defence they are extremely busy, almost a revolving door. They do not get to do any back-up work in between seeing students. There is quite often, from the students' point of view, a reticence to engage on the school level because that is their major community. To engage on issues that might be of a personal nature is very hard. Given the numbers of students in schools, most of them would need far more school counsellors than they have. There is a lack, right across the region, of any real counselling outside school that is focused on young people or children.

A couple of psychologists have some skills in the area, but they are completely booked out. Community Connections has some ability to do some, but throughout the region that is the only free service for young people to access outside their school community. Reconnect workers are trained as counsellors and that is where most of our referrals come from, school counsellors. They are not able to keep up with that. Also, school counsellors find it hard to tap into out-of-school stuff, to home life stuff. They are really just getting that one point of view from the young person and they have not been able to do any real work in between.

Ms EMZIN: I would like to reinforce that around school counsellors. With young people I have dealt with there is a shame element attached to going to see a school counsellor. There is not a great link or, I suppose, a visible pathway to get support other than Kids Helpline, that is meaningful. Some kids have horrendous home lives and the fact that they engage in the school community. If they are not performing academically, they need to go and see someone, whether it is because of their home life I do not know. There seem to be a lot of barriers around counselling.

I agree with Brett that the outside support, the psychologists and professional people who can deal with teenagers, have speciality areas for dealing with teenagers, is really lacking on the North Coast. The other thing I know to be true about visiting in the counselling system is that if you ask yourself if you want to talk to someone that you do not know about things that are worrying you, there is that element of engagement about building rapport. Speaking to someone at the school, someone in authority, there is not the ability to establish that rapport. It limits their time, especially if they do not have the time to deal with the kids.

Mr KENK: In Sydney there are new health services like High Street in Parramatta, or the Warehouse at Penrith. If we had something like that here it would go a long way to helping some of these issues.

CHAIR: So, there is really nothing like that with a specific youth health focus?

Ms EMZIN: No.

CHAIR: You referred to the adolescent mental health service?

Mr KENK: In another area.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That is the first time there was anything in the region, there was nothing in the Northern Rivers, from Grafton to Murwillumbah.

Ms TRIMBOLI: They have just introduced into Richmond Clinic, the adolescent unit, which is a bit positive for this area. In terms of clinical services external to the hospital, there is such a long waiting period that it is virtually impossible. Families and children need the care immediately. It is just not there for them.

Could I make one other point? In terms of the school counsellors, through my work I do experience a lot of concern regarding how overloaded they are and how they seem to be working with a lot of the same kids most of the time. In the primary setting the impact it has on other students who do have needs, they are seeing kids who have behavioural issues going to the counsellors and they do not want to identify in the same way. So they are reluctant to access the service. Those kids who could have maybe one or two visits to overcome their challenges are excluded in some regards because it is more the crisis situation that is being attended to. So those kids are not being serviced at all. They probably would stay out of the system or not have continued issues if they just had that little bit of service up front when they needed it.

Mr JACKSON: I think school counsellors play an important role in extreme cases and they are pretty good at advocating and referring. As a preventative measure the program that Brett mentioned before, the Kyogle Youth Ventures, where you get the year 10 and year 11 students mentoring year 7 kids. I think that is a way of breaking down that issue around people feeling a bit funny about seeing a counsellor. They can talk to an older student who they look up to.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: When things go wrong, everyone says, "Quick, get the school counsellor." The young people have basically said it is a complete and utter waste of time. What is your experience with these children and young people when they go to a school counsellor?

Mr JACKSON: I think their time is taken up with extreme cases. They might get one child that needs a week's worth of work for one counsellor to sort out whatever their issue is, whether it is accommodation or further counselling, all that sort of stuff.

Ms TRIMBOLI: In terms of some of the work that we have done in the primary school setting that some of the counsellors have been very valuable to primary school students. I am not sure whether the response that you have from the previous session was the older age group we are talking about. In primary school I know of a couple of counsellors that are very well regarded and loved by students at the school.

Brother CARROLL: It depends so much on the individual. The quality of counsellors varies. My experience is I would not want to be in a school without a counsellor because they are so invaluable in terms of supporting students. I agree with everything said about the fact that they are under a lot of stress because of the caseloads that they have. But I do think that they are just invaluable.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You were here to listen to the evidence given in the last session. The message was very clear from the young people about the value of counselling. I find that confronting, and I found their evidence confronting as well. Do we need to redesign the structure? Is our current way of thinking not effective? The young people were very much individuals but saying the same thing to us. I am worried about disregarding them, saying there are not enough resources or finding excuses and not addressing what they said to us.

