INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Organisation: UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families

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Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families

Submission to NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues

We would like to thank UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families staff who participated in consultations and made other contributions as part of the preparation of this submission.

UnitingCare
Children, Young People and Families

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About UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UCCYPF) is a service group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT. Our concerns for social justice and the needs of disadvantaged children, young people and families inform the way we serve and represent people and communities. UCCYPF is made up of UnitingCare Burnside, UnitingCare Unifam, UnitingCare Disability and UnitingCare Children's Services. Together these organisations form one of the largest providers of services to support children and families in NSW. This submission draws on the experience of UnitingCare Burnside, UnitingCare Children's Services, and UnitingCare Disability.

About UnitingCare Burnside

UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside) is a leading child and family organisation in New South Wales, with over 80 programs across metropolitan, regional and rural communities. Our purpose is to provide innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects vulnerable children, young people and families. We provide services across the continuum, ranging from preventative programs such as supported playgroups; early intervention programs such as *Brighter Futures*; intensive family support programs; out-of-home care programs and aftercare programs.

About UnitingCare Children's Services

UnitingCare Children's Services provides accessible children's services within a not-for-profit community service environment. It licenses, resources and oversees services operated by management committees of local congregations as well as providing support, guidance and direction to its own directly-provided services. Both locally managed and directly provided services work together to deliver quality early childhood education, care and support to more than 6,000 children in preschools, long day care, occasional care and out of school hours care services in NSW and the ACT.

About UnitingCare Disability

UnitingCare Disability works in partnership with individuals, families and carers, as they build and pursue their goals and dreams, and with local communities to strengthen their capacity to fully include people with disabilities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UCCYFP) is strongly committed to the importance of education as a pathway out of disadvantage and has a long history of supporting service users to engage with education.

Research on effective policy and program approaches to build student engagement highlights the importance of supporting children and families through key transitions. While this is important for all children and families, it is particularly critical for children and families with additional or complex needs.

In addition to the specific groups identified in the Standing Committee on Social Issues background paper, consideration needs to be given to the particular challenges faced by children and young people in out-of-home care. They have experienced significant trauma from abuse and neglect. Consequently, they are often contending with multiple issues, including disability and mental health issues, and have complex support needs that require the involvement of multiple agencies. Children and young people who have been in care have often also had a disrupted educational experience due to relocation and exclusion. Schools require increased resources and training in order to understand and support children and young people in out-of-home care effectively, including transition support.

UCCYPF's experience is that the nature and level of support provided by NSW schools to support children in the transition through stages of education, is highly variable. The extent of transition support within schools depends on local decision making and whether the school leadership team consider this a priority. In our experience, there is a lack of a systematic strategy in NSW to ensure that all schools provide effective transition support.

UCCYPF's experience is that, often, students with additional or complex needs and their families receive little or no additional support from schools in the transition process. Further, variations in eligibility criteria and funding arrangements mean that often, children and families do not qualify for continued support when they move from one setting to another, for example, from early childhood education and care to starting school. For children with disabilities,

delays in enrolment processes place additional stress on families as well as making good transition planning more difficult.

These issues highlight the need to develop a policy framework that promotes a consistent and inclusive approach to support transition of all children and their families. The framework should include a strong focus on developing relationships with and being inclusive of parents and carers. It should also establish clear expectations about how the formal school system will link to the early childhood education and care sector and to child, youth and family services.

Summary of recommendations

1. The NSW Government increase the number of out-of-home care support teachers and Coordinators to take their capacity beyond crisis response and into teacher support and training.

2. The NSW Government develop a policy framework to support children's transition to formal schooling, which includes:
   - the development of a transition statement[1] for all children starting school
   - processes to ensure additional support is provided for children with additional or complex needs based on an assessment of the individual needs of the child and family
   - strong monitoring and accountability of how schools provide support to children and families in the transition to starting school.

3. The NSW Government review the operation of support programs for children with additional needs to improve continuity of support across early childhood education and care, primary and high school.

4. The NSW Government increase investment in early childhood education and care in NSW to meet the Council of Australian Government's goals of universal access for all four-year-olds in the year prior to starting school within two years.

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[1] A transition statement provides an opportunity for both early childhood services and families to provide information to the school which will help the teacher support the child's learning and positive transition experiences.

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5. The NSW Government, by the end of 2013, agree to provide free early childhood education and care for children from disadvantaged and low income families in the two years prior to starting school to maximise the benefits of early childhood education and care for vulnerable children and increase positive transitions experiences.

6. The NSW Government develop a policy framework to ensure that all schools use a systematic process to identify students who are at risk in the transition to high school and provide effective support to those students. The framework should:
- include a focus on continuity of support from primary to high school
- ensure strong collaboration with child, youth and family services and specialist services
- include strong processes for monitoring and accountability.

7. The NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues seek an update on progress made by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services on development of a *Brighter Futures*-type model for children and young people aged 9-14 years (as recommended by the *Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW* and the *Final Report of the Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14*).

8. The NSW Government expand Newpin services as an effective model of supporting children with complex needs in being 'ready for school' and making a smooth transition. Additional Newpin services should be targeted to areas of entrenched disadvantage using the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) to identify the priority sites.

9. The Department of Education and Communities encourage and support schools to establish strong links with the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) coordinators in developing local transition strategies for children with additional or complex needs and their families.

10. The NSW Government expand the *Stay Connected* program to other areas of the state, with priority given to socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

1. Introduction

UnitingCare Children Young People and Families (UCCYPF) welcomes the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families.

UCCYFP is strongly committed to the importance of education as a pathway out of disadvantage and has a long history of supporting service users to engage with education. Our experience as a child and family service provider gives us insight into the factors that often lead to poor educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people and effective strategies in building student engagement.

UCCYPF is concerned about increasing levels of school suspension and exclusion and the growing trend of children being suspended at a young age, including the early primary years (see data sheet on NSW school suspensions at Appendix A). We are particularly concerned that the use of school suspension impacts disproportionately on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, with a disability, and those in out-of-home care. These students often experience a repeated pattern of school suspension, which intensifies academic difficulties and disengagement from school, and paves the way to early school drop-out.

