

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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

At Sydney on Tuesday 17 March 2009

The Committee met at 11.15 a.m.

PRESENT

Mr R. D. Coombs (Chair)

Legislative Council

The Hon. K. F. Griffin
Reverend the Hon. F. J. Nile

Legislative Assembly

Ms M. T. Andrews
Mr S. R. Cansdell

CHAIR: I declare open the inquiry of the Committee on Children and Young People into Children and Young People 9 to 14 years in New South Wales and ask all those attending to switch off their mobile phones as they interfere with the recording equipment.

MAREE GIRDLER, Divisional Manager, Integrated Planning, Waverley Council, PO Box 9, Bondi Junction, and

MARGARET BROWN, Project Officer, Supporting Young People's Connection to Activities, Waverley Council, 31-33 Spring Street, Bondi Junction, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today, Ms Girdler and Ms Brown. I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and also with a brochure entitled "Information for Witnesses Before Parliamentary Committees." Is that correct?

Ms GIRDLER: That is correct.

Ms BROWN: Yes.

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from your organisation. Do you wish that submission to form part of your evidence today and to be made public?

Ms GIRDLER: Yes, we do.

CHAIR: As we have time limitations, if the Committee wishes to send you some additional questions in writing, would you be happy to provide written replies to any further questions?

Ms GIRDLER: Yes, that is fine.

CHAIR: Could you briefly describe the capacity in which your organisation has been involved in the Better Futures project?

Ms BROWN: Over the past 10 years Waverley Council has been involved, as have many agencies, in focusing on the needs of children aged 9 to 14. Since 2004 we have been involved in the Better Futures strategy, which involves planning around the needs of this age group. In 2005 we got funding for a research project to do some recreational needs analysis for inner and eastern Sydney, specifically relating to children aged 9 to 13. That culminated in funding of \$180,000 over three years to run some projects that we will be trialling as initiatives that have been identified in the report. We are now in the final year of those projects.

Ms GIRDLER: In that time our concern has been directed at looking at the service system for young people and their access to after-school activities.

CHAIR: What would you consider to be the benefits and limitations of the Better Futures program? Would you recommend extending the program across New South Wales?

Ms BROWN: Better Futures has provided our council with funding to do some capacity building across the whole service sector working with schools and out-of-school-hours [OOSH] providers, which has been very useful. We have done some great integrated planning. Some of the negatives have probably been that we have not had the partner support that we seem to have been offered through the whole-of-government approach that Better Futures set out to achieve. For us it has been very useful. With a fairly minimal amount of funding we have achieved some excellent outcomes by adopting an integrated planning approach to activity provision across a whole bunch of sectors that never really communicated that well with each other before.

We have also developed information resources that help parents and other service providers to know what is going on and where it is happening. We have done a lot of our partnership building and we have put it on the agenda. At a local government level there are children's services and there are youth services, and there is no planning around this age group. Often these planning issues end up with local government, so it was a suitable place to have it and from which it could be driven. We have managed to put it on the agenda of a whole range of inter-agencies and it is a planning focus in other local government areas, which has been useful for us.

Ms GIRDLER: We have run it in a region encompassing five local government areas, with the support of local government. It has needed the support of local government to do that effectively. This service system was established in the 1970s for out-of-school-hours care and youth services. The model for that was put together in the 1970s and funded in the 1970s, and parts of it still work well. However, we have been concerned about the parts that do not work so well and about the children who fall through the gap in the middle of those two services.

Children aged 9 to 13 drop out of programs that are developmentally inappropriate and that are expensive for their parents to send them to, so they do not send them. Those children are the ones who go home and sit in front of computers, roam the streets, or play in parks or whatever, unattended and unsupervised. Our work has been about enhancing the capacity of those two systems and that part of it has worked well in our region. It could be duplicated in other areas for less than \$90,000 a year, which is what we were spending on this program.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: You referred to some of the issues that are encompassed in my questions. What needs to take place to improve the coordination of planning relating to activities for out-of-school-hours or holiday programs for that age group? What funding is available to run those activities outside school? In the opinion of Waverley Council as the coordinating body for this work, how should those activities be funded and coordinated?

Ms GIRDLER: We used the model of a community development project worker who was responsible for planning. We have found that you need someone to plan for the services. The services do not have the capacity, the funding or the training to do that sort of work themselves; they are very much focused on running their small services. If you bring in an outside person who works from local government—it works very well from local government, but it does not have to be from local government—he or she can use a planning approach to bring those people together, either to provide training for them or to set up new activities. You can do it with a relatively small amount of funding.

We used some program funding as an incentive to get the out-of-school-hours services and youth services involved. We would want to run a particular program with them, but it is not possible within their funding to do that. We would give them \$1,000 or \$800 grants to get them to run, say, a bicycle repair workshop after school. A lot of kids who are interested in riding bikes would join in and be able to do it for \$800. Those sorts of services do not have that kind of funding and they do not have the time to go out and talk to people to get that sort of small idea on the ground. You need a person or a body and that would cost about \$80,000 or \$90,000 a year to do with some program money. In our case it was State Government funding. I do not think local government has the capacity to run programs specific to that age group, although it has community workers who work across youth and children's services generally, and they can add value to those kinds of programs.

Ms BROWN: The model that we have developed is taking kids from OOSH, or out-of-school hours centres. We are trying to attract those sorts of children who are starting to drop out at around year 5, and we are putting them back into OOSH by providing attractive programming. We do not always deliver that program at an out-of-school-hours care centre; we link them to other organisations in a transitional model. Initially, there was resistance from youth services who said, "We do not work with that age group." Since the at-risk factors are affecting children at a much earlier age, we had to do a bit of work to try to persuade them that these were their youth service clients of the future and that it was good to get that stuff.

We got all the good messages to them to do that early intervention. We have now run those programs successfully in three locations and they are working well. Given that youth services are already funded, I suggest that we tie funding to outcomes for this age group and the same would apply to OOSH services. OOSH services will always say that they are not properly resourced to deal with this age group, which is true. Small amounts of funding through small grants programs that would enable them to carry out special activities for this age group would be useful. If the New South Wales Government is reviewing standards of practice for the out-of-school-hours care sector, there should be something more specific in there about outcomes for this age group. The quality standards that already exist are fairly vague. It is easy enough to say, "We provide for that age group", but often we do not. Bringing them to the party a bit would be a good thing that could be done with no cost whatsoever.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: You might wish to take on notice my next question, which relates to the three groups that you have mentioned. I know that there have been issues involving children who are coming

out of primary school. They are not old enough to go to youth centres, which is one of the problems that you have spoken about. Would you be able to give us some more information about services that are doing that bridging work?

Ms BROWN: Yes, I can. I have written all that up. At the end of our Better Futures project we will have a model that could be picked up and run with in any area—a model tailored to specific local circumstances. It should be a model that shows how you can do integrated planning. We got a special dispensation from the Department of Community Services and youth services in our areas to work with this lower age group. Projects are running in Maroubra, a very high area of disadvantage, where they are working with kids aged 5 to 25 years. The projects are working well. It is really just about the programming.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Could you briefly describe the difficulties that youth and out-of-school-hours care services are encountering in providing after-school and vacation care programs for children aged 9 to 14? Are out-of-school-hours care providers or youth services better placed to provide after-school and vacation care programs for children and young people aged 9 to 14?

Ms BROWN: The main problem in OOSH is that there is a focus on care rather than programming. That is what disaffects the older age child because he or she has been in care for years and is not interested in it. Parents seem to have a perception that after children turn nine it is okay for them to be on their own. We need to raise community awareness of the risk issues involving kids in that age group. OOSH providers will also say, "We have problems with space and transport for that age group." In projects like mine we have had small amounts of money to put into transport solutions. We are picking up kids and exposing them to different organisations and different activities, which has worked well.

I do not think OOSH is the only provider; I think it is a combination of a whole bunch of things. Lots of people provide for this age group, for example, sports groups, youth clubs and everything from girl guides and boy scouts down to football clubs. We need to bring all these parties together. That is what we have been attempting to do. We have got some way towards doing that. It is kind of new to map out who is doing what. We are somewhat limited by that time frame. From 3.30 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. it is difficult. So we are also looking at doing things from 5.30 p.m. to 8.30 p.m., but that excludes OOSH services. So we are looking at other providers.

My concept around this would be to also look at those standards for out-of-school-hours care and perhaps where it comes to OOSH, to split up the age groups into 5 to 8 years old and then 9 to 12 years old with specific demands for programming around them. That would also make it less costly to provide for that older age group because there are much less supervision requirements, much less stringent, than for the younger age child; these are all things that can be looked at. But also small grants program where anyone from a youth club to a sports group to an arts group could design programs around this age group and know there is a little bit of funding to get their initiative off the ground. I am not terribly clear with where that sits, but I think possibly local government could be a good factor in each area because it has the reach, it has the facilities and it has the infrastructure to provide.

Ms GIRDLER: The OOSH services are doing a really good job of working with the younger age groups with very little resources. It is not really about creating a whole new service system; they can be enhanced to do more work with older children. They need to be upskilled; they need further training; they need different sorts of people attracted into their programs. So, that is a funding and training issue. It needs support from schools because in some cases they need more space. Physically 12-year-old children take up more room than 5-year-old children, especially boys—they move around a lot more. It is possible to enhance existing systems relatively efficiently, but it will take some money to do that and it would take goodwill from a number of groups. It does not need to have new services created. It is silly to go out and start creating new programs; better to work on existing ones and to involve local government in that, most definitely, because local government has got a lot of the resources that are needed to do this.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Ms Brown, earlier you mentioned having those two age groups 5 to 8 and 9 to 12. I noticed that you focused on 9 to 13 overall. Is there any reason for that?

Ms BROWN: Well, 9 to 13 are the parameters of the Better Futures project.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: It does not go to 14?

Ms BROWN: It does not go to 14, and that still is a huge gap area for us. But youth services sort of cover that 12 to 25-year age group. Another issue, which I know that you have to focus on, is this transition on that middle childhood. When the kids go into high school it is: how do you engage them, how do you actually get them at that stage? So we have been doing a bit of thinking about that as well.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: You mentioned in your opening remarks that your grant is due to expire this year?

Ms BROWN: It ends in this year.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Will you be getting another allocation or is that dependent on something?

Ms BROWN: No, there is no further planning for it.

Ms GIRDLER: It was a three-year grant.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: So does that mean that program will stop?

Ms GIRDLER: It is finished, yes.

Ms BROWN: That is why we would like to recommend regional. Having regional workers focusing on this group is a really good idea because it is only in its infancy. This focus on 9s to 13s or 9s to 14s is only in its infancy and not fully established, but over time will be. The amount of results we have got out of a tiny little three-year project, if that was allowed to continue, would be significant.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Obviously, you are supporting another grant being given, or even extending it?

Ms BROWN: Not necessarily.

Ms GIRDLER: It was founded as a pilot. So, it was a pilot program. We have a number of outcomes that we had to deliver in that time. One of them was that we needed to create sustainable programs. Of course, three years to create sustainable programs that could change the face of care for 9 to 13-year-olds is really difficult to do in a three-year time frame. I think we have demonstrated that this model of working with these services throughout our pilot actually does work and there would be benefit in applying it in other areas. It is not a very expensive program to run.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Could you briefly describe the active after-school program? To what extent is this program used in primary schools and in out-of-school-hour care? Do you consider it should be extended to early high school?

Ms BROWN: There are 49 regions in New South Wales with a maximum of 23 active after-school communities sites in each region. We have 23 in our eastern and metro area. They are mostly based in OOSH services. When they came on board we thought they were the most wonderful thing; they have been a great boon to the OOSH sector. However, there are bugs in them and kids, because of the nature of this age group, do not like committing to things week after week. So, we would like to see it be more flexible, not just about sports, but include arts programs and music and culture and theatre to really cover the range of interests of kids in that age group.

However, it is a useful program. Extending it into high schools sounds like a good idea but there are cost implications to do with staffing resources at school level. We have found that OOSHs are a kind of natural fit for it. You would imagine that most schools have sports programs anyway. So, the active after-school communities program was targeted at underactive kids, basically. So, whether that would happen more effectively at high school level, I do not know. I have ideas about that and I think that again there is this integrated approach where if there were extra resources going into this area at high school level, you could be linking those kids back through youth services, who would have this integrated planning approach and be getting those kids to a whole range of activities rather than just being about sports.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Have you found problems in transporting the children to these programs?

Ms BROWN: Yes, that is always a problem.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: How do you organise that?

Ms BROWN: My predecessor as a project worker on these pilots actually physically drove the bus and picked up the kids, but since I do not do that and we were looking at sustainability issues, I have done a bit of a cost analysis for each local government area using community transport on a weekly basis during term times. In the case of Waverley council it comes up to \$4,500 a year to work with a cluster of OOSHs in our local government area to link them to outside services. That will all be written up in our model. Again, that is not a lot of money.

So, if you could get each local government to kick in that amount, you could get round the transport issues. Things that are harder to manage are things like traffic: where you have an activity happening in an area where there is traffic build-up at that time of day, you do not get a lot of time for the actual activity. Another part of it with the transition part with year 6s is to get them used to using public transport in those after-school hours, but then that brings in this issue of bus passes and having free travel in that timeslot, which is another whole can of worms. But that would be a way around it.

CHAIR: Thank you. We are starting to get a little beyond time. I do have some questions myself, but as I indicated earlier, we might provide the remaining questions in writing. Did you have any extra comments before you leave today?

Ms BROWN: No.

Ms GIRDLER: No, that is fine.

Ms BROWN: Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak to you about it because for myself it is something we are very passionate about and Waverley has had a big focus and interest in this age group over many years.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your attendance. It sounds like an interesting program that you have running. Thank you for your attendance today.