CHAIR: For the people who were not present this morning, we had the young people advisory group from the Centre for Children and Young People give evidence and they talked about, among many things, school counsellors. A couple in particular who had experiences with their school counsellors were dismissive of how useful they were. They felt it was not a very good experience and not very helpful.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I did not interpret it that they were attacking the counsellors. It was the system. They would turn up, the counsellor would not remember their names or did not know their names. They are meant to meet them, unload, go away. It was of no benefit to them, quite clearly. It was not an attack on the counsellors. I considered it more to be the system and that we are not using counsellors appropriately. Are we using counsellors so that the teacher does not have to be engaged? I feel I need to defend what they said because it was so clear.

Mr KENK: Not having been here this morning, it may be interesting if the counsellors were not attached to the school, not part of the Department of Education, but worked for a non-government organisation and a couple of counsellors were attached to two or three schools. You get more chance to be part of the outside curricular activities and engage that way.

CHAIR: That may well be the case. The young people talked about a range of things, including how relevant they felt the counsellors were in their lives.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: They said they wished the counsellors were younger. They also said with family breakdown they wanted access to a counsellor to negotiate the arrangements with young people. The young man who said he was not coping in year 7 was sent to see a counsellor and that was of no use to him. It was just that he had not encountered the maths and English work before. The reaction was to send him to a counsellor, but he just had an educational support problem.

Mr PARADISE: It just goes back to the time counsellors get. With the high student numbers, teachers probably send students to counsellors when it is probably not the most appropriate avenue. So they are not getting all the cases that they need to be seeing. The other thing is that for anyone that has seen a counsellor or psychologist, quite often as an adult you shop around because you do not identify with somebody straight away. That is a fairly important relationship; you have to be trusting in that relationship. If you have one school counsellor at one school, a lot of kids in that school will not be comfortable with that person.

Ms TRIMBOLI: If you compare that to the private sector in terms of clinical services, what is their caseload normally working with individuals? We have got school counsellors working in an environment where they have 500-plus kids. Of course they are not going to remember their names or their cases. The fact that they are going bang, bang, bang seeing these kids, they do not have time to review their notes. It is probably not as effective as it could be. If it were external to school, I think it would be more effective, but it still needs to have a great deal more resources to have larger numbers of counsellors available.

Mr PROKOP: In this age range they are individuating. They know at some level that they will grow up. Part of that is a push away from adults, and parents and school counsellors are seen as part of that whole thing. What I am hearing is, it is more difficult when they get older and that is because that is what is starting to happen. The delivery needs to take into account the recognition that this is what is happening and that the mentoring traditionally came from older people where it was safe to tell them what was going on because it would never get back out. What they did was cool and they were around, like the tin-she type movements where kids can come and be mentored and just talk about life.

Mr JACKSON: Ideally all adults should be counsellors.

Ms EMZIN: I would like to make a comment about the overburdening that is placed on counsellors. How much of that relates back to the parent's ability to be able to communicate? It is about getting back to the community raises the child. What skill levels do parents have to be able to engage in personal conversation with their kids? It is quite personal. I am wondering how much of that overburdening is dependent on parents' abilities to be able to talk to their kids.

Ms TRIMBOLI: In terms of families that come from a great deal of disadvantage, there is such a gap between the adults and the children now because the children are so knowledgeable and the parents feel they do not have a lot to offer. So that skills gap has an impact on those relationships and the seeking out of advice and support.

CHAIR: We are looking at the issue of after school and school holidays for kids in this age group. Many of the after-school care programs tend to finish when kids leave primary school. There is not much for high school children. It is the same for vacation care programs. Often the youth services for the slightly older age group start at age 12 or 13. In your view, is there a need for programs after school and during school holidays for kids in this age group? Do you have any views about supervision issues? When can you leave a child to come home alone and feel safe? What type of programs work for this age group if, in fact, they are needed?

Ms TRIMBOLI: I can speak to that in terms of the programs that we have previously provided. The Y has a free holiday program for children who are seven to 12 years old.

CHAIR: Is that in this area?