Research on effective policy and program approaches to build student engagement highlights the importance of supporting children and families through key transitions. While this is important for all children and families, it is particularly critical for children and families with additional or complex needs. A UnitingCare Children's Services Senior Manager noted, "*When children have a bad transition experience (in starting formal schooling), these are the children who get suspended by term two or three of Kindergarten.*"

Our submission focuses primarily on the transition to starting formal schooling and the transition from primary to high school. However, it also outlines the role played by the Brighter Futures program in supporting children with additional and complex needs in the transition to starting early childhood education and care. The submission also includes an example of a good practice policy

framework for systematically identifying and supporting students who are at risk in the transition to further education or training.

The submission addresses issues for three groups of students and their families with additional or complex needs:

- students in out-of-home-care
- students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds
- students with disabilities.

2. Issues for students in out-of-home care

The Standing Committee on Social Issues background paper identifies several specific groups who have additional or complex needs including students with disabilities, students who are homeless, and those who have additional needs due to cultural factors. In addition to these groups, consideration needs to be given to the particular challenges faced by children and young people in out-of-home care.

Children and young people in out-of-home care enter care as a result of abuse and neglect. This has a profound impact on their ability to learn and interact in socially appropriate ways. Current research into brain development has established that early trauma due to abuse or neglect influences a child's capacity to think, to analyse, to understand the motives of others and develop positive peer relationships.[2] Early trauma reduces their capacity to regulate strong emotions, often resulting in conflict with students and teachers. It can also cause language delays, which impact significantly on a child's ability to learn and socialise.

Children and young people in care are often contending with multiple issues and consequently have complex support needs that require the involvement of multiple agencies. In our Western Sydney Out-of-Home Care program, for example, in 2007, 23 of 36 (63.88%) children and young people had at least one, to as many as four identified educational barriers to effective learning. Of these thirty six children:

- Ten children had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

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2 Perry, B.D & Pollard, R (1998) *Homeostasis, stress, trauma, and adaptation: a neurodevelopmental view of childhood trauma*, Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 7(1), 33 – 51.

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- Two children had an intellectual disability
- Eight children had a developmental delay
- Three children were experiencing a psychiatric disability or disorder
- Eight children had a learning disability
- Twelve children had other disabilities (eg sensory disability).[3]

Children and young people who have been in care are also likely to have had a disrupted educational experience due to relocation and exclusion.[4] Many children and young people in out-of-home care are not regularly attending school because they have been suspended or expelled. In 2007, 17% of Burnside children and young people in care were either suspended or expelled from school. This was within an agency where educational support is a strong focus and advocacy with schools is persistent.

Lost educational opportunities have a cumulative effect on children in care as they move through the various stages of education and development.[5] Poor transition experiences create opportunities for and exacerbate disengagement and poor educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

Schools require increased resources and training in order to understand and support children and young people in out-of-home care effectively.

Keep Them Safe: A shared approach to child wellbeing is the NSW Government's five-year plan to improve the safety, welfare and wellbeing of all children and young people in New South Wales.[6] Under Keep Them Safe, school principals are responsible for ensuring that within 30 days of entering OOHC all preschool and school age children and young people in OOHC in government schools will have an individual education plan prepared for them. The education plan must be reviewed annually or when the student's circumstances change. However, our experience is that the implementation of this policy by schools is very variable; in many cases, our case workers need to advocate strongly for schools to develop the plan.

[3] UnitingCare Burnside, 2008, *Response to NSW Department of Education and Training, Consultation Paper, Raising the School Leaving Age, The School Leaving Age Initiative*.

4 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007, *Educational outcomes for children on guardianship or custody orders: a pilot study.* Child Welfare Series No 42. Catalogue No CWS 30. Canberra: AIHW.

5 Ibid.

6 http://www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au/

Also, schools are only required to develop plans for children and young people currently entering care. Consequently, many children and young people already in care are missing out on having an education plan. This is not consistent with the intention of Commissioner Wood's recommendation in the *Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW*.[7]

Under *Keep Them Safe*, regional OOHC Coordinators have been appointed within the Department of Education and Communities. They are responsible for coordinating and monitoring the educational support for children and young people in out-of-home care in government schools. Their role also focuses on developing more effective models of improving the educational outcomes of children and young people in OOHC.[8] However, our experience is that the regional OOHC Coordinators are very stretched because of the large areas they cover. In some areas they seem to be mainly focused on expediting enrolment of students living in OOHC (for example, when students move to a new area) as there are often lengthy delays in this process.

The Department of Education and Communities also employs OOHC teachers who have a more 'hands on' role in working with schools to support children and young people in OOHC. Our experience is that in some areas, the OOHC teachers do play a critical role, for example, in assisting in transition planning and participating in school suspension meetings. However, this is variable, in part because of the limited number of OOHC teachers across the State. For example, in the Mid Coast area, one OOHC teacher covers the Port Macquarie, Taree and Kempsey areas including both primary and high schools. Also, as the OOHC teachers cover such a large area, their work focuses mainly on crisis intervention, rather than building the capacity of teachers and school staff to understand and support children and young people in care.

Recommendation 1

The NSW Government increase the number of out-of-home care support teachers and Coordinators to take their capacity beyond crisis response and into teacher support and training.

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[7] Wood, J., 2008, *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW*, Vol 2, p 671.

8 Department of Premier and Cabinet, Keep Them Safe, A Shared Approach to Child Wellbeing, Annual Report 2009-2010, www.dpc.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/107761/KTS_Annual_Report_2009-10.pdf

3. The transition to formal schooling

Research indicates that children who make a smooth transition and experience early school success are more likely to be socially competent and achieve better results throughout their schooling.[9] Conversely, children who experience academic and social difficulties in their start to school are likely to continue to have problems throughout their school careers, and often into adulthood.[10]

Early conceptions of school readiness focused on the characteristics of individual children, such as their age, maturity and competencies. Recently, the understanding of what constitutes school readiness has been broadened to recognise that many factors influence the process of transition to school. These factors include the skills and abilities of children, but also the role of families, schools and communities in supporting children's learning and development.[11]

Research has consistently identified the following features of policies and processes that facilitate positive transitions to school for children with additional or complex needs and their families. It should be noted that many of the features identified can assist all children to make successful transitions, but are even more critical for children with additional or complex needs and their families:

- focus on both the child and family
- actively involve and build relationships with families; focus both on meeting the identified challenges within families and on building skills and capacity within those families
- strong coordination and collaboration between all services involved in providing support to the child and family, including schools, early childhood services, family support, health and other specialist services
- managing the transition process from early childhood services to school in a proactive way that creates a bridge from one setting to the other

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9 Shepard & Smith, 1989, cited in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011, *Headline Indicators for children's health, development and wellbeing,* 2011, Cat. no. PHE 144. Canberra: AIHW.
10 Farrar et al, 2007, cited in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, op cit.
11 Dockett, S., Perry, B., Kearney, E., Hampshire, A., Mason, J. and Schmied, V., 2011*, Facilitating children's transition to school from families with complex support needs*, Charles Sturt University, Mission Australia, University of Western Sydney and Ripple; Centre for Equity & Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC), 2008.