Ms BROWN: I will leave you with a little book that we have generated.

(The witnesses withdrew)

DAVID BENNETT, Professor, NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health, the Children's Hospital, Westmead, Sydney, and

FIONA ROBARDS, Coordinator, NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health, the Children's Hospital, Westmead, Sydney, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance today. I have some formalities to go through with you for the moment. I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and also a brochure entitled "Information for Witnesses Appearing Before Parliamentary Committees," is that correct?

Professor BENNETT: That is correct.

Ms ROBARDS: Yes.

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee today?

Professor BENNETT: I am an adolescent health physician and parent, and advocate for health and health care for young people.

Ms ROBARDS: My background is that of a psychologist and manager of youth health services. I am now Coordinator of the New South Wales Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health.

CHAIR: Time is limited today so the Committee may wish to send some additional questions to you in writing. Would you be happy to answer those if we make that decision?

Professor BENNETT: Absolutely.

Ms ROBARDS: Sure.

CHAIR: In your experience how comprehensive and coordinated is health service delivery and early intervention programs for children in the middle years in New South Wales? Are there currently any statewide health strategic plans that include this age group other than plans addressing specific health issues, such as obesity?

Professor BENNETT: The first thing to say is that we are very happy that this age group is under focus. There are the beginnings of an awareness that early intervention in early childhood is very important for future health, but this group on the threshold of adolescence tends to have less attention. There has been less research done and, therefore, we have somewhat less information about the importance of these years, but the evidence is growing. We think there are some policies in place that address this. I noticed in the previous presentation a focus on the Better Futures policy, which we very strongly endorse. So, the age range of 9 to 18 really takes over where the statewide Families NSW project ends.

The reasons for being so concerned that Better Futures be better supported is that it is based on the evidence that keeping kids connected with school is important to building resilience and wellbeing; a focus on positive youth development, which is about engaging young people in meaningful activity within their communities, but also within their school; and it also mentions the importance of responding better and in a more coordinated way to the health needs of young people at risk. The most disadvantaged young people have the least access to health and supportive care.

Ms ROBARDS: Our centre has just been commissioned by NSW Health to write a new youth health policy for New South Wales, which will be finished, hopefully, by February next year. So, that is an opportunity to put research into practice. The last policy is now 11 years old. However, in terms of coordinating health care, one of the biggest challenges is that resources for youth health services across New South Wales are very patchy; there is a very uneven spread across the State. There are 15 youth health services, for example, in 9 area health services and, say, 5 youth health services are in one area health service. So, some area health services do not have any youth health services.

Professor BENNETT: Particularly in rural and remote areas children and young people really do miss out on a lot of supportive health care.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: On what age group is the new youth health policy focusing?

Ms ROBARDS: Twelve to 24 years.

Professor BENNETT: We have argued very strongly that it should be this broader age range.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: That is what I thought. Earlier you were saying that it should be an age group lower than 12?

Professor BENNETT: No. The youth health policy is appropriate probably from 12. What we are saying in support of the Better Futures policy is that it starts at 9 and goes to 18. We also have some difficulties in our policy work because the definition of "adolescence" is so broad and vague. Paediatric services, for example, are trying to limit their purview to nought to 16. Our work in youth health needs to extend to the older age range because there is a continuity of problems. A funding program called Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth has been so effective over so many years since the Burdekin report on homeless children in 1999 or thereabouts.

Ms ROBARDS: No, 1989—10 years earlier.

Professor BENNETT: I am sorry, 1989. There have been evaluations that show that services within the community have a holistic approach and in which young people feel that they are accepted, valued and respected, but it is not just a very traditional service. It provides creative arts activity and all sorts of things outside of the traditional mainstream box of care. Those sorts of services are under-resourced in our state and in the country.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: I will just follow that up. Some interventions, such as increasing physical activity, have the potential to improve outcomes for 9 to 14 year olds across a range of health issue areas. What other interventions would you recommend that you consider would have the potential to improve outcomes for this age group across a range of health issues?

Professor BENNETT: The promotion of healthy eating and physical activity are among the most effective programs administered, mostly through schools, but also there is clear evidence that mental health and wellbeing-oriented programs are effective, as are conflict resolution programs. A review of the literature undertaken by the Centre for Parenting Research at the Department of Community Services also shows that moderately effective programs are those that aim to improve self-esteem. The most effective time to be conducting parenting programs is in that transitional age to high school.

The notion is that if you can support parents to parent well—and we understand what that means in terms of evidence of good parenting—it has been shown you can prevent the uptake of drug and alcohol issues. Programs in schools are less effective where risk is the agenda. It is very difficult to prevent depression through school programs. But there is a very strong and growing belief that if we can support parents to parent in an authoritative way that is warm and respectful, it is likely that we can protect kids from most mental health problems as well.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Obviously giving support to parents is very important, particularly parents of teenagers and pre-teenagers.

Professor BENNETT: Yes.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Has there been any evaluation of some of those programs as to their success?

Professor BENNETT: There has. There is the Triple P program that has been rolled out for primary school kids as a universal program. It has been shown to be effective. There is less evidence currently for the teenage age group, but we do know that families benefit from almost any intervention that helps them with communication and conflict resolution. They benefit and their children benefit. We are very strongly supportive of efforts to support parents as their children become adolescent.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: How do you engage the parents? Are they expected to come to the facilities, or do you go to the parents?

Professor BENNETT: The evidence seems to show that the parents benefit even from having material sent to them that they can think about and work through. At the moment it is very ad hoc. There are lots of churches and schools that provide this just as a service to the parent body, but it has been very difficult to see any coordinated approach to parenting support. There are tried and true programs. There is one that we were introduced to recently called Parent Shop, which is a slightly briefer intervention with parents and children. Some of the other programs have longer duration. There are more sessions and therefore it is a big ask for parents to come.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Do you consider the age at which children and young people display mental health and behavioural problems is trending downwards? If so, what are the implications for service provision, particularly for the 9 to 11 year olds?

Professor BENNETT: I think it is true that we are recognising depression and anxiety in particular, as well as other mental health problems in younger children than was the case previously. There is a worldwide trend towards mental health problems becoming the number one burden of disease, which means that many, many people are affected by mental health problems. The implication of that trend is that we actually need to start building resilience and mental health at a much earlier age than we have been.

The evidence about the health promoting schools approach is that it is very, very strongly evidence based. Schools with a range of good links with health services that try to work well with their parent body, that have policies around health issues and that value and involve students so that they feel more connected to and engaged with schooling, those things are very protective of mental health. I think we have to convey the notion that schools are an ideal setting to help to shape self-esteem and self-worth as well as promote effectiveness with children—not just as fodder for future work, but in terms of creating a healthier future adult population.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: I will tie the last two questions together. What should be the priorities for mental health and early intervention for this age group, both inside and outside schools? In your opinion, what more is required to reduce alcohol and other drug misuse in this age group?

Professor BENNETT: To take the second one first, there is strong evidence that happy and well-functioning families are protective against drug and alcohol issues, but also are high-achieving role models and the promotion of healthy environments. Schools are the ideal place to have young people feel connected and valued, and that is protective against drug and alcohol issues as well.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: What should be the priorities for mental health and early intervention for this age group, both inside and outside school?

Professor BENNETT: We probably have looked less into outside school, although our centre was invited by the Department of Community Services [DOCS] to work with 10 Better Futures projects and programs in an area of Sydney. We discovered what your previous presenters told you—that there is an enormous passionate commitment to working with kids out of school hours in positive youth development activity. We are just very impressed with the importance of that.

Previously in Australia when Aus Youth existed as a federally funded program, there was an attempt to coordinate these activities. At the moment, the only program that we are aware of that supports youth development activity out of school hours is the Better Futures program. We are highly empathic to those who feel that there should be a better-supported program.

The other issue we have experienced is that the Youth Interagency Taskforce that was set up originally to support a policy for 9 to 18 year olds was the only truly cross-sectoral government activity that focused on the needs of children and young people in that age range of 9 to 18. We are actually missing the opportunity to see a whole-of-government approach to the needs of this group.

Ms ROBARDS: That meeting stopped a few years ago. Even though there is a State Youth Plan, which is across government and which is a great thing, there is no implementation committee, which is something that I feel quite concerned about.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: So you strongly endorse the interagency approach to these problems?

Professor BENNETT: Absolutely.

Ms ROBARDS: Across different government departments.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: You spoke about the participation in extracurricular activities and that there is not a great deal in that, except that Better Futures is doing some of that work. Are you aware of any other current research in that area in relation to out of school hours?

Professor BENNETT: I think we wanted to mention the service learning movement, which is fairly new in Australia but much more established in the United States. It is championed by people like Father Chris Riley who believe that young people benefit enormously by contributing to their local community. At the moment the independent schools throughout Australia and some public schools encourage students to do important and meaningful work in their local communities. They reflect on it in the classroom and they need to gain credit within their curriculum for making these contributions. I think that is something that should actually be addressed and supported.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Basically that is one issue that you would like to see strengthened?

Professor BENNETT: Yes.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: To build resilience in the middle years?

Professor BENNETT: Yes.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: What other programs are initiatives are you aware of, or do you think need to be supported in relation to that?

Professor BENNETT: For resilience building?

Ms ROBARDS: You had some information on mental health programs in schools.

Professor BENNETT: Yes. There is a very strong evidence base for some programs. The Resourceful Adolescent Program is 11 sessions for 13 to 15 year olds. That is universal. There is also an adolescent program that has a strong evidence base. There is a program called Friends, which targets anxious children, and that has also been shown to be an important and successful resilience-building program. There is another program called Adolescents Coping with Emotions, or ACE. Each has a strong evidence base and there are about 40 programs that could be used to build resilience and positive mental health in children.

There are a number of programs for which we are awaiting the results of evaluation, and they include the Mind Matters program, which supports staff and pupils in schools and high schools. The Beyondblue initiative has school-based programs, but that is very much focused on reducing the stigma about depression and promoting the understanding of depression. With the New South Wales School Link program there is some evidence that linking schools with, particularly, mental health services, identifying kids at risk, and having easy pathways to health will prove to be very successful as well. Schools are a wonderful venue for many of these initiatives.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: It is a captive audience.

Professor BENNETT: Absolutely, yes.

CHAIR: Fiona and David, do you have any further comment you would like to make before leaving us today?

Professor BENNETT: We came here with three take-home messages. The first one is please try to support and strengthen Better Futures. We believe in it, as your previous speaker said, quite passionately because it has a good evidence base and it is a whole-of-government approach. The second one is that I think there should be more cross-sectoral collaboration around the needs of this age group at the governmental level.

Our third message was to please think very seriously about the need for support of parents as their children become adolescents. Thank you for focusing on this age group.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your appearance today. As I said earlier, there are probably some questions that we have not been able to address in the very limited time frame available. We will await your response to those with some enthusiasm.

(The witnesses withdrew)

PAULINE O'KANE, Network of Community Activities, 66 Albion Street, Surry Hills, New South Wales 2010, and

ROBYN MONRO-MILLER, Executive Officer, Network of Community Activities, 66 Albion Street, Surry Hills, New South Wales 2010, on former oaths:

CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee, I thank you for your appearance. I remind you that you previously gave evidence to the Committee under oath, and you remain under oath in respect of any evidence that you may give today. Do you agree with that?

Ms O'KANE: Yes.

Ms MONRO-MILLER: We do.

CHAIR: As time is limited, we might have to send you some questions at a later date. Would you be happy to answer those?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: Yes, we would.

Ms O'KANE: Very happy.

CHAIR: Could you advise how well coordinated is the provision of before and after school care as well as other activities outside of school? How could this coordination be improved?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: Currently there are 1,100 out-of-school-hours services across New South Wales. Approximately 90 per cent of those are community based, and they are run by parent groups or community agencies such as local government, and 10 per cent are private providers. As to the level of coordination amongst those services, the Network of Community Activities is the peak body. We have a coordination role, in a way, with regard to the services signing up as members to our organisation. We also send out regular newsletters and have a training program that is rolled out across New South Wales. Also we have newspapers and different email alerts and technology that keep them informed. We do not have a huge role in coordination, a lot of that is built up through our community involvement over 35 years with those groups. We try to link in wherever possible with the community.

CHAIR: Are approved childcare providers currently able to make out-of-school-hour-care services available to 13- and 14-year-olds and to receive childcare benefit payments on behalf of eligible families? If that is not the case, would it be desirable?

Ms O'KANE: Yes, the legislation allows them to do that. However, a lot of services in many areas are bursting at the seams in coping with their demand for five- to 12-year-olds. The other issue that has to be taken into consideration is that once children go to high school they have transitioned both mentally and emotionally into a different stage of their life. A lot of children, unless the program was developmentally appropriate, would not want to go back to those services, unless there was a program that was planned to cater for and meet their needs. Of course, the best way to do that is obviously consult with young people about how they could be re-engaged. Some of the better services allow young people to come back and they end up volunteering at the service, or they treat it as a place where they have community connection.