Ms TRIMBOLI: In Goonellabah, which has two Department of Housing estates and has a higher need. Before I started with the Y eight years ago the programming was more geared to 12 and a bit older, but there was a spike in anti-social behaviour and vandalism in those early years so we started to gear back towards those years because there was virtually nothing for them to do during school holidays unless their parents had enough money to support activities. With the program that we have got, holiday programs are not funded or easy to get funds, other than for the support of local government, Department of Housing, a little bit here and there, but really we have had to have a cap in hand approach because it does not fit a criteria for funding. Our program that we have been running for the last seven years currently has no funding and we are trying to find ways to continue that program.

The reason we need those programs that are outside of vacation care is, we have got some vacation care services in this area but they have very large numbers attending and some families need some additional support and also they would like some choice around where their children are going. They also feel that they have no access—and I am talking predominantly the disadvantaged low socio-economic families—to things like PCYC activities. They are \$10 a day. New South Wales Sport and Recreation is \$40 a day. If you have got more than one child, even if you have got a family with two working parents, it is unaffordable. And so children up to the age of 14 still require supervision. It may be that they can be left for a period of time but up to that age group a number of them still need to be supervised during school holidays and so it places a great deal of pressure on middle class families, but in terms of families within the poverty bracket there is very little for them to do during the holiday period. Hence boredom. Next step vandalism. So we tried to find ways to accommodate those issues and have after school activities as well just to keep the children connected, give them opportunity, build on skills and most of our programs are activity based, just to work with those life skills and to work with their peers to develop as individuals.

Mr JACKSON: We used to have a youth club at Nimbin which was supposed to be for 14 to 18 years olds but it was mostly attended by nine to 14 year olds.

CHAIR: Was that funded through a government grant?

Mr JACKSON: No, it was just our usual funding.

CHAIR: What happened at the youth club? What did they do?

Mr JACKSON: The issues of supervision came up and just the Government and parental permission and all that sort of stuff so it is quite tricky in the end. It ended up closing. It was interesting that none of the older teenagers wanted to attend.

CHAIR: Those who did attend, do you think they got some value out of it?

Mr JACKSON: Yes, especially during the school holidays.

Mr PROKOP: In Mullumbimby there is six-a-side soccer that runs part of the year. The focus is not so much on competition but a large number of young people gather at the fields. The games are relatively short. There are enough adults around to keep an eye on things. If somebody has got a problem they can talk to them. This last year was the first year my son did it and I just thought it was fantastic. Those kinds of things where they can gather together and hang out, it is safe, there is no alcohol and there are enough adults, the adults actually are cool with it, and I just thought that kind of thing is fantastic. In the Byron Shire we have no indoor facility really for our children. We have one indoor basketball court which is part of the school. I mean those kinds of things to me are really important to help build community. We get to meet other parents and connect. We are not stressed out of our heads.

CHAIR: Was the soccer activity after school or during school holidays?

Mr PROKOP: After school, one night a week.

CHAIR: It just grew out of parents and kids finding something to do? Was it organised through a club?

Mr PROKOP: It was through the Mullumbimby Soccer Association. They saw nothing was happening during the evenings for the kids and the soccer season had finished and the focus was just on having fun so they swapped teams, there are mixed teams and they have a hoot and it is fantastic.

Brother CARROLL: I think there would be a large number of students who would go home to an empty house or to where there are no adults especially in the case of when parents work. Some, of course, spend a lot of time travelling to and from school, 1½ hours. Others are involved in sports, training and other activities. I am surprised that there has not been a greater outcry for some sort of provision of care after school for the older teenagers. I suspect that people have just thought that it is impossible.

CHAIR: Do you get a sense from parents that they are anxious that their kids are going home and there is no one there? Does that matter arise in conversations?

Brother CARROLL: I think so many have just accepted it. Kids do not seem to get terribly worried about it. I suppose parents do but they think there is nothing else for them to do. The other issue that has received some press coverage is the responsibility is falling more to grandparents in terms of caring for those young people who would drop in to their place on the way home, and those sorts of things. It is a difficult issue.

Mr KENK: I would like to add that existing youth services who advertise holiday programs, for example, say on the flyer 12 to 25. If you are a parent of a 12-year-old would you agree to let them go on an activity with an 18 or a 19 year old? You would not. I actually think there should be targeted programs for 10 to 12 year olds and then perhaps something different again for the older age group. It just does not make sense to have such a large age span in these funded programs. It does not work.