- transition support needs to be viewed as long-term process which extends over a considerable period spanning both the pre- and post-preparatory years, rather than just a few months
- alignment of funding programs across the transition to provide continuity in support.[12]

3.1 Adequacy and availability of appropriate support

3.1.1 School-based support

The level of school support for transition to school is highly variable

As a starting point, the adequacy of appropriate support for children with additional or complex needs should be considered within the context of the support that schools provide for transition for all students.

Our staffs' experience is that the nature and level of support provided by NSW schools to support children in the transition to starting school is highly variable. The extent of transition support within schools depends on local decision making and whether the school leadership team consider this a priority.

For example, a number of schools in Western Sydney run transition programs where children come into the school for half a day in term four in the year before starting school (or in several schools for two terms). In contrast, other nearby schools will only have one or two orientation sessions in the last few weeks of the school year.

Similarly, schools vary in the extent to which they have formed effective linkages with services in the early childhood sector. As discussed above, strong collaborative relationships are essential in supporting positive transition for children moving from early childhood services and schools.[13] This is especially important for children with additional or complex needs and their families.

Current NSW Government policy directions to give school principals greater autonomy in the way that they run schools may further entrench disparities in the support provided to families to support transition. Schools will determine

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12 Centre for Equity & Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC), 2008, *Literature Review, Transition: a positive start to school* , Melbourne Graduate School of Education; Famian, H. *and Dunlup, A., 2006, Outcomes* of good practice in transition processes for children entering primary school, UNESCO; and Dockett et al, op cit.
13 Ibid.

individual goals and approaches which may or may not include engagement of disadvantaged students as a priority. This highlights the need to develop a policy framework that provides a consistent approach to support transition of all children, irrespective of the school that the child is going to.

The policy framework should include a focus on improving transfer of information between early childhood services and schools. In its 2003 *Inquiry into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties,* the NSW Legislative Standing Committee on Social Issues made recommendations to ensure better information flow between preschools and other prior to school services and schools.[14] However, this issue remains unresolved.

The *Transition: A Positive Start for School* initiative in Victoria is an example of a policy framework which promotes a consistent and inclusive approach to support transition of all children and their families.[15] The approach also emphasises strong communication with and involvement of families.

A key component of the initiative is the introduction of a 'Transition Learning and Development Statement' (the Statement) – a tool to support the consistent transfer of information about a child's learning and development to schools and families. The information in the Statement:

- summarises the strengths of a child's learning and development
- identifies their individual approaches to learning and their interests
- indicates how the child can be supported to continue learning.

Since 2009, all early childhood services offering a preschool program in Victoria (whether this is in a long day care setting or stand-alone preschool) have been required to provide the Statements for all children commencing school the following year. The Statement is also available to other services such as early childhood intervention services.

School staff are encouraged to work with families to complete the first part of the Statement for their child if they are enrolled without one (for example, if they are not using an early childhood education and care service). This section of

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[14] Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, 2003, *Realising Potential, Final Report of the Inquiry into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficultie*s, Parliamentary paper 116, recommendation 17, p40.
15 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/transitionschool/default.htm

the Statement provides families with the opportunity to provide information that will help the teacher support the child's learning.

The Victorian framework for supporting school transition recognises that some children need extra support during the transition period in varying degrees. These children may:
- not have had the opportunity to participate in early learning experiences
- be from families who speak languages other than English
- have health concerns, disabilities or developmental delays
- experience complex family arrangements, for example, children being supported in out-of-home care.

For children with additional support needs, the Kindergarten teacher meets with families and early childhood educator to discuss the Transition Learning and Development Statement and identify additional transition program activities that may be required.

It is notable that in Victoria, student pathways and transitions are one of three key student outcomes that schools and regions are accountable for under the School and Network Accountability and Improvement framework (alongside student learning and student engagement).[16] This includes, not only the key transitions across stages of education but also a student moving to a new school; students who move from specialist schools or language schools into primary or secondary schools; and students with chronic illness requiring long periods of time away from school.

Recommendation 2
The NSW Government develop a policy framework to support the transition to formal schooling, which includes:
- the development of a transition statement for all children starting school
- processes to ensure additional support is provided for children with additional or complex needs based on an assessment of the individual needs of the child and family
- strong monitoring and accountability of how schools provide support to children and families in the transition to starting school.

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[16] Department of Education and Childhood Development, *Accountability and Improvement Framework for Victorian Government Schools 2011*
http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/account/operate/saif2011/Accountability_and_Improvement_Framework_Guidelines_2011_FINAL.pdf

Lack of additional support for children with disabilities or complex needs

Generally, in the experience of our staff, there is little or no extra support provided within the primary school for children with additional or complex needs with the transition process. Indeed, families who are not using any formal services often don't know about school transition programs and miss out on the transition support or orientation activities run by schools. Vulnerable families often don't start thinking about their child starting school until after Christmas, and by then have missed out on transition activities.

Further, our experience is that some children who receive additional support in early childhood education and care services, under programs such as *Supporting Children with Additional Needs (*SCAN), do not qualify for such assistance when they start school. This is consistent with recent research which explored the experiences of families with complex support needs around the transition to school. The study found that for the families involved in the study, support ceased at around the same time that children started school.

> *Different models of funding, different criteria for funded support and the different natures of available support often meant that families experienced a major gap in support across the transition to school. For some families, this gap widened over time as support was unavailable in the changed context of school.[17]*

The recent establishment of the Department of Education and Communities provides an opportunity to review the operation of support programs for children with additional needs to ensure continuity of support across early childhood and school environments. As similar issues occur in the transition to high school, (see section 4), the review should encompass programs across early childhood education and care, primary and high school.

Recommendation 3

The NSW Government review the operation of support programs for children with additional needs to improve continuity of support across early childhood education and care, primary and high school.