Ms MONRO-MILLER: In New South Wales teenagers still attend some services, particularly teenagers with a disability, because there is no service provision for them. In a way the out-of-school-hours services are used as a bit of respite care, because families with a child with a disability have nowhere else to leave those teenagers.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: It is important to have research and to evaluate programs. What evidence is there about the effectiveness of vacation care and before- and after-school programs for child outcomes? How would you suggest that research in that area could be encouraged?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: Currently there is very limited research available. Better Futures has done some of that research, but not to the depth that obviously early childhood has, so I support Professor David Bennett when he said that there has been limited research in middle childhood. We believe that there needs to be

more, because we can see the outcomes from anecdotal evidence but we do not have quantitative data to say that there are good outcomes as a result. A lot of the available research comes from the United Kingdom and the United States of America, but, once again, they function in slightly different models so that we do not get the true Australian perspective.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Earlier you mentioned children with disabilities. What would you recommend to address difficulty encountered by out-of-school-hours services in catering for children with a disability, including children over 12 years?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: For children under 12 years, services cater for children with a disability. Generally they are inclusive services, so they cater for all children. The child services for children with a disability come second, but when you cater for a child with a disability there are additional costs. Currently, the available funding to support those additional costs is not met. Therefore, services are generally left out of pocket when they provide care for children with a disability. Over the age of 12, we believe the same issues come up for any child, that is the lack of service provision or transition projects that they can move into. We would say that we needed services for children over the age of 12, or infrastructure to support them, and they do not necessarily have to be identical to the out-of-school-hours environment. Once again, as Pauline said, they have to be based on consultation and collaboration with the older child.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: To what extent is the active after-school program used in primary schools and in out-of-school-hours care? Should that program be extended to early high school?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: The program is being used extensively. The Committee has been provided with some figures already regarding the take-up rate. There are still services on the waiting list wanting to access it. It has been successful to the point that services are able to utilise it, and some children have really benefited from it. I am not taking anything away from that program, but we need to be aware that it is just one area of a child's development, and that is sporting. A child is a whole child, and we need to take into account, as has already been said, their creative development and their social development. The active after-school program is focused purely on the physical, and currently it is quite a rigid program. There are some requirements that all children at the service need to attend and participate in that particular physical activity in order to retain their funding.

We know that children in their time out of school should be allowed to play, as play is an important part of their healthy emotional and physical development as well. There are children who do not want to spend time in sport as they have already done sport at school and when they come out of school they had to be forced into some sort of sport again. It is not exactly appealing. It also tends at times to cause children to draw away from sport, rather than encourage them to join in. It has its merits and I would never say that the program was not successful, but I think we need to do some review of how successful in regards to a child's whole development. As with moving into the older teen years, there could be some benefit there. But, once again, if you think you have problems with a child up to nine being forced into doing sporting activities, try it with a child over that age. You will soon have very unhappy children who will show other ways to get your attention.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: That runs into my next question: How could out-of-school-hours programs be integrated further into the vacation care and before- and after-school services?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: Currently active after-school programs are not part of the vacation care programs. So how could they be integrated? Obviously, the Premier's Council for Active Living has put out some guidelines on physical activity in out-of-school-hours, and drawn people in by bringing in visiting specialists. Therefore, potentially, the visiting specialists could come in to do particular workshops with children, but, once again, our whole philosophy on out-of-school-hours care, which is what made it so successful in the services that are truly implementing it, is based on collaboration and consultation with children, so that the children would be involved in who is coming in and what sort of activities are being done—that sense of ownership in the program. When a child does not have a sense of ownership about participating in something, particularly in the older age group of nine to 14 years, you will not get their involvement at all.

Ms O'KANE: I add a comment to that. What has not been researched is a lot of focus on money going into physical activity. I know that we have obesity, but by the nature of getting groups of children together they are physically active through play. One of our concerns is, yes, the program is very successful but if you look at the whole child and get him or her to engage in programs, a lot of children cannot get into programs at the moment. The connectedness with community actually has a flow-on effect to their physical development,

because they are out walking in their community, they are out being a part of their community. It does not need to focus just on physical activity.

Ms MONRO-MILLER: Yes. That is where funding needs to be looked at in the community environments. Are our parks and playgrounds suitable places for kids to be and for families to go to? There is increasing emphasis on doing something structured rather than an emphasis on what we are putting into our environments, and how child-friendly are our environments for children to be able to move around in? It is all well and good to have advertisements with lounge chairs jumping up and down telling the kids to get out and get active, but is there a place where they can go out and be active, where they are safe to play freely? Or, will they be shooed away from wherever their local environment is?

Typically, councils often do not want to provide a skate park, because trouble can brew at a skate park. However, for a 9- to 14-year-old, a skate park is a wonderful place to socialise and indulge passions. We need to look at our own perceptions about what we are doing for children and how friendly are our whole environments, not just the rigid services that we might provide.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: My questions relate to transporting students to before- and after-school care. What difficulties are there in that transportation process? What would you recommend to improve that?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: For many years the Network of Community Activities has said that transport is a huge issue in accessing services for children, because no transport subsidy is available. The other incredibly silly thing, I hesitate to describe it, the difficulty, is the fact that the school bus pass system takes the child only to school and back home. If the out-of-school-hours service or after-school activity is not on that route, the child cannot use the school bus pass. To go to an after-school-care program many parents have to pay extra to get the children transported on the school bus route. That does not make sense; it is not only child unfriendly but also family unfriendly. That bus pass system is one issue. The other issue is that there is no transport subsidy for places that are a little bit off the beaten track that needs to be accessed.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: In your submission you mentioned a juniors card, relating to children being able to get to activities during school holidays. Could you expand on the juniors card? How do you envisage it would work? What benefits would it provide?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: The juniors card is it similar to the Seniors Card in that children could travel for \$1 anywhere they wanted to go. They could pick up a juniors card and be able to access all the transport system to ride freely to where they need to go. It could also provide discounts into places, such as museums, and to other activities that are available to children in that age group. The benefits would be that it would encourage children to get out into the environment and be able to access different places. They would develop self-help skills in their ability to access transport and they would be less isolated. There are models of that type of juniors card in other countries. Pauline might speak about the United Kingdom experience

Ms O'KANE: Our idea came from lots of cities in the United Kingdom that might have a plan where they can ride anywhere within a city environment. Our perspective on that is that when we have spoken to families and children in services, or when services had tried to organise excursions, to actually go off and do things in Sydney is quite expensive and quite prohibitive. A lot of children may have gone to the Australian Museum many times, but they may want to go and see just the photographic exhibition, but they have to pay the whole fee. Something for local children to come into the city and have a swim and go to the photographic exhibition using their juniors card would make it an affordable day out.

A couple of services have done some work with year 6 students in their transition to high school, and taken them out in term four to get to know their local community. Okay, we do not have the body of research, but what those workers are saying is that kids do not know their way around their own city. They do not know how to get on a bus and do that, because they have never had that experience. That would be a way of leading them into the transition to high school and making them independent, by knowing where places are safe in their community and where they can feel welcome, so they are using their city as a whole place rather than putting on special activities for them. They should be embracing what is already there.

Ms MONRO-MILLER: This is where the vacation care programs have been building life skills, when they do activities for the older children, excursions in particular. They often get them to read the timetable and work out where they are going. I have been with groups of children who have become lost and allowed them to be lost. We followed them along, because we were teaching them about what happens if they get lost when they

read the timetable wrong or get off on the wrong train station. That builds in their life skills that they often do not get the chance to experience.

Increasingly we find children who, as Pauline said, do not know their way around their local community, because they do not even look out of the car window when their parents drive them from A to B, because they have new whiz-bang technology that they can just watch the DVD in the back of the car. Sadly, they do not even know any landmarks. So, those life skills are incredibly important and we find increasingly that vacation care and before- and after-school care are the few places where children are being taught to pick them up. That is as a result of the training and resourcing we are doing, saying to the people who are working in the sector that they must make sure that every child leaves the centre with those necessary life skills.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: I have one more question in relation to comments you made earlier about child friendly areas and kids playing in parks and things like that. You mentioned skateboard parks and so on. What other appropriate things do you think there could be in parks and recreation areas, whether in the city or in rural and regional areas, so that kids could feel comfortable and everyone would be happy that they were there as part of the process of enjoyment of recreation?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: Obviously bike tracks and resting places—spaces in the local mall where people can sit and hang out. Often people see kids in the local mall as problems whereas we need places where they can go and sit because teenagers like to hang out together socially. That is their time to be together and we have all known what it is like to do that. Also there are models overseas where they have play rangers in the parks, so there is some adult supervision and the kids are able to play in certain parks. In Victoria we still have adventure playgrounds, which sadly have disappeared in New South Wales.

In those adventure playgrounds children can go and play quite freely with minimal adult supervision but there are still adults there. The children can come and go; they have that freedom. Those adventure playgrounds in Victoria have been known to attract an older group of children who are a little bit more independent than the younger children. There are models all over the world but unfortunately to date we have not harnessed them in New South Wales. It is certainly something that Network is strongly committed to.

CHAIR: Could you explain your involvement in the Better Futures project and its benefits or limitations?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: I think I should hand over to Pauline, who is Network's representative on Better Futures.

Ms O'KANE: I sit on one of the regional executive groups for Better Futures and one of the things that has come to my attention is that compared to Families First, which is the under-8 program, Better Futures is almost the Cinderella of funding because funding is very limited. I have sat on the Better Futures executive group and we have had no money to spend. All of the money has been tied up in projects such as the one that you heard about earlier. One of the things that I want to raise is that since Better Futures was moved out of the Premier's Department into the communities division of DOCS there has been a tendency for it to be tacked onto people's jobs, so it is not given priority or the level of importance.

You are constantly dealing with a new project officer who is coordinating the Better Futures funding. This makes it difficult for anybody in the community who is working on a Better Futures project because of the reporting back. There is also a huge issue with coordination. This year alone I have been to several forums discussing the 9 to 14 age group and it has been repetitive because the five areas over here are doing exactly the same as five areas over there and there seems to be no harnessing of what we have already learnt in Better Futures in the project that Waverley Council hosted, in another project in the south-west at the moment.

I think there is real value in Better Futures because a body of evidence and research is starting to build, but there are a lot of pilot projects and they are almost like pilots to nowhere. There is minimal funding to do a very low-cost project and three years down the track it is non-existent again. If there is a real commitment to this age group—and we are really pleased to be talking about this age group—there needs to be a commitment to the coordination and the funding that goes with it in the same way that Family First and a lot of under-8 projects have with those programs.

CHAIR: I have a question about the adventure playgrounds in Victoria but I think you have done a good job of explaining that. Are there any further comments you wish to make?

Ms MONRO-MILLER: Yes, just to say that Network's 35-year experience is in this age group. We are one of the few agencies that have been going this long that is truly committed to the middle childhood years. This particular inquiry has been wonderful for us. We want to stress that two things are really needed—consultation and collaboration with the younger age group. That is often overlooked and we believe it is a fundamental child's right, particularly in the 9-14 age group. They want it and they demand it. Our quality assurance system in outside school hours care asks for that to occur in everything we do and it also asks for community involvement in everything we do. We would like to stress that we should not lose sight of that. We also do not want to see a duplication of service provision. We would like to see the existing infrastructure maximised so that greater benefits and cost benefits are obtained.

Our one great concern that we will leave you with it is that we would hate to see just mainstream children benefit from any of your initiatives because we think children with a disability and children in socially or economically disadvantaged situations can easily be pushed aside on the basis that they will be dealt with later. We need to be very inclusive in our approach. The Vinson report emphasises that social inclusion is one of the critical factors in children's development. We would like to emphasise that that has to remain a focus for this Committee.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your attendance here today.

Ms O'KANE: We would be very happy to take you to any adventure playgrounds.

(The witnesses withdrew)

IAN GEORGE BAKER, Director Policy and Programs, Catholic Education Commission NSW, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney, on former oath,

LORRAINE DENISE WALKER, State Coordinator, Student Welfare Programs, Catholic Education Commission NSW, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney, and

GERALDINE MARY GRAY, State Coordinator, Special Learning Needs, Catholic Education Commission NSW, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney, sworn and examined.

CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance today. I understand Ms Walker and Mrs Gray have been issued with a copy of the terms of reference and a brochure entitled Information for Witnesses Appearing before Parliamentary Committees. Is this correct?

The Witnesses: Yes.

CHAIR: Time is limited today and we might not get through all the questions we would like to ask. Is there any objection if we give you those questions in writing and you respond to them?

Mr BAKER: No, that is fine.

CHAIR: Thank you. Can you advise what specific approaches the Catholic education system takes to educating middle-years students?

Mr BAKER: There are a number of middle-years initiatives in Catholic schools. I might say there is some debate about the definition of middle years. There are specific middle-years initiatives in various schools, but generally speaking it is the same approach we would take to all students of whatever age—that is a focus on the individual student. That is the irreducible focus, the individual student.

CHAIR: To what extent do Catholic schools have transition to high school programs in place and do you think they are making a difference?

Mr BAKER: I will comment and my colleagues may wish to comment as well. Again, it is a bit like the middle years. Yes, there are specific programs in place. They are locally driven. Our primary schools are typically networked with a regional Catholic high school, although I might say that a challenge facing almost all high schools is that increasingly they draw from multiple primary schools. Students are coming in from the local regional Catholic primary schools, if I can put it that way, but students are coming in from other schools and transition is an issue.

Ms WALKER: Obviously transition, particularly students moving from primary school into secondary school, is clearly identified as a time of risk for young people and the Commonwealth Government has funded a lot of work as part of the National School Drug Education Strategy. They have developed Resilience and Drug Education Information programs to support student transition. That includes a big transition program that involves parents—of course it is essential parents are involved in this process—and assists schools to work with parents and students from the feeder schools as they come into the secondary school. Additional programs that are optional but that schools may implement, and in which many Catholic schools take part, are provided by outside training providers such as the Peer Support Foundation Limited. It provides a peer support program where older students work with younger students in year 7. My personal experience when I was in a school was that that was a very effective program to help support young people.

Mrs GRAY: I will speak about students with special learning needs. There is often quite a long transitional process for those students, which involves looking at collaborative information collection and assisting those students, often up to a year earlier, so they can transition successfully. Those students need extra support in the social/emotional area, and communication and finding their way around the schools, but there is also linking with outside agencies that are involved with those students so the transition can occur easily. There are also lots of equipment and access requirements for those students so the transition for them is quite lengthy at times.