Mr PARADISE: I think sometimes too we get caught up in having to have an organised activity instead of a safe place where "you are not being supervised but there will be adults around" as opposed to "We are going to be watching you". You can actually start to engage with the other young people and the adults as your friends, and there are choices about how you do that. As much as I would love to see youth activity centres and so forth, I think planning, when it comes to towns and neighbourhoods in particular, areas where it is sort of designated that there will be parents and it is a safe environment, that is going to be welcoming to young people. We are thinking about that in a neighbourhood sense and you can say "I am not going to be home".

I look back even to my childhood and I knew that my street—and my parents did not need to know where I was because they knew that I was at another parent's place or I was hanging with the kids in the street and I was parented by the parents in the street. We have lost that. We fear that. I think we need to start to encourage people and the community to actually go back to that and say "Actually we are all a little bit responsible and we will actually take a bit of a load off each of us" and look at that. So identifying those areas and making sure that it is organised properly but not making it "We are supervising you and watching you the whole time" and "You shall be cooking".

CHAIR: Yes, particularly for older kids who often do not want that level of structured activities.

Ms EMZIN: It scares me to think about the choice that you see some of the kids who are above that year 12 age group making in the school holidays locally in Lismore. Unless they know they are invited to go along and be helpers at the free program they do not engage. There have been recent reports of not only vandalism but violence against older residents. You go to a lot of places with that around supervision, why they are doing what they are doing. I think it comes back to the availability of inclusion. We are always talking about social inclusion and community engagement but does that happen at an age group like this? Do they have an input? There are spaces that are available, and shortly are going to be available, but my fear is that the housing estate group will be priced out of being able to access those sorts of things. The vandalism and anti-social behaviour is going to be isolated around that particular area for people who do have access to it. They are considerations that are very concerning when great things are happening that not everybody can have access to that. Like I said, this is a formative time in the lives of young people if they cannot be included are they creative about how they can get themselves out there?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: We have vandalism. When you talk about the haves and the have nots it seems some of the vandalism we see has developed out of that, when you talk about them not being engaged in society, it is not just between generations, it is increasingly the haves and the have nots.

Ms EMZIN: Absolutely. When I talk about engagement, I am talking about engagement within their homes, school and communities. It is on all levels. They have to formulate their own positions. They do not have the mental capacity or the maturity to weigh up the pros and cons. Their thought processes are a little skew-whiff. If you or I see that someone makes a nasty comment we can put that into context, such as they are having a bad day or maybe they were misinformed. Today children of this age will take it, read it and react rather than respond. They are not well equipped to do that without good guidance, whereas we have great schools and great school programs in the local area.

Where is the ability to maintain those good messages from what is going on at school to their homes, to their friends, to their groups and their ability to stand up as individuals and speak for themselves adequately with their strength and conviction? It is a dicey age; you stand up and you face being knocked down because you are a Goody Two-Shoes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: A lot of them are very angry.

Ms EMZIN: Yes, for a lot of reasons. It could be because of their colour and where they come from. In this area we have a diverse community. We have refugees who are impacting on our community. We have a high population of indigenous community members who feel disenfranchised, I guess. It is a little melting pot.

CHAIR: Everything that the Committee heard this morning has been very useful for us to get a better understanding of the needs of children and young people, especially in this age group. It would be useful to hear one thing you believe governments should do to address some of the issues that you have raised. You may have more than one, but one recommendation would help.

Ms TRIMBOLI: The priority for me would be to fund that age group adequately for intervention programs.

Mr KENK: To add to that, identifying that age group as a specific target group and fund it properly.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: Like the nought to fives?

Mr KENK: Yes.

Mr JACKSON: Supporting agencies and places of education to develop living skills.

CHAIR: Living skills amongst children in that age group?

Mr JACKSON: Yes, and around parenting. Everything.

CHAIR: For their parents as well?

Mr JACKSON: Yes.

Ms EMZIN: Ditto to all of the above and add the element of support for parents. I fear that what we have in this local region is very young parents parenting very young people. Their level of maturity to be able to pass on living skills and great advice about dealing with the world might be a bit shy.

CHAIR: Last night we heard from a group of parents and it came through that they felt there was not enough support for parents as the children got older, as they became teenagers.

Mr PARADISE: Pretty much the same, but I would encourage programs that bring in NGOs to incorporate intergenerational activities, to look at how to mesh and meld those into the community.