The school enrolment process

For children with disabilities and their families, the school enrolment process is complex and difficult to navigate without support. Where a family is using a UCCYPF service such as *Brighter Futures* (see section 5.1.2), the service will

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17 Docket et al, 2011, op cit.

support the family in this process. For example, children with autism are required to have a current psychometric test done which costs up to $1000.

A further issue is the delay that often occurs in the confirmation of a child's enrolment at a particular school, particularly for out-of-zone enrolments. As well as being very unsettling for families, this hinders the process of preparing the child for going to school and means that they do not have the opportunity to participate in school-based orientation programs. As one family using UCCYPF children's services said, "*What school uniform do we buy?*"

For example, a family may have applied for the child to go to an autism class, but is not informed until late January that the school cannot take the child. The child may need to go to the local primary school, however, the family has not put in an application for additional classroom support. A clearer process to support families in this process is needed.

3.1.2 Early childhood education and care

There is a growing body of international evidence that children's participation in early childhood education and care significantly improves their experiences and achievements in primary and high school. High-quality early childhood education and care increases children's wellbeing by learning through play. It builds the foundations for children's literacy and numeracy, improves social skills and enables early intervention for children with developmental delays that may impact on future life chances.

Research tells us that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from early childhood education and care.[18] However, these children are most likely to miss out on access to early childhood education due to the high cost of preschool and long day care services in NSW. Recently released figures on access to early childhood education show that as many as one in five children in NSW are not attending an early childhood service in the year prior to starting school.[19]

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[18] Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Blatchford, I S., Taggart, B. and Elliot, K., 2003, *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-school Period*, Institute of Education, University of London.

[19] NSW Department of Human Services Community Services, NSW Department of Education and Training, 2010, *Annual Report 2009 Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (UAECE) New South Wales*, submitted to Council of Australian Government's National Early Childhood Development Agenda.

UCCYPF strongly supports the initiatives under way through the Council of Australian Governments' National Early Childhood Development Strategy, including the commitment to enable children to receive early childhood education for 15 hours a week for 40 weeks per year in the year prior to starting school. We welcome the recently announced funding review of Early Childhood Education in NSW which will focus on recommendations to support all children in NSW having access to a quality early childhood education program in the year prior to starting school. Meeting this goal will assist in improving transition to school for children with additional and complex needs and their families.

Recommendation 4

The NSW Government increase investment in early childhood education and care, to increase the number of children participating in early childhood education and care in NSW to meet the Council of Australian Government's goals of universal access for all four-year-olds in the year prior to starting school within two years.

Recommendation 5

The NSW Government, by the end of 2013, agree to provide free early childhood education and care for children from disadvantaged and low income families in the two years prior to starting school to maximise the benefits of early childhood education and care for vulnerable children and increase positive transition experiences.

4. The transition to high school

The transition from primary school to high school is a critical period for both children and their families.[20] Research indicates that the 'middle years' is the time when disengagement from school escalates and suspensions increase.[21] If students do not have a positive experience of learning in the middle years they are at risk of becoming disinterested in school and learning in general.

Children and young people in the middle years need a range of support as they transition to high school including:

20 Falbo,T., Lein, L., & Armador, N., 2001, *Parental Involvement During the Transition to High School, Journal of Academic Research*, 16(5), 511-529.
21 Bland, D. and Carrington, S., 2009, 'Young People, imagination and re-engagement in the middle years,' *Improving Schools*, 12, 3, 237-248; RPR Consulting, 2003, *Report of the Reconnect Longitudinal Study: Building Community Capacity for Early Intervention.*

- opportunities to become familiar with the nature of high schools during the last year of primary school
- positive role models that demonstrate positive engagement and the benefits of positive engagement
- family encouragement of educational goals and aspirations
- tutoring services to address literacy and numeracy gaps that may emerge during the transition to high school.

There also needs to be a strong focus on involving and building relationships with parents. Parents may require support to assist children and young people to set and attain educational goals. This is particularly important for parents with limited or negative experiences of education.

4.1 The adequacy and availability of appropriate support

4.1.1 School-based support

Lack of a systematic state-wide strategy to support transition to high school

Our experience is that the approach taken by schools to support transition from primary to high school is highly variable. As with the transition to primary school discussed previously, this depends on local decision making and whether the principal or deputy principal considers it a priority. It also depends on the extent to which there is good relationship between the high school and local feeder primary schools.

Some high schools have established effective programs to support students in the transition process, which include, for example, peer mentoring and processes for effective transfer of information from primary schools to high schools. In other schools transition processes consist only of an orientation session in the term prior to starting school.

Where schools do have good transition processes, these have been developed and derived locally. There is a need for a systematic strategy in NSW to ensure that all schools meet the needs of students in the transition to high school.

Need for stronger focus on working with parents

Effective transition programs need to include a strong focus on developing relationships with and being inclusive of parents and carers.[22] A focus on building positive relationships between schools and families is important at all times, but particularly so at points of educational transition when patterns of interaction are established.[23]

The transition to high school is a time when parents often have heightened concern about their children's lives and interest in how they are faring at school. However, the high school environment is much bigger and less personal than primary schools. Many parents lack confidence in engaging with high schools, particularly if they have had negative or limited experiences of education.

Our experience is that school programs to support transition to high school generally don't involve parents. Indeed, a key concern for UCCYPF is that when issues such as disruptive behaviour start to emerge, many schools do not communicate with the child's family. Consequently, families have no contact with schools until the issues have escalated to the point of school suspension.

Lack of support for students with additional or complex needs

Our experience is that, generally, students with additional or complex needs and their families receive little or no additional support from schools in the process of transition from primary to high school.

Also, a student with additional needs has to be flagged by their primary school teacher or a school counsellor in order to get any extra support from the high school. For example, children with Aspergers Syndrome often miss out on support when they start high school because things are going well by Year 6 of primary school and the child is settled. However, when a child moves into the new high school environment they will often not cope well with the changes involved. Their heightened anxiety may result in a range of challenging behaviours including physical aggression. In turn, this will often set in train a cycle of repeated suspension and exclusion from school.

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22 Falbo et al, op cit.
23 Dockett et al, op cit.

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This highlights the need for a more a systematic process to be developed in all schools to identify students who may be at risk in the transition to high school and ensure effective strategies are put in place to address this.