CHAIR: Is there anything specific that you have identified that is not available for teaching?

Mr BAKER: Yes. In this State we lack a unique student identifier that goes across the three school sectors. I think we are now the only State that does not have a unique student identifier. There is a student identifier within the Department of Education and Training and the Board of Studies uses a student identifier to link students across the schools to get into high schools. As students change schools and systems you cannot manage a student unless the relevant student history data comes forward. We are hampered in this State by the lack of a common student identifier. It is a real need.

Students move both ways. It is not just students at the end of year 6 going into year 7. Students move across all sectors. We have a significant number of students who move through the Government sector to go to selective high schools. At the moment we literally have to post the stuff off by snail mail, and we are dependent that all the principals are talking to each other, as generally they do. But if we had a unique student identifier we could do what other States do, and that is make sure essential student data follows the student.

CHAIR: Is there any enthusiasm within the Catholic education system for middle year high school classes? I know that some independent schools are moving that way; I think it is for years, 6, 7 and 8.

Mr BAKER: There are various models of looking at the middle years. Some of the newer schools are looking at models of having primary and secondary schools co-located on the one site. The greatest inhibitor to that is our current infrastructure, unless you are going to bus kids around between schools. So, yes, there are various pilots of that. It is facilitated where you have co-located primary and secondary schools. Frankly, it is a big problem if you do not, and most of them are not co-located.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Evidence to the inquiry has identified the need for more school counsellors. As there can be barriers to accessing formal services such as school counsellors, how important and effective are other strategies, including peer support programs and mentoring programs?

Mr BAKER: School counsellors are important. Not all Catholic schools have school counsellors on site. It is a resourcing issue. It is also a supply issue. I think school counsellors is probably one of those skills shortages. Our schools use different models. Some schools employ an on-site school counsellor; others of our schools have arrangements with our Centacares, our Catholic social welfare, and have the counsellors visit and access the schools on a regular basis. So there are a number of models. But I think it would be fair to say that we probably do not have as many school counsellors on the ground as perhaps we would like to if we had the resources.

Ms WALKER: I will add a little to that because you made reference to peer support and mentoring programs. There needs always to be a clear understanding that when we are talking about students at school, be they in the nine to 14 age group or whatever, 80 per cent of our students are happy, in a good place, and coping extremely well. The role of the school is an educative one, and that includes having preventative programs in place, and that is where peer support and mentoring programs are an excellent supporting program. When we start to talk about the other 20 per cent it is about that early identification of students who may be at risk or their emotional wellbeing is of concern. I am not saying that counsellors do not play a role in preventative work, because they do. They work integrally with the student wellbeing, student welfare teams in the school. But they are there, when those students are identified at risk, to start to help to put in additional support programs, and that is where school counsellors are really important. Then obviously from that 20 per cent there are probably 5 per cent to 10 per cent who may be at much higher risk.

There are lots of great programs around. Peer support, mentoring—all of those programs are good but if a student really has a problem, young people are not the ones who can address it. They may be the ones that they will first speak to about it but it is about where do you refer it on from there. That is also the basis of the national Mind Matters Program, which is the mental health program for schools, which again is mainly based at supportive for that 80 per cent of students but with how to identify those students who are at risk, particularly those students at risk of higher mental health issues, because the earlier that they can be addressed, and that is where, if there is not enough counselling—and particularly out in the country, I know that it is a real issue in the country—is accessing those sorts of services of good counsellors. I do not know, I do not have an answer to it. I am just aware that it is a major issue.

Mrs GRAY: Our counsellors, where we can access them, come from two different areas. They come from social welfare or some of them come from education-psychology backgrounds. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training has its own cadetships so it is able to access training at university level

through that cadetship for counsellors. We do not have the resources to do that sort of thing. It would be nice to be able to access something like that.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Some of the youth who gave evidence to the inquiry last year raised concern that the school counsellor level was, basically, too formal and possibly intrusive or there could be some retribution to them later on by talking about their issues. They wanted someone less formal, peer support, to at least want to raise these issues. What resources are available for schools in relation to new arrival middle-year students with few English language skills? What approaches have been effective?

Mr BAKER: We access, as indeed do all schools around Australia, the Federal Government's longstanding ESL new arrivals scheme. That provides special grants, with qualifying criteria. As with all schemes, you can run into a student who perhaps just falls outside the qualifying criteria. We have significant numbers of ESL new arrival students in our schools. About 50 per cent of the students in the Sydney archdiocese are ESL students by Commonwealth definition—they are not all new arrivals, by the way—and the provision of language acquisition is significant. Just one area where there can be anomalies: a child who has been brought up in a non-English speaking environment but who was either born in Australia or has lived in Australia for a year or more does not qualify as a new arrival by definition, does not attract the money but comes to school with no English. That is an issue. It will be an issue for all schools, not just our schools.

Mrs GRAY: We have intensive language centres where this is run. The area that is coming to the fore now is the students who are coming into our schools and into the intensive language centres who are affected by trauma. Again, that is going back to the add-on issues for some of the students that are coming in.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: What support is available for middle year students who have been suspended from school? Are there any new approaches you consider might effectively be implemented to assist those students?

Mr BAKER: All schools, by virtue of Board of Studies registration requirements, must have policies around suspensions and expulsions. So this is not happening in any school without proper procedural fairness procedures around it. In most schools—I would even so far perhaps as to say all—would tend to use in-school suspension as a first step and then it is graduated from in-school suspension to out-of-school suspension to, in very extreme cases and within the guidelines that we have to have with the Board of Studies, expulsion. In-school suspension is the more common way—it is not the exclusive way but the more common way—of managing such situations.

Mrs GRAY: A number of programs are being trialled at the moment across our State, including across-sector. One of the largest ones would be the positive behaviour support program, which is a whole school program that looks at renewing school rules but in doing that having the students have a voice in what is required so they own the school rules. There is some evidence coming out that this sort of approach is improving general behaviour in a school, so slowing down the number of suspensions to start with. There is initial evidence to say that some of the prevention programs that are going on are working.

Within that same approach there are the levels that my colleague alluded to before around what we do with the 80 per cent of the students who are going along very well but then to up levels of support for the 20 per cent of students. The idea around it is to have a minimal number of suspensions to begin within. Then what do you do with students at a very high level who require extra intervention and support? They are the ones that are looking to a point where the schools are not managing them. So there is certainly a lot of early work going on in that area, and there is conversation across the sectors.

Mr BAKER: The restorative justice initiatives—the Marist Brothers run a very comprehensive one in Western Sydney. It has a website. Just google Marist restorative justice. So restorative justice as an approach is quite a growing initiative in our schools.

Mrs GRAY: And they are linking. There is a group across the diocese in New South Wales that is linking those resilience and restorative justice programs with the general behaviour support program, ensuring that it all fits together and moves forward.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: You spoke earlier about the transition for students with a disability. Obviously there is probably with those students, as you said, a bigger lead time in terms of that transitional period and some of the things that need to be put in place for those students. Are there any innovative ways

coming into play now that are helping with that, especially the long lead time in the system as those students transition?

Mrs GRAY: I think we are becoming better at working out the process, improving the process of that transition. For some students it is not a lead time at all, so it just depends on looking at the levels of need and the resource needs of those students. In some cases it is quite difficult so looking at a collaborative process where people are coming together. That brings up an issue around accessing outside specialists, but the aim is to have a process where everyone comes together, including the student, their parents, the specialists and the school, to look at the best and most supportive way to have that student successfully start their schooling. In that way it tends to prevent them or we do not have the need then for students to have a slow transition, even at the beginning of year 7, because they have eased their way in in year 6. So they are processes that are at the local level.

They are successful, dependent on the access to the specialist. For example, if you have to access a specialist from Westmead and you are in Wilcannia, it becomes a little difficult to do. There are satellite processes. There are satellite link-ups that are helping with that. But we have the ongoing issue of not being able to access some of the therapy support services, such as those through DADHC, the therapy in schools support that some of our department colleagues and our department schools are able to access. So we find it a little bit more difficult to come together.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Regarding services and activities, the Government has supported the recommendation of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales to establish integrated, multidisciplinary, co-located services with programs such as parenting education, home school liaison, breakfast programs, counselling services, school counselling and allied health. How important are these centres that provide services to children and young people in middle years and their parents? How would the Catholic school system relate to these centres?

Mr BAKER: Like everyone else involved with children's services in any form, we are carefully working our way through the Keep Them Safe Government response to the Wood inquiry. The short answer is yes, we want to be involved. The longer answer is we are concerned that we will not be. We have been looking at the proposed functioning of the child wellbeing units. We are concerned that non-government schools may not have access to those units. We have looked at the proposed resourcing, which seems to be inadequate. We have concerns about how the Keep Them Safe agenda will be implemented. Multiagency models, by definition, are complex, and to keep all the agencies working together will be demanding. We want to work with the Keep Them Safe implementation process. The short answer is yes, we want to be part of it. The long answer is we have a range of concerns.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Would it help if those centres were located close to a Catholic school?

Mr BAKER: These centres should be accessible to all schools. One of the points we make, and we have made it at other committees and other forums, is that, without stereotyping families, at-risk families tend to be the most mobile. The Wood report and the Keep Them Safe response drilled down—to use that wonderful term—into all this data. I forget the exact data, but it shows some 300,000 notifications. When you start actually drilling into that, it is about 4,000 individuals and about 2,000 families. We actually have the sophisticated demographic data to almost pinpoint the families. We know they are mobile. We know that if they are in strife they will tend to move school, shift school. We need services that can actually follow these families and their children. In many cases they will have children across the three schools sectors. It is a delightfully, simplistic, old-fashioned idea that families belong to sectors. They do not. Particularly families under stress and distress do not belong to sectors and will have children across the sectors. It will be a problem if a family is a part of different intervention strategies for different children because they happen to be in different sectors.

This is particularly true in growth areas like Campbelltown. In those sorts of areas we have families who are split across the sectors not because they are in distress or crisis but because we cannot provide enough places in Campbelltown. If the families find themselves in distress or crisis and require intervention services, their children will be across the school sectors. We support a multiagency approach. We are concerned it will actually end up a silo approach. All schools need access to these child wellbeing units. They need to be designed, without getting into stereotypes, with a probable clientele in mind. The probable clientele is highly mobile and more than likely to be changing school sectors.

CHAIR: What would be required to enable Catholic schools to offer more low-cost after-school activities for middle year students, including students with disabilities?

Mr BAKER: First of all, those services do exist but they are local and they are variable. Yes, there are impediments. There are number of them. They are easy to identify, not easy to solve. They can range from industrial relations issues about extending the duties of school staff. There can be insurance issues. There could be a different entity coming in to manage the service. The previous speakers were talking about the disappearance of adventure playgrounds. Their disappearance was basically driven by litigation. We would like to be able to make our facilities more available, but there is a range of impediments.

CHAIR: I am sure you have already answered this, but you may want to make further comment. Discussions have taken place in recent years in relation to full service schools. What are your views about this approach?

Mr BAKER: There have been a number of false starts with full service schools and various models over the years. The Howard Government had a pilot program for full service schools that ran through about three years. We were actively involved and enthusiastic. But, as the previous speakers mentioned about pilots, that is one of the problems in this area. We have a succession of pilots, which generally lead to another set of pilots. We can all dust off our files. There is a lot there about full service schools and we are supporters. We would like to be working more with our cousin Catholic agencies in Catholic social welfare. Yes, there is a history there. We would be keen to revisit it on full service school models.

Mrs GRAY: The access to the specialists to be able to do that, we need them trained. We do not have enough therapists. There are not enough psychologists, not enough health workers to involve them. At the same time we do not have the ability at this stage to train our own—and you should not have too. We should be doing what we do well and have the access to those other people. If we are going to go in that direction, there needs to be a lot more training.

Ms WALKER: Again, it is a lot worse in the country. Often, there is such a long waiting list to access any service at all. Everything is always exacerbated in the rural areas.

Mr BAKER: Coming back to Keep Them Safe and Wood, disadvantage is, generally speaking, not randomly distributed. We can identify with statistical science, not just by anecdote, areas of need. As my colleague Gerry points out, there are shortages in the specialists that you would need to really run a full service school. In one way these child wellbeing units, which in concept we support from Wood and Keep Them Safe, I think we could all pretty readily agree that as a matter of priority they need to be set up and they should be cross-sectoral. It would be madness for us to start a child wellbeing unit, the Department of Education and Training [DET] to start theirs and the Association of Independent Schools [AIS] to start theirs. We do not want silo services.

CHAIR: Thank you, that concludes our panel's questions. Do you have any other comments you would like to make before you leave us today?

Mr BAKER: Could I raise a very old chestnut? It also links to the Wood report and Keep them Safe. One of the recommendations in Wood and Keep Them Safe is to expand the number of home school liaison officers by 25. We endorse that. We point out that the non-government schools have no access to the home school liaison service. I go back to my point about families at risk as the families who need this service typically, without the risk of stereotyping. We have the situation where a family will have one child in a government school and that child will have access to the home school liaison service and another child in a Catholic school will not. We endorse the recommendation in Keep Them Safe to expand the home service liaison service. We would like to be part of it.

CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance today.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

ALISON PETERS, Director, Council of Social Service of New South Wales [NCOSS], 66 Albion Street, Surry Hills, and

DEV MUKHERJEE, Senior Policy Officer, Council of Social Service of New South Wales, 66 Albion Street, Surry Hills, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and also a brochure entitled "Information for Witnesses Before Parliamentary Committees." Is that correct?

Ms PETERS: That is correct.

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from your organisation. Do you wish that submission to form part of your evidence today and to be made public?

Ms PETERS: Yes, we do.

CHAIR: You have no problems with that?

Ms PETERS: No.