Mr PROKOP: Bring back rites of passage. Provide contemporary community-based rites of passage, which deliver on a lot of these things. We have older men and women in safe places mentoring young people and with our program we do not tell them what they should or should not do. We know that does not work. They hear stories from other people about the different paths we live in our lives. In this age group we still have connections with parents. As they get a bit older we are not on the pedestal any more. In fact, we have fallen off by the time the kids are 14, but they are still children.

They were never asked whether they wanted to do a rite of passage, because they are still children. That was a decision by the adults, and it happened. This is really important to unlock the door and let us out of Neverland. We do not have role models for this era. As parents we are really different from my Mum and Dad. We are not a nuclear family, they live a long way away. Parents need to change their parenting style over this period, for a nine-year-old it is very different. We still have authority, we are still appropriate. But, as they step on to the bridge of adolescence we need to change that because it does not work.

This leads to frustration, and sometimes frustration can lead to violence and anger. It is not a conversation that is happening about dealing with the transition. It is vital to do something because we bear the consequences of it later when we wring our hands and say "What are we going to do?". We need to do this now. We need to take the bodies out of the river. We have been doing that for a long time, let us go up the river and stop throwing the bodies in.

Brother CARROLL: I do not disagree with anything that has been said. The facilitation of a lot of agencies working together such as schools and community services, to support parents, because that is very important, and to support the development of skills in young people so they can develop. I am not sure our Government does that. That is going back to the very beginning, the comments about groups working together to help parents and schools, because they deal with these young people every day and are in a good position to do that. But once again it gets down to the resources available to deal with those kids.

CHAIR: Do you think schools are becoming more accepting that their role goes beyond the 9.00 a.m. to 3.00 p.m. timeframe?

Brother CARROLL: I think that teachers feel very pressured for all sorts of reasons and they still have a curriculum to deliver every day in the classroom.

CHAIR: Sure, I am not saying they work only between those hours.

Brother CARROLL: They need to focus on different issues that are brought up. It gets back to resourcing of schools with specialist people, personnel, to address those other issues. The answer is that there is probably an understanding that the community expects them to do more, but whether they feel they can is another question.

Mr PARADISE: We are talking about a safe environment that we could use and utilise for young people. Schools are an ideal place. One of the keys would be to open up schools to be more community focused, not just look at it as an educational institution, but as a community place where we do these programs together. Some schools do that in a limited way; it would be good to encourage that more.

Brother CARROLL: Economically the statistics show that 85 per cent of policing is actually related to domestic issues. That is scary. If we invest more in young people in this formative time while we will still have influence that would save a lot of money later.

CHAIR: Does anyone want to say something before we adjourn?

Mr PROKOP: I would like to finish with a quote from Michael Meade:

If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearth of the community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth.

CHAIR: Thomas George, the local member, would like to make a comment.

Mr THOMAS GEORGE: The only thing that I would like to add that has been brought to my attention and someone did touch on it, I think Fran, and I had some schoolteachers approach me just recently, is the lack of mental health support, especially in the primary schools. Fran also touched on that, and we have this adolescent unit here now. Sadly, that has not got the ability, through lack of support, to be able to provide outreach services. That covers from Tweed Heads to Coffs Harbour servicing adolescents and children. The other point I was going to raise was the experience of counsellors. I always thought I was bullet proof and I would never use counsellors. Just listening to the debate here this morning, I went to a program where I used counsellors but I went through about four counsellors before I got to a person that I was happy with. I sat back and listened to the debate here this morning of what children are facing—someone they know and see around the school grounds. I am coming mainly from the primary schools again, because that is where I have had the

incidents brought to my attention. Maybe that needs to be seriously looked at. The school counsellors do a mighty job but how comfortable is a young person dealing with them? I went through four counsellors myself before I was comfortable, and I was able to express myself. Maybe that needs to be looked at. I thank the Committee for being here today and listening to the outstanding contributions made by these people.

CHAIR: Thank you everyone for attending this inquiry. We appreciate that you have given us so much of your time. I also thank the members of the public who have come to listen. I acknowledge the presence of Jenny Dowell from Lismore City Council. I need to ask the witnesses whether you are willing to make public the evidence that you have given today. A transcript will be made available to you so that you can check what you have said has been recorded accurately. You can indicate whether you are willing for the transcript of your evidence to be on the Committee's website after you have made the necessary corrections. Is everyone happy with that?

ALL: Yes.

CHAIR: The Committee resolves to make the evidence public and published on the Committee's website after corrections have been made.

(The Committee adjourned at 12.30 p.m.)