As with the transition to starting school, there is also lack of continuity in the support provided to children with additional needs as they move from primary to high school. For example, children who may have had a teacher's aide one or two days in primary school are no longer eligible for that support in high school.

Recommendation 6

The NSW Government develop a policy framework to ensure that all schools use a systematic process to identify students who are at risk in the transition to high school and provide effective support to those students. The framework should:

- include a focus on continuity of support from primary to high school
- ensure strong collaboration with child, youth and family services and specialist services
- include strong processes for monitoring and accountability.

Delays in enrolment impact on transition planning

For children with disabilities and their families, there are also issues relating to enrolment processes that impact negatively on processes for transition planning. For example, currently Burnside's out-of-home care service in Western NSW is working with a boy aged 12 who has an intellectual disability, difficult behaviours and is in care. He is in Year 6 and will be commencing high school next year. He has great difficulties in handling changes to his routine or environment; consequently there is concern that this has the potential to be a difficult transition for him. The Burnside case worker has been working with several other agencies to develop a collaborative transition support strategy. The case worker has regular meetings with the primary school teacher, OOHC teacher, (private) psychologist and NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care behaviour specialist. However, the placement panel that places students with special needs won't advise which high school the boy will be attending until some time in term 3. As a result, it is not possible for the high school to be involved in the planning process at this stage. Also, the case worker cannot arrange for the boy to visit and become familiar with his new school until the panel advises which high school he will be attending.

4.1.2 Gap in early intervention services for children and young people in the middle years

The 9-14 year age group is a prime opportunity for early intervention to address emerging problems such as disengagement from school, family conflict and substance abuse before these problems escalate. However, in NSW, there is a major gap in early intervention services for children and young people in the middle years.

Over the years, community sector organisations such as UCCYPF have developed a range of early intervention initiatives that provide support to disadvantaged children and young people in the middle years and their families. These programs have included a focus on working with schools to support educational engagement and support students in the transition from primary to high school. However, the programs have generally been funded as pilot programs or on a short term basis and consequently have not been sustained beyond the period of the pilot or funding contract. Also, the initiatives are only available in a few areas across the state.

In his *Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW,* Commissioner Wood recommended the progressive extension of the *Brighter Futures* program to children and young people aged 9-14 years (see section 5.1.2) for overview of the *Brighter Futures* program).[24] One of the strengths of the Brighter Futures model is that it is a state-wide program, which operates with a consistent model of service delivery that was informed by research evidence on effective programs

The *Final Report of the Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW* (The 9-14s Report) reiterated Commissioner Wood's recommendation on the development of a *Brighter Futures*-type model for children and young people aged 9-14 years.[25] In responding to The 9-14s Report, the (then) Department of Community Services stated that the

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[24] Wood, J., 2008, Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW, Vol 2, pxix.
25 Parliament of NSW, *Children and Young People aged 9-14 in NSW: the Missing Years* (Executive Summary), Sydney,
http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/854a280c28be00a8ca25762600226dae/$FILE/9%20to%2014%20Report%20Executive%20Summary.pdf

department had commenced work on scoping this project.[26] However, it is not clear what progress is being made on these recommendations.

The *Brighter Futures*-type model for children and young people should include appropriate models to support Aboriginal children and young people aged 9-14 years, including Aboriginal mentoring programs.

Recommendation 7

The NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues seek an update on progress made by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services on development of a *Brighter Futures*-type model for children and young people aged 9-14 years (as recommended by the *Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW* and the *Final Report of the Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14*).

5. Examples of good practice

5.1 Examples of good practice approaches in the transition to starting school

The following UCCYPF early intervention programs illustrate the elements of good transition practices identified in the literature (and outlined at section 3), including, for example: working with both the child and family concurrently; a focus both on meeting the identified challenges within families and on building skills and capacity within those families; strong coordination and collaboration with other service providers; and providing support over a considerable period of time.

The programs also have an emphasis on helping children and parents to build peer support and community connections and reduce social isolation. Transitions are made more easily when there are personal social supports, such as a network of friends.[27]

5.1.1 Supported playgroups

Supported playgroups aim to provide a structured and positive learning environment for young children and their parents, and to involve vulnerable

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26 Parliament of NSW, 2009, Final Report, Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW, Sydney, www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/854A280C28BE00A8CA25762600226DAE?open&refnavid=CO4_2

27 Strategic Partners Pty Ltd, 2001, *Pathways to Prevention, Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia*, *Full Report*, National Crime Prevention Strategy.

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families who may otherwise not attend a playgroup. A key distinguishing feature of supported playgroups (from playgroups generally) is their facilitation by a professional worker with qualifications or experience in early childhood or in working with families with children.

Supported playgroups are similar to general playgroups in that they create opportunities for relationships to be enhanced between parents and their children, and parents with other parents. However, in a supported playgroup the facilitator can also provide advice and information on parenting issues and link parents into other support services such as an early childhood nurse or speech therapist. The facilitator also models key techniques based around play, communication and positive interactions with children.

A recent Australian study found has found that regular attendance at playgroups can improve the learning and social development of children, and that disadvantaged children benefit most.[28] Boys and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds who attended a playgroup over two years were consistently ahead on literacy, numeracy and vocabulary by the age of four to five, compared with children from similar backgrounds who did not attend. Girls from disadvantaged families were also ahead in social skills, compared with girls from similar backgrounds who did not attend. It is important to note that as the researchers used data from the Australian Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, they were not able to distinguish between outcomes associated with attendance at different types of playgroups (general playgroups and supported playgroups).

Burnside runs a range of supported playgroups across urban and regional areas of NSW. Our supported playgroups provide a soft entry point to other child and family programs in Burnside and act as a transition point to facilitate access to quality early childhood education and care. Supported playgroups should not be seen as a substitute for early childhood education and care.

All of our playgroups include a focus on supporting children to develop early literacy skills. As illustrated in the case study below, we also run a number of supported playgroups that are specifically designed to support children's

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[28] Hanckock, K., Lawrence, D., Mitrou, F., Zarb,D., Berthelsen, D., Nicholson, J., and Zubrick, S. (in press) 'The association between playgroup participation, learning competence and social-emotional wellbeing for children aged 4-5 years in *Australia' Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. Corresponding author: Kirsten Hancock, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, khancock@ichr.uwa.edu.au

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transition to school. The case study highlights the benefits of strong cross-sector collaboration between Burnside supported playgroups, schools and specialist services in supporting children with complex needs in the transition process. It also highlights the importance of providing support to both the child and the family.