CHAIR: As time is limited today we might not be able to ask all the questions that we want to ask you and we might send them to you by mail. Would you have any problems with answering those questions?

Ms PETERS: No, we would not.

CHAIR: The recent Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales recommended extending Brighter Futures to children aged 9 to 14, including priority access for Aboriginal children and their families. What benefits would arise from extending that program?

Ms PETERS: This is something that NCOSS has long supported. Unfortunately, I do not have enough copies with me today, but we can make more copies available to the Committee. I have brought with me the NCOSS pre-budget submission for 2009-10. My purpose in doing that was to draw the attention of the Committee to one of our recommendations, which was the extension of a Brighter Futures-type program for children aged 9 to 17. We felt that that was justified as this group of children and young people have similar needs but do not have the same priority, or access, to intensive early intervention futures that Brighter Futures is able to give to younger people. I will leave these with you but we can certainly make more copies available. It is also on our website.

CHAIR: Thank you. What benefits are in place, what are the limitations of the Better Futures program, and should this program be extended across New South Wales?

Ms PETERS: I could be getting my Better Futures and Brighter Futures mixed up, which I have a habit of doing. Brighter Futures is the early intervention program that is currently available and that focuses on young children. The practical focus of that program has tended to be on children aged zero to three and zero to five and their families. Better Futures is a more limited program, both in relation to its funding and its scope. It is quite small, about \$6 million per annum as I understand it—I could be wrong on that—so it is not a large program. As a result, it lacks focus and perhaps comprehensiveness as a way of providing appropriate services for this age group.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Alison or Dev, the Reconnect program is one of several early intervention programs currently provided for children aged over 12 or 14. Do you feel that consideration should be given to extending these types of programs to include a younger age group?

Mr MUKHERJEE: Are you talking about the Commonwealth Government's Reconnect program?

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Yes.

Mr MUKHERJEE: As I understand it, that program is aimed at young people at risk of homelessness. People are at risk of homelessness. Again, it is a small program that does not cover every area in New South Wales, or indeed Australia. It is specifically targeted to homeless young people, although it has a focus on reconnecting with education. As I understand it, its primary objective is to reconnect young people with their families. I am not certain whether that model is suitable for a very much younger age group—I would not have thought that it would have been ideal for a very young age group—but there are some benefits to be achieved from extending it to children aged 12, or even a little younger. Given that primarily it is about homelessness, I would not have thought it would have been suitable for children aged much younger than 12.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: What would you recommend to improve the access to transport of children aged 9 to 14? Do you have any suggestions that you could recommend to the Committee?

Ms PETERS: In some areas, having public transport in the first place would be a good start. We have no particular recommendations that could usefully be made, but access to transport increasingly is an issue for children and young people—being able to access support services and recreational and leisure opportunities. Anything that is designed to improve general safety for public transport obviously is a good thing. However, we need to bear in mind that transport is just not available to significant numbers of children and young people. We have been seeking an extension to community transport as a viable alternative in those areas. For example, last year we conducted a range of regional consultations.

A story that I tell a lot, I think illustrates some of the difficulties that we have. We were in Kempsey and the local Aboriginal community in Kempsey had organised to have a local surf life saving club train young people for their bronze medallion. Everyone thought that was a fantastic idea. It was all lined up but, of course, the beach is 40 kilometres from Kempsey and they had no capacity to get there. A community transport bus was locked up in a yard every weekend, but because that bus was provided under the Home and Community Care [HACC] program, which is for older people or people with a disability, it was not available for a more general community use. That story illustrates some of the difficulties that we have. We can have some good programs in place, or some good opportunities available for younger people, but access to public or community transport is just not available to allow those programs to roll out effectively.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Given the comments that you just made relating to transport, is there any way in which some of these things could be overcome so that youth transport is involved with those other programs?

Ms PETERS: We know, for example, that the Department of Sport and Recreation has a lot of programs that are designed to connect young people and children who are at risk or who are disadvantaged in some way to formal sporting opportunities. However, a lot of those programs fall over because of a lack of infrastructure—transport to and from the sporting fields, or training and the like. Outside Sydney that is a particular issue because of the distances involved. It can sometimes be through a lack of other facilities—qualified coaches, volunteers or other people to assist in running the programs and so forth. When these things are introduced they need to have proper support for that sort of infrastructure.

NCOSS certainly believes that there is a role for community transport, through additional funding, to provide more transport, which at the moment is limited. It needs to ration the services to priority cases, so that tends to be either under the HACC program where it places limits on who is eligible to access such transport, or through some of the other schemes. It is looking at people with needs for health transport and the like, so it has to prioritise. If children and young people need to go to a game of football or to do training after school, that is not considered a priority in the same way as other needs are considered a priority. We need a boost to community transport funding to enable those organisations to meet this need. I think that would also give us focus on other needs for children and young people in this age group.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Could you comment on the need for additional youth services and the capacity of current youth services to meet these needs?

Ms PETERS: I know that you will be hearing later from representatives from the Youth and Policy Action Association [YAPA]. I think they would probably be better placed to deal with this matter. It is our understanding that a large number of youth services that are currently funded under the Community Services Grants Program [CSGP], offer terrific programs for children and young people. They can deal with the age group at which this inquiry is looking. The Community Services Grants Program, or CSGP, is a fairly unique and long-standing program.

It funds youth services, family support services and neighbourhood centres, and essentially it enables those organisations to meet the needs that confront them, or whatever the needs are in the local community. It can be flexible in the sorts of programs and services that it provides to those communities. The program has not had a substantial increase in funds for a number of years. In fact, again in our pre-budget submission, NCOSS has called on a substantial increase in funding for that program, which, of course, would flow to youth services, allowing them to offer more services and also to meet the increased demand for their services in many areas. We would draw your attention to that part of our pre-budget submission as well.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Your submission identifies the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program [SAAP]. Youth services are not funded to deal with homeless young people in this age group. How would you recommend this issue be addressed?

Mr MUKHERJEE: This is a complex area. SAAP is a Commonwealth-State funded program that is now undergoing a great deal of change as part of the Council of Australian Governments [COAG] process. It is certainly true that SAAP services are not meant to provide accommodation support to people under the school leaving age under the Commonwealth SAAP Act. That may change because they are talking about removing that Act and doing all sorts of things, but as it currently stands services are not meant to be providing accommodation support for children under the school leaving age under that particular State or Territory in which they live.

The National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness a couple of years ago reported on this quite extensively. It was a community inquiry. They were suggesting a number of reforms, which would include scrapping the age restrictions of SAAP. Whether that is the best system for that particular group, is not really known. There is not much evidence to say that that is actually the best system, but it is the system we have and it is the system that is actually providing the services now. So, to have an Act that actually restricts current activity was what I believe was a concern of that commission.

Certainly the needs of the younger age group under, say, 16 can be quite different to 16 and older. So you perhaps would need services that are particularly focused on that younger group—so, whether that is a refuge. That inquiry also recommended there be an expansion of the Reconnect Program; and I believe they saw the Reconnect Program as probably a better service for the 12 to 16-year-olds than the SAAP system, although they did say that there were cases where it was not possible for a young person to be returned home because of the situation, nor was that appropriate. It also goes to the fact that the child protection system has not focused particularly on homeless young people, let us be generous and say 12 to 16—it may even be younger than that—because the focus of the child protection system in many ways has tended to be for sort of nought to eight.

Young people who become homeless are probably better in some of the services that are provided under child protection, like out-of-home-care services other than the SAAP services. In some instances they are the same organisation providing the services, but it is which particular program is better suited to those young people. From memory, I think the recommendation of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness was that the out-of-home-care system was actually the best place for those young people, but recognised that because it was a national inquiry that was not possible in every State and Territory. So, it was suggested some amendment to the SAAP Act.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: How long are waiting times for children and young people aged 9 to 14 for public dental health services? What would you recommend to improve access to dental services for this age group?

Ms PETERS: I do not have those figures immediately to hand. NCOSS, in conjunction with the members of the Oral Health Alliance in New South Wales, is about to release a report on the unmet dental needs in New South Wales based on a survey we have done with community-based organisations—talking to their clients about how long they wait. I am unaware, because I was not actually part of writing up the report, whether that is being done by age, but certainly if those figures are available we can send them to you. What we do know overall is that disadvantaged groups wait a disproportionately long period of time to access public dental services; there just is not enough. So, often young people, particularly if they are in disadvantaged circumstances—if they are Aboriginal or indigenous in particular—they are highly likely to be in need of dental services and they will have waited a substantial period of time to access dental services.

It tends to be a case of you get treatment if you actually need your tooth taken out, but you do not get the ongoing important preventative checkups and maintenance. We are aware, of course, that the Commonwealth Government intends to introduce a program affectionately known as Teen Dental, which will provide free checkups for teenagers. However, our concern about that program, which is well intentioned, is that that is just for the checkups. If as a result of those checkups you obviously need treatment, that has to come from somewhere and we continue to have significant waiting lists in New South Wales for people accessing public dental services. Again, I perhaps should draw your attention to another recommendation in our pre-budget submission, which goes to a significant investment in public dental services to meet unmet demand across the community. Certainly, that would benefit children and young people in this age group as well.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Are there any particular comments or recommendations you would like to make about education for middle years students in New South Wales?

Ms PETERS: We believe there are others who would be better placed to talk about that particular issue. We understood you were to have seen the Teachers Federation and we would urge that you try to reschedule them appearing before this inquiry. We think they probably would have more to say. I know you are seeing someone from the Parents and Citizens Associations this afternoon. I suspect they would be in a better position to comment on that than we would.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Are there particular initiatives or reforms you consider are required for employment of children and young people in the middle years?

Ms PETERS: In a previous position I held I was involved in a working group chaired by the Commissioner for Children and Young People that looked at employment of children and young people. I have to admit, I was somewhat amazed by how many younger people were employed than I had understood. That report is available and if the Committee is not already in possession of it, I would urge that it seek it out. There was a range of recommendations that go to parental authority, consent, safety issues and, importantly, hours of work so that it did not impact on schooling because, certainly within this age group, they would be required to be at school. With the proposed extension of the school leaving age to 17, obviously that is even more important as well.

NCOSS has supported the extension of the school leaving age to 17. We understand that it is either to be within formal schooling or in an appropriate vocational education environment. We think that provides a sound basis for the future life of these children and young people. However, to achieve this you actually have to invest in it and invest in it properly. We have raised these issues with the relevant Minister as well.

CHAIR: Thank you, Alison and Dev. Would you like to make any further comment or recommendations or put anything to us that, basically, we have not covered?

Ms PETERS: Not at this stage. As I said, I will leave some copies of our pre-budget submission with the Committee, but I can make other copies available should that be required.

CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance today.

(The witnesses withdrew)

REYNATO REODICA, Executive Officer, Youth Action and Policy Association, 146 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you for your appearance today. I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and also a brochure entitled "Information for Witnesses before Parliamentary Committees," is that correct?

Mr REODICA: That is correct.

CHAIR: As time is limited today, we might not get through all of our allotted questions for you. Therefore, do you have any problem at a later time responding to questions in writing?

Mr REODICA: No, not at all.

CHAIR: We will go straight to the questions. What are the main factors that youth services encounter in providing an accessible and comprehensive service for 12 to 25-year-olds?

Mr REODICA: Obviously, the first thing would come down to availability of funding sources and also the way those funding streams are administered to youth service providers. A lot of youth service providers are very good at coming up with different ways of addressing the needs of young people within that age group, but what we are finding is that a lot of the new funding programs are far more prescriptive than some of the other funding programs. Because of this we are finding that it is quite difficult for youth services to be innovative and to really look at the needs of their client groups beyond some of the priorities that are set in other places. That is certainly one of the difficulties.

The second difficulty is just resourcing in terms of quantum and the fact that the demand that these services face in changes to compliance costs and just costs of being able to deliver the service have far exceeded the amount of funding that has been made available, particularly for programs like the Community Services Grants Program, which funds a whole chunk of non-residential youth services across the State. They probably would be the two issues that we would identify first up.

CHAIR: Do you consider it is appropriate for youth services to provide services for 9 to 11 year olds, provided that additional funding is made available and specific programs are put in place?

Mr REODICA: Certainly. I know that a lot of services run programs that are appropriate for the younger age group, such as the 12 and upwards age group, and they have worked hard with their funding bodies and collaboratively with those funding bodies to try to change the parameters of those particular funding contracts to allow them to cater to the younger age group. That is particularly so around transitions from primary to high school, which I know this Committee has heard a bit about.

We find that that is one example of an area in which services that work with that younger age group really want to extend those opportunities to people in the 9 to 11 age group. I think there is a second issue around whether or not you can provide a comprehensive service, such as a drop-in service, to the complete 9 to 18 age group or even beyond that, which some do. A lot of youth services tend to find that their clientele is within the older teenage group. Because of that, sometimes there are some issues that need to be addressed in terms of making sure that the mix between those younger age groups, the nine to mid-teenage group and older young people, have interactions that are appropriate at all times.

There are difficulties obviously, but we think it is appropriate for particular programs to be allowed for that younger age group. I would like to point out that anecdotally we have been hearing from people who have been around for a while that across the country some of the issues that some of the older members saw as traditional or longstanding youth issues fitting squarely within the 12-upwards age group are now starting to be seen with younger people. Further to that I think it is actually quite a good thing to look at allowing funding programs to extend down to about the nine years of age group.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Has YAPA being involved in the Better Future projects? In your experience, what are the benefits and limitations of that program? How could it be improved?

Mr REODICA: We are currently funded by the Better Futures project, which is the youth participation grants program. It provides small grants for young people across the State, or grants opportunities for young people who want to have youth-led projects that have some community good for other young people across the State. That just notes the fact that we do receive Better Futures funding. We believe it is a great program.