Case study – School readiness supported playgroups

Burnside Family Centre at Cabramatta runs a number of supported playgroups across South West Sydney. Three of the groups focus specifically on supporting children and families in the transition to school. Burnside staff started working in partnership with Liverpool Public School two years ago to establish the first school readiness group. Last year another group started at Chester Hill North Public School, followed by a third at Chester Hill Public School.

Many of the families in these communities are from culturally diverse backgrounds. Often they have limited English and are not familiar with the Australian school system or the concept of early learning. Many of the families are socially isolated, and the supported playgroups enable them to meet other parents.

The groups came out of feedback from the schools that children starting kindergarten were not socially and emotionally prepared for 'big school'. Children who haven't previously attended an early childhood education and care service (preschool or long day care) often have difficulty separating from their parents; consequently, kindergarten teachers were spending too much time consoling the children. Although most schools operate some type of Kindergarten orientation program, it was clear that two hours a week for several weeks was not enough for the children starting school in these communities. The Burnside team began to meet with the school staff, and from these meetings came the idea to start the School Readiness Groups.

The groups are staffed by an early childhood professional and a group facilitator. Caregivers and children starting school the following year attend the groups, which run on a weekly basis, on the school grounds. The children visit the school library, have story time sessions with the librarian, eat recess in the playground, and have the opportunity to become familiar with the school environment. The principal and other staff visit the children in the group, and the school principals have input in identifying the activities that children practice.

Guest speakers talk to the parents about schooling in NSW and, for example, how to prepare healthy lunchbox snacks. Parents and children in the group, the early childhood worker and group facilitator participate together in the schools' orientation

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day. Because the group are held on the school grounds, parents learn how to interact with school staff and become familiar with the school system.

For children with a disability, the school readiness groups work closely with the local early childhood intervention services, including arranging an assessment of the child where this has not been done. Sometimes a worker from the early childhood intervention services comes to the group, observes the child in the playgroup environment, and then discusses the child's case with the staff and the parent(s). The Family Centre is also working in collaboration with the schools to run a group program for children with language delays, which focuses on helping parents help their child to develop language skills.

5.1.2 Brighter Futures Early Childhood Facilitators

The *Brighter Futures* program is funded by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services to provide targeted support to meet the needs of vulnerable families and prevent escalation of emerging child protection issues. The program is for families with children from birth to eight years or who are expecting a child. Referrals into *Brighter Future* often focus on children aged 0-3, however, families in the program often have children of different ages. Eligibility for *Brighter Futures* is dependent on the identification of risk factors for child protection such as domestic violence, parental drug and alcohol misuse, and mental health issues. The children also often have undiagnosed disabilities or mental health issues.

Brighter Futures provides an integrated service model that combines case management services with some or all of the following service components: home visiting, parenting programs and facilitating the child's attendance at quality children's services, including initial assistance with fees. Families in the program may also be referred to specialist community services such as mental health, drug and alcohol services and disability support services.

The design of the *Brighter Futures* Program was informed by research evidence on effective programs. In particular, research evidence shows that early intervention programs are more likely to have significant outcomes when they use multi-faceted approaches and work with parents and children

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concurrently.[29] The most effective approach is to combine a strategy aimed at parents while providing high-quality child care for children.[30]

Burnside is a Lead Agency for *Brighter Futures* in four regions and is also a contracted service provider for *Brighter Futures* in Western Sydney. As a Lead Agency, Burnside has developed a specific model of supporting parents to access and sustain placements in quality ECEC services. We have employed Early Childhood Facilitators (ECFs) whose focus is on addressing the needs of children. Our ECFs work alongside the *Brighter Futures* caseworkers as part of a multi-disciplinary team. This approach differs from most other Lead Agencies where caseworkers arrange the placement of children in ECEC services.

The role of our ECFs includes working with parents to help them understand the benefits of ECEC for the child's development and school readiness and to address any misgivings they may have about using child care. Our ECFs work closely with providers to identify appropriate placements, ease the process of enrolment and work with the early childhood education and care provider to sustain the placement.

The ECFs also assist the ECEC service in preparing children for the transition to school. This may involve identifying a school setting which will meet the specific needs of the child and facilitating meetings with the family, childcare centre, specialist service and the school. ECFs also work with parents to address any practical barriers that may prevent enrolment in school. For example, often children are not up-to-date with immunisations or the parents may not have a birth certificate for the child.

The *Brighter Futures* ECFs also work with the family and school to address any behavioural issues that arise once the child is at school. Parents are often fearful of any contact with the school because they had negative experiences of education. Consequently, often when a young child starts getting suspended from school for disruptive behaviours, the parents don't return phone calls or answer letters from the school. However, where a *Brighter Futures* ECF is involved, they can sit with the parents in meetings with school staff, and help

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[29] Katz, I., Spooner, C., and Valentine, K., 2006, *What interventions are effective in improving outcomes for children of families with multiple and complex problems?* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

[30] Gomby, 2005, cited in NSW Department of Community Services, 2008, *Prevention and Early Intervention Update – trends in recent research, Research to Practice Notes*.

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them put in place strategies to better manage the child in the school environment. This process is illustrated in the case study at Appendix B.

5.1.3 Newpin

Burnside's *Newpin* program is an evidence-based, intensive intervention that helps vulnerable families with children aged 0-5 years where there is a risk of abuse and neglect. *Newpin* fills a need in the current NSW service system where vulnerable families need a deeper, more intensive intervention to make changes which improve their children's lives.

The *Newpin* model was developed in the United Kingdom and Burnside has been operating the program in Western Sydney for the past ten years. Burnside holds the national licence to train and support other agencies who wish to offer the *Newpin* program. There are currently four Burnside *Newpin* Centres based in Western Sydney and another five programs operated by other non-government organisations in other states and territories.

The key components of the *Newpin* model are:
- An 18-month intensive centre-based parenting program or a one-term intensive group work course that gives parents the insight, skills and support to improve their parenting
- Counselling and group work on family relationship issues
- Structured play sessions where parents and children learn to play together and develop attachment with the support of staff
- Daily support and guidance by children's workers for all newborns or toddlers to help them acquire social skills and gross motor skills
- **School preparation support** for four year olds
- Referral to other services, such as early childhood education and care, health services, and vocational education providers.