I would have to say it is difficult to get a real picture of Better Futures across the board. Our feedback is that in certain regions, it works better than in others. If some of the intentions around good participation of young people, and participation through the creation and design of Better Futures funded projects occur, that tends to improve service generally across the board. Apart from giving that principle statement about Better Futures, I could not really give you an informed view of how it is across the State. I think a lot of my comments come from piecemeal anecdotes of different people who have engaged in different projects.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: The inquiry has been told of the importance of working with families of children and young people in middle years, not only with the children and young people themselves. What are your views about this approach—working with the families of that age group?

Mr REODICA: I think it is certainly appropriate in most situations, not all. I think it is appropriate for families to be involved in it as much as is possible, but sometimes it may prove difficult to get to outcomes through that. I do not think it is a one-or-the-other type of issue and that you could have both. But I would say that there is a lot of value in providing programs for young people directly as well as working with families. Does that answer your question?

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: I think so, pretty well. Thank you.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: What type of initiatives do you consider the New South Wales Government should put into place to increase youth participation in the development of its policies and programs?

Mr REODICA: There are a number of different things. Firstly, in terms of government practice, there are currently best practice principles at the government level. There was a Premier's memorandum handed down a couple of years ago that outlined particular principles for youth participation, which we certainly support. We will always encourage government departments to follow that. I think some of those principles also apply across the board in terms of good practice for other organisations. For example, some leadership around youth participation in government would be good. I am not sure of the status of the current Youth Action Plan, which includes statements around that, but I think that keeping to that particular document would be one way that the Government can encourage that in its own ranks.

Secondly, there are possibilities around different funding opportunities. A number of different funding opportunities can have, and should have, youth participation embedded into those things. For instance, with our Better Futures youth participation project, there is a requirement that we have a number of young people on the selection panel and on the steering committee for that particular project. I think that is generally good practice around youth participation.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: What is required to increase the access of early teenagers to activities in a more comprehensive manner, particularly in rural areas? That is one of the issues that a number of witnesses have mentioned—the accessibility problems in rural and regional New South Wales.

Mr REODICA: When you say "activities", do you have any specific activities in mind, or shall I just talk about different ones?

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Some of the comment that we have received relates to the types of activities that young people or children have in terms of out-of-hours school care.

Mr REODICA: Yes.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Obviously when kids are from nine years of age onwards and into high school, they cannot necessarily access youth centres.

Mr REODICA: Yes.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: But they certainly do not want to necessarily engage in the types of activities that the younger children have in those out-of-hours school care programs.

Mr REODICA: We have definitely picked up on that particular issue around the restrictions in terms of, say, youth centres being able to access that particular age group. If those young people want to access youth centres, some more flexibility around those young people being able to access those centres would be best for engaging in activities that they want to engage in. There are other issues in terms of activities generally. One thing that has been on our radar and on which we haven't done an incredible amount of work is young people's involvement with sport and recreation activities and the good outcomes of that in terms of health outcomes and social connectedness.

If there could be some ways that the Government might look into dealing with regulations or supporting young people who find it difficult to pay the insurance costs of particular activities, some of the prohibitive costs of being involved particularly in organised sport might be overcome. Those would be other ways that you can increase young people's access to activities. In terms of rural and regional New South Wales, that is a difficult one. It covers a whole gamut of issues that young people face in rural areas.

Transport is the first thing that comes to mind. It pretty much creates a barrier for a lot of young people in rural and regional New South Wales. There are some different ideas about access to community transport and different things that have been trialled around the State to increase opportunities for young people to get to the places where they want to have those activities. I think it should be supported and spread across the State, if possible.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: I will ask a question that I think you nearly answered just then. What sort of transport initiatives should be introduced that could benefit young teenagers, especially those in rural and outer metropolitan areas?

Mr REODICA: Community transport options, such as the one I talked about. For instance, in the Eurobodalla shire, we have a voucher system. I think down Wingecarribee way, there are other night-time transport options, but I think that particular one is for older young people on a Friday night. Innovative public transport options is one thing. I have always found it strange that the Home and Community Care-funded buses that are used during the day throughout weekdays often are left in garages when young people could be using them for local use and working in partnership with other organisations to use those particular buses on weekends. That is something that I have always found quite interesting.

The other options I probably would suggest are just about access to normal private transport options: that does have an impact. One of the limitations we have found is change to the young driver's legislation. People often do not realise that when older siblings of the age group you are talking about start driving, there is an expectation that they will ferry around the younger siblings. That needs to be factored into the unintended consequences of some of the road safety measures that have been put in place over the past five years or so. That is what comes to mind in that area.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: If you have an answer to the next question I am about to ask, you are a miracle worker. What types of early interventions and prevention programs should be introduced to help to address causes of crime?

Mr REODICA: I am not a miracle worker, apparently. This is obviously a very difficult thing.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: It is.

Mr REODICA: From our perspective, what has been promising is that both sides of politics have kind of realised, and have been moving towards, early intervention approaches to recidivism in young offenders being something that in the long term does lead to less crime. Focusing on that general approach is definitely a step in the right direction from YAPA's perspective. I think there has been a significant amount of research done in the Victorian context around different options that are available for reducing young offending. I cannot say that I am across all the research, but I would encourage the Committee to view that particular work, if they aren't aware of it already.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: What types of issues arise with young people's use of public spaces, such as libraries, shopping centres and malls? How should these be addressed?

Mr REODICA: YAPA has been looking at public space issues for young people over a number of years. What we know is that opportunities for young people to use what would have been public space in the past are much fewer these days. Young people find themselves using shopping centres, for example, as their primary areas for congregating or are using libraries, considering that there is Internet access. That applies particularly to young people who do not have access to such facilities at their home. What issues arise? Obviously there are a number of different issues when different people have varying views about the way that this space could be used. In the past in some of those areas, we have looked at shopping centre protocols where local young people and the shopping centre management look at developing protocols around the way that young people use that space.

We have also put out some information for librarians and different people who manage public space, to help them understand some of the issues that they might face, and looking at different ways that they might approach young people that is not just banning them, particularly when it is a shopping centre that has essential services. Young people might need to access services. A ban from that shopping centre would mean that they could not get a Medicare card or access their banking facilities. This is obviously an area of concern. What we have done in the past probably needs to be re-looked at; that is, the way that security guards are trained to deal with young people. We have done some of that work in the past under a particular project. When there is turnover of security staff, which seems to happen in that industry, the industry needs to retrain their staff about how to best deal with all their customers including young people.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Have some shopping centres allocated an area for young people?

Mr REODICA: Yes. That is something that will vary from shopping centre to shopping centre. I know that we have had this discussion in the past with one quite good shopping centre.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Is that getting back to the local management? Does Westfield have a policy?

Mr REODICA: It was that particular shopping centre management, but it was redeveloping its shopping centre space. One of its considerations was whether it would go down the road of giving young people their own space or not. There are costs and benefits with both. Firstly, if you do go down the road of getting a young-person-only space, depending on how it is done it can exclude other people from that area. The balance you have to strike is to have people-friendly spaces that young people can feel some ownership of, but that do not necessarily exclude unnecessarily other people.

I think that there are places where that has worked, and given the proper management of those spaces and a proper understanding between the management and the young people using the space, that can work. Other places have gone down the road of trying to make the whole shopping centre youth friendly without allocating that particular space.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: To follow on the question regarding the workplace, what do you think are the key issues facing young teenagers in the workplace? How can they be addressed?

Mr REODICA: Firstly, we did some research around young people and their ability, particularly to bargain at work and to protect their rights and interests at work. We know that young people are less likely to understand their rights and may be less confident and more trusting of their employers in terms of trusting that the employer will do the right thing—which does not always happen. Ensuring that proper protections are in place for young people is incredibly important.

Having said that, I was, my organisation was, on the Children At Work taskforce that was led by the Commission for Children and Young People. We know that young people engaging in work is a good thing, but just making sure that those protections are in place and that young people are able to enforce those rights and are not taken advantage of in those situations is important.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Have you published some advice sheets to hand out to young people?

Mr REODICA: We have not done that specifically. We have looked at some of the work done by the New South Wales Office of Industrial Relations through the Young People At Work website and some of their

other publications. We think that that is generally along the right track. That is not quite within our resources to do, unfortunately, as a non-government organisation. But, we do think that that goes some way to ensuring those things and making sure that those initiatives continue.

CHAIR: That concludes the Committee's questions to you. Do you have any further recommendations or comments?

Mr REODICA: No, not particularly.

(The witness withdrew)

CHAIR: The New South Wales Teachers Federation has been unable to send a representative today because of illness. The federation will be invited to attend to give evidence when the Committee next meets, on 15 April 2009.

Further, I must now withdraw from today's hearing, as I have an important function to attend. The Deputy Chair, the Hon. Kayee Griffin, will chair the remainder of today's hearing.

(Short adjournment)

DIANNE BUTLAND, executive member of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations and casual teacher, 6 Pembroke Avenue, Turramurra, affirmed and examined:

DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. Do you have a copy of the information for witnesses appearing before the Committee?

Ms BUTLAND: Yes.

DEPUTY CHAIR: As time is limited today the Committee may wish to send you some additional questions in writing. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to any further questions?

Ms BUTLAND: Yes.

DEPUTY CHAIR: To what extent have primary and secondary transition programs been implemented in New South Wales schools and how should these be strengthened?

Ms BUTLAND: There has been a significant change in the last five years or so with a much greater consciousness of the need to provide strong transition programs for year 6 students going into secondary schooling. Before that they were very lacking; there were not many of them and they were not well developed. I think there has been quite a focus in the last five years on supporting those programs, but at the same time they are very mixed. Some places have very good programs and other places have programs that are in great need of support. There is also a greater need to engage parents and the community in the transition process. Schools are doing much more to link up with their feeder primary schools in the transition of students to secondary schools but the support and engagement of parents in that process still needs much more work.

DEPUTY CHAIR: I think you have partially answered the next question. The Department of Education and Training's middle years strategy runs from 2006 to 2009. If a subsequent strategy is developed, what issues do you think it should emphasise?

Ms BUTLAND: Lots! I guess the critical issue is the engagement of young people with schooling, both in late primary school and through to secondary school. Perhaps to pre-empt that we need to look particularly at the needs of middle years of schooling in low socioeconomic communities. There needs to be a much greater focus on the needs of that segment of our community. Things are much better for middle-class kids. The need exists in communities that have economic problems and related social problems. The strategy needs to look particularly at engagement of young people with the curriculum and how to organise schooling so that while there is a curriculum guarantee, schools are much more able to respond flexibly and innovatively so that the curriculum engages kids and connects to them and their particular life situations. It needs to engage much more with the life experiences of young people.

A new middle years strategy would need to expand what have been very fragmented programs to engage family and community in the schooling process, or to work together in the schooling process. Sometimes work that has been funded for the short term has not necessarily continued. There needs to be an ongoing program of schools working with the community. That does not mean drawing parents into the school but rather schools reaching out to the community. Schools and teachers need to be engaged with their communities to take account of, know and understand the cultural context from which young people are coming. That way they can make the curriculum relevant and meaningful and connect the community and family to the schooling process.

At the same time that will have an effect on supporting and developing the community, because it affirms the community and begins to build practices and competencies in the community. I am arguing that any middle years strategy for schools should not be a narrow schools-focused strategy but should have a family and community focus. It needs to give time to teachers. There is an interesting and important issue here. Not only do teachers need professional development to be better able to work with and engage with communities, but also they need time because we are creating a significant role for teachers in getting out into the community and engaging and talking with people. It may be that they will run literacy classes where a community has literacy problems. The school can play an important role in developing the literacy needs of the community. That has a whole lot of follow-on effects in building positive relationships between schools and the community.

You asked me what sorts of things should be in the new strategy. There is a lot of talk around education, and also around the department in some ways, about the core work of schooling being literacy and

numeracy skills. There is a concern that over the last few years in schools there has developed, perhaps in contradiction to what I said earlier about transition programs, a growing view that the responsibility of schools is narrowly around developing literacy and numeracy. We would argue that these skills are always in context. There has been a push to spend a great deal of time in primary schools and now even in secondary schools in evaluating things such as the English Language Literacy and Assessment [ELLA] test, the Secondary Numeracy Assessment Programs [SNAP], the Basic Skills Test [BST] and now the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] test.

There is a push for teachers and schools to demonstrate their worth by performance in these tests. However, even if it leads to an improvement in test scores it does not necessarily improve the educational level—the engagement of young people in the schooling process. Schools and the department need to recognise that literacy and numeracy skills are learnt in an applied context where the curriculum is rich and diverse and where students' knowledge about themselves and their local and wider communities and the broader environmental issues are a mechanism by which kids will develop literacy and numeracy. That is the way in which the school curriculum can become more enriching, more engaging and more alive for young people. Through that the skills that they obviously will need in later life will be developed and enriched, because they have a purpose and a meaning.

School has a meaning when it engages the real lives of young people. So there is a need for the curriculum not to be narrowed but to maintain a broadness and richness and give young people the opportunity to delve deeply into issues when they are relevant and meaningful. It does not mean the curriculum just having a broad perspective but that it offers plenty of opportunities to engage in the arts, sciences, sport and music. We must be sure not to allow the school curriculum to be narrowed, particularly by the demands of the testing regime that has come to be a force in supposedly measuring what schools are doing. It is much too narrow and inappropriate. It is making the middle years of schooling even more fragmented and narrowed down to ritualised behaviour in relation to literacy and numeracy.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: You have probably answered some of this but could you outline to the Committee to what extent extracurricular activities are available in schools for middle years students?