The school preparation component supports parents to help their children make a smooth transition to school. In the year prior to children starting school, the Play Facilitator runs weekly sessions with parents and children together, to introduce some of the more formal aspects of education. The program helps parents to understand the developmental needs of children so that they understand how a child learns. Parents are also provided with information about school processes and what to expect, for example, enrolment processes and attending school meetings. Where *Newpin* families are using other services such as a preschool or early childhood intervention provider, Burnside staff

work collaboratively with those services and the school to identify the child's support needs in the transition process.

Recommendation 7

The NSW Government expand Newpin services as an effective model of supporting children with complex needs in being 'ready for school' and making a smooth transition. Additional Newpin services should be targeted to areas of entrenched disadvantage using the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) to identify the priority sites.

5.1.4 The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)

The *Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters* (HIPPY) is an intensive, structured program designed to enhance the learning readiness of preschool children within educationally disadvantaged communities. HIPPY helps parents with low levels of education and income to support confidence and capacity in learning in their young children. Families start HIPPY when their child is in the year before school and continue into the second year of HIPPY during their first year of formal schooling.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence holds the licence with HIPPY International to run HIPPY in Australia. In turn, the Brotherhood of St Laurence has developed partnerships with other agencies to run HIPPY in their own communities. For the past two years, Burnside has run a HIPPY program in 10 suburbs in Western Sydney.

HIPPY focuses on the interactions between children and their parents and supporting early literacy development. Every fortnight, home tutors visit parents or carers in their home to show them how to do HIPPY activities. The parent and child then spend 10 to 15 minutes each day, five days a week, doing the activities together. On alternate weeks the parents join a group meeting where they practice new activities, listen to guest speakers and participate in fun games that they can then try at home.

The home tutors are recruited from the local community and provide peer-to-peer support to other parents. This strategy works well in engaging mothers because they find it easy to relate to other mothers. Some mothers come on board because they already know the tutor and feel comfortable with her.

The home tutors work under the guidance of a professional program coordinator. The coordinator provides training to the tutors through role playing

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activities and, in turn, the tutors role play the activities with parents. In this way, parents have the opportunity to practice the learning activities and positive communication with children.

The home tutors are also supported to undertake relevant vocational education. For example, currently two of our home tutors are doing a traineeship in the Certificate 111 in Community Studies, which gives them a deeper understanding of working with children and families, and can lead to employment.

The feedback that our staff receive from families is that children are able to settle well at school, are able to listen, follow directions and are confident learners. One mother said, "*I never thought she'd be able to sit down and read a story…but now she's doing it.*"

International evaluations of HIPPY across different cultural settings indicate that the program improves future educational involvement for the parents as well as improved learning outcomes for the child.[31] Evaluations of the nine pilot programs in Australia indicate similar findings to the international studies, including significant benefits in children's literacy and numeracy performance, children's overall adjustment to school, and academic self esteem. The Australian evaluations also demonstrate significant improvements in the socio-emotional development of children and parent-child relationships.

In 2007, the Federal Government, in partnership with the Brotherhood of St Laurence, made a commitment to implement and evaluate HIPPY in 50 communities across the country. The programs are funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Recommendation 8

The Department of Education and Communities encourage and support schools to establish strong links with the *Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters* (HIPPY) coordinators in developing local transition strategies for children with additional or complex needs and their families.

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31 Dean, S. & Leung, C., 2010, *Nine year of early intervention research: the effectiveness of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) in Australia*, Bulletin – April 2010, pp 14-18.

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5.2 Example of good practice approach in the transition from primary to high school

5.2.1 Stay Connected

Stay Connected[32] was established in 2009 as a two year pilot program funded by the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC) and is operated by UCCYPF in both of the pilot areas – the Central Coast and South West Sydney areas (Camden, Campbelltown and Wollondilly LGAs). ADHC has recently provided UCCYPF recurrent funding to enable continuation of the program in the two pilot areas. However, *Stay Connected* is only available in these two areas of the State.

Stay Connected targets children in Years 6 to 10, with diagnoses or suspected Autism Spectrum Disorder or intellectual disability, who are at risk of school suspension, expulsion or prematurely leaving school because of their challenging behaviour. In order to promote early identification of young people at risk of suspension or expulsion, priority is given to young people in Years 6 and 7 who are transitioning from primary school to high school.

The program employs a collaborative casework approach to work across the home and school environments to develop and implement a comprehensive case plan to support students to remain engaged at school. Additional funds are also provided for brokerage of clinical therapy services, such as speech pathology, which will support the case management plan. *Stay Connected* also encourages young people to build community connections and reduce social isolation.

For students who are in Year 6, *Stay Connected* provides support to the child and family to build their understanding of what the new environment will be like, for example, arranging school visits or accompanying them to orientation days.

Stay Connected staff liaise with the school to help identify the most appropriate classroom environment for the student. For example, a boy in Year 6 could only read to year 3 and it was clear that the boy needed to go into a special support class. However, the family needed the caseworker's support to arrange for this

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32 The official name used by ADHC for the program is the *Case Management for Young People with Challenging Behaviour*. However, it is locally known as Stay Connected. This submission will refer to the program as Stay Connected.

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to occur, as the mother did not know how to go about this (and the child's needs had not been flagged by the primary school).

As children move from the primary to high school, often parents don't know what to expect, what support is available at the school or who to speak to about any concerns that they have. *Stay Connected* supports parents to develop skills and confidence to be able to be involved in the school and discuss issues affecting their child's education. A number of schools have commented on communication with parents being more open as a result of *Stay Connected* involvement with families (rather than only having contacting the school when something bad happens)

ADHC commissioned an independent evaluation of the *Stay Connected* pilot program; however, the evaluation is not publicly available. UCCYPF suggests that the Standing Committee on Social Issues seek a copy of the evaluation and review its findings.

Recommendation 9
The NSW Government expand the *Stay Connected* program to other areas of the state
, with priority given to socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

5.1.3 Example of good practice approach in the transition to further education and training
The following program from Victoria is an example of an effective policy framework that enables systematic identification of students at risk of early school leaving and provision of individual support to meet their needs. This approach is also relevant to students in late primary and the early years of high school.