Ms BUTLAND: Of course being able to pay for them often helps! That is an issue we are well aware of. Communities where people have extra resources are more likely to have opportunities for kids to engage in extracurricular activity, even down to the opportunity to play interschool sport and so on. Those sorts of activities cost money. Kids have to pay for bus fares and all those sorts of things. Opportunities are inevitably limited for the most needy groups of young people. Some schools are wonderful in terms of what they are able to offer. Some activities will be extracurricular but there is a need to diversify and ensure we have a broad curriculum so that those activities are not always extracurricular but are included in the curriculum. That is what makes schools living, important places for young people to be. They want to be in a rich, exciting environment. They do not want to sit through a routine most every day.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Following on from that, how should extracurricular activities be made more available to middle year students?

Ms BUTLAND: I tend not to want to see them just as extracurricular, so I have partly addressed that by saying that part of it is to do with resourcing. It is about kids having a say in their own learning so that they feel confident and that people are listening to them and they are able to make decisions about wanting to learn about this or engage in that. Some of it is about making it okay for teachers to ask kids what they want to do and how they want it to go—giving them options so that they can make a choice. Some of it is about legitimating a process of extracurricular activities. It depends on whether you are talking about being in the school or outside of school hours or in lunch times and after school times and so on. The response will vary a little bit on about which of those you are talking about and how you define the extracurricular.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Probably meaning more out of school.

Ms BUTLAND: Lunchtime and so on, outside the mainstream curriculum.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Yes.

Ms BUTLAND: Now when I think about it, maybe that is not a healthy division because much of what is extracurricular should be part of the mainstream curriculum. I think I want to pull back from that and say that

we should not be talking about extracurricular because it is the main curriculum, some of which might happen at lunch time with your science clubs or your agricultural group that gets together and looks after the plot of land and so on, but it is mainstream curriculum.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Many parents and citizens run out-of-school-hours care facilities at school. How should the need for out-of-school-hours care for over 12 year olds be addressed?

Ms BUTLAND: There has been a huge expansion in out-of-school-hours care run by P and C groups, which run them on a non-profit basis. We are very concerned at the present time with the department's unilateral decision to charge extensive rental space for school facilities. When you have non-profit making P and C groups that are running out-of-school-hours care, we are suddenly being confronted with a huge rental bill that is being currently drawn up in terms of a contract relationship. No difference between profit making out-of-school-hours care and school-based P and C non-profit making. Obviously schools are community facilities.

Why we have a department that is thinking it can make money on the use of community facilities when it should be seen as a facility for the enrichment of the community — and out-of-school-hours care is an integral and important change in our society that requires that young kids in their late primary years, maybe the first year of high school, need supportive care after school — raises the issue of what happens to the next age group. At present there are sometimes homework clubs. It is not a very organised and systematic process, and there is probably a lot more scope for secondary schools to run a different kind of after-school service. Our organisation knows of homework clubs, sports teams, that sort of thing, but it is sort of one-off and not as regularised. So it is an interesting issue.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Is there a coordinated approach to parent participation within the New South Wales Department of Education and Training?

Ms BUTLAND: There is in policy but not in practice, or it varies in practice. There are documents written about parent participation and recognition of its importance and it is stronger in primary schools and it very easily peters off in secondary schools. Yet that is the time in which that engagement is so important. We need much more professional development for teachers and school principals on how to do it, how to engage in it, a readiness to say, "Parents must come to us". As I said before, the schools must go out; they have to engage with their communities, particularly communities that are not part of that middle class group that fits the pattern of our school system. It is a big challenge, and it is good to see that there is some potential through the new Commonwealth project, the national partnerships around building low socioeconomic communities. There is a great potential here and the New South Wales department will be responsible for that. So it will be a critical question of whether that partnership, that engagement, goes in the right direction.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Is there a need for widespread parenting programs for parents of students in the age group?

Ms BUTLAND: I do not like the concept of parenting programs. I think parents want to know, they want to learn, but many of the programs are not appropriate for the groups that we are talking about.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: What should the content of the programs be then?

Ms BUTLAND: I think that is partly where you have to talk to the groups that are there, because what I would see is not necessarily what those groups in the community, and it will vary a great deal, and it must start with their starting point in terms of what they want to know about and—

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: No one size fits all.

Ms BUTLAND: No, there is not one size fits all. I am aware of one program that is standardly used. I have read that it fits reasonably well for a middle class group but totally inappropriate for the groups I have been stressing this afternoon.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: For the low economic and disadvantaged schools.

Ms BUTLAND: Yes, where people have lots and lots of issues in their lives that they want to talk about and explore.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Or schools with larger numbers of ethnic children.

Ms BUTLAND: Yes. I will return to the issues about middle years, picking up on your idea of different groups. We have had increasing integration of students with special needs. We have been hearing increasingly of parents saying, "I want my child in a special needs unit, maybe within a mainstream school, maybe somewhere else, depends on the needs of the child." But those facilities have disappeared, and sometimes I am hearing that parents are saying, "My child is not happy in the integration process, doesn't fit it, doesn't have other people to link with". The department may have one, two or three kids here or there, but because it does not have six or seven kids no special class is set up or it is too far to travel for kids. So there are some problems that have arisen in relation to special needs provision that I think need to be solidly addressed. It may or could mean anything from providing more specialist classes to having much smaller classes when you do have integrated students.

If you have five or six kids integrated into a mainstream class, how on earth can a teacher work with 24 to 32 kids and cater for their needs? Where they have classes with students with high demands we must have smaller class sizes so a teacher can build relationships with the students, otherwise they are spending their lives simply keeping the class under control. They do not have any chance to build connections with kids who are often disengaged from school. You have to build that by building relationships. It is an expensive demand but I think it is absolutely necessary to begin to address the needs of kids with special needs but also kids from communities with special needs.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: You mentioned special needs. Sometimes there are children in that middle age group who need additional literacy assistance, because we know there are children going through the system who cannot read.

Ms BUTLAND: Yes.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: How do you feel that that can be dealt with?

Ms BUTLAND: I had a class at Walgett for a short period of 14, 15, 16 year olds who had minimal literacy. They had missed out all along but they also came from problem families where there were lots of problems and issues. In the time that I was there I was able to begin to build a relationship where they at least came to school. That was the first point. I was only there on a short-term contract so I did not have the ongoing opportunity to address their needs, but there was a need for resources relevant to that community. That school did not have resources that drew from the whole range of Aboriginal literature. That was lacking.

I wanted to start with current issues in Aboriginal community lives but the resources were not there, but they should have been. That would have been the way to begin to engage. I got to the point of reading some of the children to sleep on the floor. I thought that was it; that was going right back to reading children to sleep. So I went back to that level. It is very intense. It relies on building relationships. It is not about simply teaching literacy. You are about building relationships, building trust, building confidence in young people that they will have a go, especially if they have had years of resisting, in feeling that they are not valued. You have to overcome things. So it is very intense, very expensive and requires compassionate teachers.

(The witness withdrew)

MATTHEW ROY SANDERS, Director, Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, affirmed and examined:

DEPUTY CHAIR: I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and a brochure entitled "Information for Witnesses Appearing Before Parliamentary Committees". Is that correct?

Professor SANDERS: That is correct.

DEPUTY CHAIR: Is that the capacity in which you are appearing today?

Professor SANDERS: Yes, it is.

DEPUTY CHAIR: As time is limited, the Committee may wish to send you some additional questions in writing. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to those questions?

Professor SANDERS: Sure.

DEPUTY CHAIR: How widespread is parenting support for the parents of nine to 14 year olds in New South Wales as compared to support for parents of younger children?

Professor SANDERS: I believe it is much less accessible to parents of that age group. Typically, parenting programs, the investment in them, has been in the early years. If you are a parent of a child under the age of eight you are more likely to have done a parenting program and to be aware of parenting programs in your community than you are if you are a parent of a pre-adolescent or an adolescent-aged youngster. There are also significantly fewer programs offered to this age group, and I think this is partly based on a set of assumptions relating to where investment in parenting is likely to lead to the greatest benefit to children, that being the early years.

Having said that, I think there is clear evidence that there is another window of opportunity in engagement for parents around promoting good healthy, positive relationships with their children, and it is in the transition to the adolescent years. You can have parents who have been parenting their children well, with no major difficulties, and still go into a tailspin at the prospect of puberty and moving into adolescence, and there is another spike in interest by parents in accessing parenting programs. That window closes rapidly after probably the first or second term of high school.

DEPUTY CHAIR: Could you briefly describe the Teen Triple P [Positive Parenting Program] program and the target group of the program?

Professor SANDERS: This is an extension of the Triple P program, which starts from birth up to age 12. We developed a version of Triple P for parents of teenagers, recognising that there was a gap in the service provision for this group. Fundamentally, it is not a single program in the sense of a single size fitting all. It is a multilevel system of intervention. So, for example, if it were delivered as a transition to high school program it would have a universal element, which is a media and communications strategy, which can be quite localised. There would be brief interventions around things like tip sheets and videos that parents could access to do with common developmental, behavioural and emotional issues of teenagers.

There is then a more intensive group and individual program where the parenting difficulties experienced are more complex and less likely to respond to light touch interventions. The most intensive form of intervention would be to those families where parenting problems are complicated by other forms of family adversity, including depression and other mental health problems in the parent and things like drug and alcohol problems that might be present in the family, marital discord, relationship breakdowns. That is at the more intensive level. The idea is that the level of intensity of the intervention that the parent participates in is related to the level of need that that family has and also their interest and capacity to engage in what is being offered.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Professor, a preliminary evaluation of the Teen Triple P program showed a significant reduction in a variety of risk factors associated with developmental, behavioural and emotional problems. Could you give a brief overview of the initial outcomes?

Professor SANDERS: If I might say, the broader context for evaluation of Triple P is that there are now 92 studies that have been conducted on the system of intervention. It is not a single program. If we isolate the teen program, there have been trials focusing on delivering Triple P as a telephone-based intervention, a 10-session telephone consultation program, which was developed for rural families. There is also a group program, which is an eight-session program that is being evaluated in a randomised trial, and also a 10-session individual program. So there are more intensive levels of intervention. In a snapshot, consistent with other evidence relating to the outcomes with Triple P, what you see in terms of the outcomes of the teen version are when parents learn to parent more positively there are fewer behavioural and emotional difficulties with their children, there is less coercive parenting taking place in the home. That means there is less conflict on a day-to-day basis with the adolescent. There is also some evidence relating to improved mental health outcomes in the parent, particularly in the area of stress and depression.

The other important piece of evidence relating to this has to do with the effects of parenting programs relating to parents' capacity to work. We have recently conducted some trials that have included in the sample both parents of teenagers and parents of young children that have shown that if working parents are able to leave for work without having had significant conflict with a kid about getting up, getting out, getting organised, they are significantly less likely to have a conflict interaction in the workplace. We have also found that when parents learn to parent positively their job satisfaction increases, the level of occupational stress and burnout decreases. This has been demonstrated in a recent study with teachers as parents—in other words, delivering Triple P not as classroom management training for teachers but as a work-life balance strategy as an employee assistance program.

So that the cascading benefits of kids being happier and getting on better within their families, when the parents have the knowledge, skills and confidence to parent well I think is not only a replicated finding but it is a finding that is extremely difficult to ignore anymore. Because of all of the things that we could do that are potentially targeting risk and protective factors that influence the development of children and the development of adolescents, there is probably no more important factor than the child's family and the adolescent's family. What I guess I am saying is that whatever investment government makes in parenting services and parenting programs, it has to fundamentally be based on a respectful message to families about their rights to choose how they wish to raise their children. We lose that self-regulatory emphasis in supporting parents and the parenting community will reject parenting programs. The evidence is increasingly strengthening for parenting programs as a whole and in recent times there has been increased evidence relating to the Teen Triple P strategy as well, which is a consistent set of body of knowledge.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Those evaluations show a twofold benefit: to the adolescent and to the parent?

Professor SANDERS: Yes. You could think of it like this, the five key principles of positive parenting, what teenager would not benefit from this? Living in a safe, engaging environment where there are plenty of interesting and age appropriate things to do and the teenager is adequately supervised. Living in a positive family environment where parents have the skills and knowledge to encourage kids positively, to motivate them positively. Thirdly, when there are reasonable boundaries and limits, the kids know what is appropriate and what is not and parents have the confidence to be able to continue to provide disciplinary limits for the teenager. Fourthly, when parent expectations are reasonable, they are age-appropriate and take into account the adolescent's perspective. Fifthly, when parents as people look after themselves. How can you parent a teenager well if you are overwhelmed with stress, you have drug and alcohol problems, you are living in an environment of friction, conflict, economic uncertainty and the family is at war internally?

What I am saying is let us go to the heart of many of these problems with increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse, kids getting into serious antisocial behaviour, and develop clever ways of engaging modern parents in what it is they are looking for, which is for support in raising their children. Not everyone wants to do a parenting group. We have a group of young people now who grew up in an age of technology. They have different ways of looking at how they wish to access information about parenting, including the web and television programming and so on.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Congratulations, Professor, I would like to learn a lot more about your programs.

Professor SANDERS: Thank you.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Have other teen parenting programs been found to be effective?

Professor SANDERS: Yes, they have. The thing I would just draw to the Committee's attention in terms of the total research investment in parenting programs for teenagers is it is much less than in the parenting programs of younger children. Therefore, the amount of evidence is not as strong as we would like it to be. Having said that, there are a number of programs that have been trialled and shown to be effective. For example, the Adolescent Transitions Program by Tom Dishion at the University of Oregon, the Strengthening Families Program by Dick Spoth at the University of Iowa. There are programs like multi-systemic therapy for fairly severe and complex problems where kids become involved in the juvenile justice system.