5.2.2 Managed Individual Pathways
Victorian Schools receive funding under *Managed Individual Pathways* (MIPs) to support careers and transition programs.[33] The focus of MIPs is on ensuring that all students aged 15 and over in government schools are provided with an individual Career Action Plan and support to make a successful transition to further education, training or full-time employment. Schools are also funded to provide additional support to students at risk of disengaging or not making a successful transition to further education or secure employment. Under the

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33 www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/mips/default.htm

Wannik Education Strategy for Aboriginal students, the MIPs initiative is expanded into years 8 and 9 for Aboriginal students at risk of disengaging from school.

MIPs aims to help young people to:

- develop their knowledge and understanding of education, training and employment options, and
- develop skills to effectively manage their careers and pathways throughout their lives.

A review of the MIPS scheme found that many schools reported that MIPS had improved student engagement and staff-student relations, increased the responsiveness of school staff to the needs of all students and raised completion rates.[34]

The review recommended improvement in the systematic identification of students at risk. Subsequently, the *Student Mapping Tool* has been made available to all government secondary schools to support effective implementation of the MIPs.[35] The tool provides school staff with a systemic process to assist them to identify students at risk of early leaving, map all internal and external supports provided to the student, and evaluate selected interventions. Under the *Wannik* Aboriginal Education Strategy, the *Student Mapping Tool* must be used by all government schools, including primary schools, with one or more Aboriginal student enrolments.

A review of effective strategies to increase school completion found that the most successful schools implemented MIPs from Year 7, in order to identify and assess individual students' needs as early as possible, particularly for students at risk.[36]

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34 Asquith Group, 2005, cited in Lamb, S. and Rice, S., 2008, *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development*, Victoria.
[35] www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/mips/default.htm
36 Lamb, S. and Rice, S., op cit.

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Appendix A

Suspensions in NSW Schools

The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) enables the school principal or relieving principal to temporarily remove a student from school for up to 4 school days (a "short suspension") or in instances of serious or sustained misbehaviour for between 5 and 20 school days (a "long suspension"). A summary of long suspension data only is published by DET on an annual basis.

Between 2005 and 2009, total long suspensions for NSW students across all grades (K to 12) have increased by 32.7% from 11,216 to 14,887. Physical violence and persistent misbehaviour have accounted for between 83 and 87 percent of long suspensions issued over the four year period. In 2009 the average length of long suspension was 12.6 school days.

Table 1: NSW DET long suspensions in year bands - 2009

Year	No. students receiving long suspensions	% of total long suspensions*	Long suspensions as a % of student enrolments
K-6	2,043	20%	0.7%
7-10	8,139	75%	4.9%
11-12	688	5%	0.9%
All grades	10,878		1.5%

Source: NSW DET (2010) Long Suspension and Expulsion Summary 2009.

* Total long suspensions include students placed on long suspension on more than one occasion.

Disaggregated long suspension data for 2009 highlights a number of issues of concern:

- As shown in Table 1, 2,043 primary school students (K-6) in NSW received suspensions ranging from 5 to 20 school days.

- In 2009, 26.6% of all students (K-12) long suspended (2,894 students) received more than one long suspension in a single year raising concerns about the efficacy of interventions.

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- There are sharp variations in the number of students receiving long suspensions as a percentage of school enrolments across DET regions. For example, in Northern Sydney 0.4% of students were long suspended in 2009 compared with 2.7% in Western NSW, 2.6% in New England and 2.1% in the Hunter Central Coast region.

- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students are significantly overrepresented in suspensions data. They are 3 ½ times more likely to be suspended than non-indigenous students and account for 22% of total long suspensions issued. In 2009, 2,286 or 5.6% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students received long suspensions.

The continued overrepresentation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in school suspension data is of particular concern to UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families in the context of government commitments to 'Closing the Gap'. In 2006, an issues paper produced by the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) for the NSW Government drawing on 2003 data showed that for Aboriginal males in Years 7-10 there were 629 short suspensions for every 1,000 males compared with 188 suspensions per 1,000 non-Aboriginal males.

The AECG Paper pointed to worrying increases in the use of both short and long suspensions in the early years of school. In the years from Kindergarten to Year 2, the rate of suspension for Aboriginal females is 9 times higher for short suspensions and 6 times higher for long suspensions than for non-Aboriginal females. Aboriginal males in years K to 2 receive four times as many short suspensions and twice as many long suspensions as their non-Aboriginal male counterparts.

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Appendix B

The following case study illustrates how our *Brighter Futures* Early Childhood Facilitators work with schools to support children with additional or complex needs and their families in the transition to school. It highlights the importance of strong multi-agency and cross-disciplinary collaboration in achieving good outcomes for vulnerable children. It also illustrates the importance of using a strengths based approach in working with families.

Case study

The Burnside *Brighter Futures* service was working with a young boy, Joshua*, who is in Year one. Although Joshua did not have a diagnosis, he has an obvious language delay and poor expressive communication skills.

Joshua was suspended as a result of an incident where he hit his teacher. This incident occurred because he was frustrated that he could not explain to his teacher what he wanted. As it involved physical violence, (under Department of Education and Communities policies), this would result in an automatic suspension, and as it was the second suspension it would generally be for 18 or 20 days.

Joshua's mother, Ella was reluctant to have any contact with the school because she was concerned about what the school would think of her and that they would judge her as a 'bad mother'. The *Brighter Futures* Early Childhood Facilitator gained Ella's permission to call the school; the school was pleased that *Brighter Futures* was involved as they had been trying to contact the mother and talk to her about how they could support the child's needs. Ella agreed to go with the Early Childhood Facilitator to a meeting at the school. The school was very supportive of getting Joshua back into school as soon as possible and developed an individual behaviour program.

The Early Childhood Facilitator then made a 'social story' for Joshua around what he would do when he went back to school. Social stories visually depict processes involved in transitioning to school in a way that is meaningful to the child (they are often used for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and help to prepare children for school and relieve anxiety).

Joshua ended up having a week's suspension while everything was organised. He then went back to school the following week with a behavioural card that showed how his behaviour had been that day. Ella was encouraged to reward each smiley face and ignore when there wasn't one. Previously, she would have wanted to punish the child for not having a smiley face, but she was now starting to see that the reward for positive behaviour was encouraging her child to behave more positively at school.

The school also praised Ella for her support of her children's education, for example, the children being at school on time and in uniform. This helped her to feel good about her parenting and to be more comfortable in having contact with the school. Through the collaborative support of the school and *Brighter Futures*, Joshua managed to get through the rest of the term without further suspension.

* Names have been changed.