The point I would make, however, is that we need a greater investment in the preventative arm by asking the question: Could these problems that end up being extremely severe and requiring complex family intervention programs and other treatments have been prevented by more effective, timely and culturally appropriate parenting services delivered to parents at a point of transition where they have got heightened receptivity again? Most parents want their teenagers to do well at high school, just as they did when their children were starting primary school. There is that window of increased receptivity for sensible, respectful messages to parents about raising their children.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Is there evidence that teen parenting programs are likely to have an impact on a range of outcomes, such as, drug misuse, involvement in crime, poor school achievement and truancy?

Professor SANDERS: Yes, there is. In fact, if you look at the preventative programs and the treatment programs that have targeted adolescents, in general, the programs that are family-based and involve a strong parenting component have stronger effects. In other words, it is very difficult to shift entrenched adolescent problems without family involvement.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Are there any benefits or is there any evidence that teen parenting programs work for lower socioeconomic dysfunctional families?

Professor SANDERS: This is an important question relating to responders and non-responders to parenting programs. We need to look at this in two ways. First of all, if you look at the research on outcomes with Triple P in contrast parents with lower socioeconomic levels and parents with poorer levels of education, we found that when a parent does the parenting program that outcomes are similar for the lower socioeconomic status [SES] and the middle-class families. Where there is a difference in outcomes has to do with the lower-SES families are at greater risk, first of all, of not knowing about the programs in their community and then making false starts.

In other words, they show an interest in participating but for whatever reason they do not complete a program. Usually the research that has looked at reasons for disengagement in a parenting program after initially showing an interest and getting started, it has typically nothing to do with the program. They are to do with kind of life events—housing problems, losing your job, kids getting sick. Most of the parents who prematurely terminate their involvement with a parenting program, however, indicate an interest in doing it again at a later point. So the parents are not saying, "We don't like this" or "We don't want to be part of it". It is almost like a readiness and a motivational commitment to get involved. This is why we need many different strategies to engage parents to enable that the interest should be capitalised upon.

I would like to see, for example, a comprehensive media and communications strategy targeting parents of youngsters in this age group that is not alarmist and sensationalised but is positive, optimistic, preventative and uplifting. It is getting the message out there that your relationships with your kids are their greatest asset. If there is a single thing that families can do to improve outcomes, whether it is school, peer relationships, health or work-related outcomes, it is to get on well with your mum and dad.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Professor, I think you have partly answered this. Do you consider that teen parenting programs are likely to have a greater impact if they are offered in conjunction with the intervention programs for children and young people?

Professor SANDERS: It depends on how those programs are offered together. There is some evidence to show, for example, that if you put children who are seriously at risk of antisocial behaviour together in a program and you have parents doing a parallel parenting program the outcomes can be worse than doing the parenting program separately or the adolescent program separately. Part of the problem, and this is based on

Tom Dishion's work, although there have been some issues with trying to replicate the finding, he was finding that some of these antisocial kids when they were getting together were planning on how to do a crime. While their parents are learning the parenting skills to prevent it, the kids are learning the strategies that would minimise the adverse effect.

In general, what I would say is that programs that provide kids with the opportunity to learn life skills, the social and emotional skills that are relevant to them better handling the current set of relationships and circumstances, is still an important thing to be able to do. My view on this is that kids can learn all sorts of skills and then not apply them because they are living in a family environment that does not value those skills. If the kids and the parents are not on the same page, you can do all sorts of clever things in schools to make kids feel more self-confident and so on but they do not generalise; they do not transfer to other relationships because the family is dysfunctional.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: That is a shame. Have any cost-effectiveness studies been conducted relating to team parenting programs?

Professor SANDERS: Cathy Mihalopoulos conducted an economic analysis. She is now at Deakin University but she was at the University of Melbourne. However, that affiliation would need to be checked. She conducted an economic analysis of the implementation of Triple P up to the age of 12 on a population base of four million, which was the Queensland population at the time. She found that you need to reduce one problem by only 1.5 per cent, which is a conduct disorder, and the whole multilevel system is paid for. The cost offsets are enormous when effective parenting programs are implemented.

Stephen Scott from the London Institute of Psychiatry estimated—and this was published in the *British Medical Journal*—that the costs of a child developing a serious antisocial behaviour problem or conduct disorder are 10 times greater to government—that is, the direct costs—than they would be for a child without such a disorder. We are talking about an investment in parenting that could lead to cost offsets to government of multiple millions of dollars. The economic analyses have been done.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: That is interesting. Thank you, Professor Sanders.

DEPUTY CHAIR: What evidence is available about the impact of participating in activities such as art and sports on increasing the resilience of children and young people in this age group?

Professor SANDERS: I think the important mechanism here is connectedness. If kids are meaningfully involved in age-appropriate activities, in particular, activities that involve peers who are not engaged in antisocial behaviour, that is a protective factor. When kids are meaningfully connected through their schools in a range of activities, whether they are sporting, artistic or recreational activities that involve some kind of adult supervision and connectedness—not necessarily supervision in a controlling sense, but adults are part of the activity, particularly with younger teenagers—there is significantly less likelihood of the kids becoming involved in antisocial behaviour, crime, causing problems on the streets with graffiti and other sorts of behaviours that generally cause community alarm when it occurs.

We were involved with the British Government when Tony Blair's respect agenda was the policy framework for the prevention of antisocial behaviour. Triple P has been widely implemented in the United Kingdom as part of a strategy that involved parenting orders from courts to prevent further serious antisocial behaviour being committed by kids in the 8-year-old to 13-year-old age group.

DEPUTY CHAIR: We will probably send you a couple of questions on notice. A question that I would like to ask on notice relates to a number of people who have come before the Committee and who have talked about children and young people not having ownership—not being able to play in parks and do a whole range of things in open space. Committee members would be interested in hearing your point of view on the difficulties that are being experienced. People have raised issues such as insurance and so on. I will leave that as a question that you might like to take on notice. Thank you for being here today, in particular, as you have come from Queensland at your own cost to give evidence to the Committee. On behalf of the Committee I thank you very much.

Professor SANDERS: It was my pleasure. I am happy to be here.

(The witness withdrew)

LOUISE VOIGT, Chief Executive Officer, Barnardos Australia, Bay Street, Ultimo, on former oath:

DEPUTY CHAIR: Welcome Ms Voigt, and thank you for appearing before the Committee today. I remind you that you have previously given evidence to this Committee under oath or on affirmation, and you remain under oath or on affirmation in respect of any evidence that you may give. Do you agree to that?

Ms VOIGT: I do.

DEPUTY CHAIR: As time is limited today the Committee might wish to send you some additional questions in writing. Would you be happy to provide a written reply to any further questions?

Ms VOIGT: Yes, I would.

DEPUTY CHAIR: I have a couple of questions to ask and then other members of the Committee might wish to ask you questions. Some submissions to the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales recommended extending Brighter Futures to children aged 9 to 14, including priority access for Aboriginal children and their families. Do you think that would be beneficial?

Ms VOIGT: Yes, definitely, I think it would be beneficial. I also think that it would be beneficial if it were not restricted, as it currently is, to children who were not under the whole protective issue of the department. One of the difficulties is—and as evidence given before the Wood inquiry showed—that Brighter Futures does not work with children who are in considered to be child protection cases. The only problem is that the department frequently does not work with them either. They are excluded from Brighter Futures because they are not in the correct category group and they do not get anyone else working with them. If Brighter Futures extends in age group and is a lot more flexible in including children who are seen as child protection cases but remain with their families that would be extremely helpful.

DEPUTY CHAIR: The Government has supported the recommendation of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales to establish integrated, multidisciplinary, co-located services, with programs such as parenting education, home school liaison, breakfast programs, counselling services, school counselling and allied health. How important is it for these centres to provide services to children and young people in their middle years, and to their parents?

Ms VOIGT: As an agency that has been running such centres, particularly in deprived population areas such as Auburn, the outer west of Sydney and in Wollongong, with centres containing eight or more different programs of quite a substantial nature, I fully support the need for such centres, particularly for this age group. A number of children who come to notice during this age group do not come to notice when they are much younger, often because of antisocial behaviour, or they have been picked up by schools because of a lack of supervision or a lack of attention by their families. Therefore, it is important to have a range of service provision for children. Co-location is one of the good ways of ensuring that that happens.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Do you consider that placing such co-located services in or close to schools would provide additional benefits?

Ms VOIGT: Schools as communities have meant that in some communities services are usually co-located close to schools. However, there are some problems in relation to that. Whilst school is extraordinarily important, if you chose a junior school, most likely it would be seen in the community as important for that age group, whereas such a centre should service children of a younger age group and of an older age group. We cannot forget adolescents and we need to work with them. When children move from a junior school into a high school, for many of them it is somewhat demeaning to be seen close to the junior school ever again. One has to take such attitudes into account. It depends on the community. For instance, if it is a rural community it might be seen as part of the social network, but it might not be.

Ms MARIE ANDREWS: Do you consider that the age at which children and young people display mental health and behavioural problems is trending downwards?

Ms VOIGT: There is greater recognition now than there was before, although in the work we do—we often work with severely disturbed kids who come from abused and neglected backgrounds—conduct disorder is a name that has been given to such children. They are now more correctly being identified in mental health

terms, with rather less of a catchall phrase. As there is more recognition in the general community, for example, of depression and anxiety, and of course all the attachment disorders of children, there is more recognition that this occurs. However, I emphasise that there is not necessarily more treatment. The amount of available child psychiatry is very limited. The possibility of getting children into services is quite difficult.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: I have a follow-up question relating to children in the younger age group. Should consideration be given to extending some early intervention programs provided for children aged over 12 or 14, such as the Reconnect program, to children in a younger age group?

Ms VOIGT: As we run both I feel fairly confident in saying that I am not terribly comfortable with this. Clearly, you cannot make arbitrary judgments, although in the end you have to. There are problems in talking about Reconnect, which often works as children or young people start to separate from home—they are couch surfing a lot with friends and those sorts of things. Those are the sorts of kids who are serviced by Reconnect. Of course, it would be much better if we worked with younger age groups on the same issues, that is, the feeling of disconnection from home.

But I am not sure whether it should be in a targeted program such as Reconnect. These problems are rephrased differently in different age groups. Often government chooses to give money to a particular age group because that is either the flavour of month or a particular inquiry has raised the issues. The issue of children remaining in contact, being reared by their family in as positive a relationship as is possible with their family, is an ongoing and important issue for children, young people, teenagers and young adults.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Would your organisation like to make any specific recommendations to improve literacy in this age group?

Ms VOIGT: At present our focus is on severely disengaged young people from the school system. For groups who appear not to be able to take very good advantage of school, in particular, Aboriginal children, we are now running homework programs for such children, again to engage them in literacy and numeracy. We are doing this work in conjunction with and alongside schools because schools often do not have the resources to give the individual treatment that is needed. The relationship is really important if you are running something like a homework program in Wellington. You need to relate to the families as well so that they feel comfortable about their kids coming to you and they are supportive of what you are doing.

Individual work, both tutoring and homework clubs, is important to ensure that kids at least match their age group. Some of the kids we are meeting who are aged 8, 9 and 10 cannot hold a pencil properly. The level of disadvantage amongst these children is astonishing. You read the statistics and you think, "Oh dear." But when you see it clustered together in groups of children it is really tragic because of what it will mean for the next generation. The Federal Government's Closing the Gap is critical when you need to focus it at children, because education is the path of possibility.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: What should the New South Wales Government's priorities be in relation to initiatives to improve outcomes for students in the middle years with disabilities?

Ms VOIGT: I am less experienced in that area. Obviously, we have some commentary because some of the children who come into care that we have of course are disabled young people. It is the same thing throughout the education system. It is more resources for more individual treatment, fewer children and young people, greater opportunity to relate with adults, with families and engage with them. This is throughout the education system I would have thought.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: What funding is available currently for tutoring, homework support and mentoring programs for this age group?

Ms VOIGT: Very little. There are very little resources around. At the moment we are going to the corporates and I am sad to say that with the current financial crisis, which is affecting many corporate donors, there is going to be some difficulty in funding some of our programs, as with other charities this year, for this particular group of activities. One of the things about tutoring is, and I think other charities also recognise this, that it is not something you can just provide to children. You are most effective if you do it in conjunction with adults, with the families of such children. If a child comes from a fairly seriously disadvantaged background with multiple problems in the family group, then unless you have at least some work with the mother and, if

possible, the father, you are not likely to be able to engage that child as effectively and to ensure they continue with the program.

DEPUTY CHAIR: Earlier you mentioned suspended children?

Ms VOIGT: Suspended, yes.

DEPUTY CHAIR: What programs are required for students in the middle years who are either suspended or truanting?

Ms VOIGT: We are particularly concerned as an agency about the way in which children are excluded or suspended from school; it is increasingly amongst certain groups of children. One can understand that schools are left with few options when they have children who behave in violent or difficult ways in the school or are totally non-social. However, for those students, they become increasingly disengaged not only from school but the whole of society. Unless we have more options for funded day programs to re-engage these children, you are not likely to see them get into high school and be effective, for example, for those who are in junior school because it is happening to junior kids. For the senior age group it is also extremely important that day programs are provided, which ease them back into school.

DEPUTY CHAIR: Do you have any other comment or recommendations to make to the Committee regarding this inquiry?

Ms VOIGT: No, except to advocate on behalf of a particular group of children who are the children on the cusp of coming into care: those children in the child protection system who are especially vulnerable. When you look at that group of children you are looking at children whose education is some of the lowest and whose medical situations are extremely poor. So, anything that can be done for children in the child protection system in this age group to improve their outcomes. In my evidence I talked about the need for permanency in the foster care system. We adopt one-third of the children. The average age is nine. That means quite a lot of them are in this age group. It is possible.

DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before the Committee.

Ms VOIGT: Thank you also.

(The witness withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 4.33 p.m.)