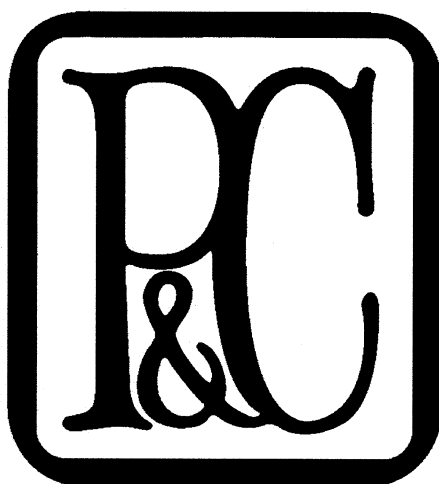


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SUBMISSION



**Parliament of New South Wales
Children and Young People Committee**

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

May 2008

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Approved by



Dianne Giblin, President

PREAMBLE¹

The Federation is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people, irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- All students have the capacity to learn;
- The Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular;
- Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of the children.

P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students.

INTRODUCTION

"At any time of life, a change of the magnitude of moving from primary school to high school would cause significant disruption; during early adolescence this is exacerbated by the developmental challenges the young people face."

Professor Tony Vinson

Paper delivered at the CornerStones Conference, September 2006

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales is the peak representative body of NSW public school parents - a community group that most definitely has the best interests of our nations children at heart. As such the Federation welcomes this opportunity to convey its opinions, priorities and recommendations to the NSW Committee for Children and Young People regarding young people aged 9-14 years.

The core belief of the Federation is that the education of our youth is the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource. The needs, challenges and opportunities available to the age group under consideration are greatly impacted by their educational experience. Similarly, the recommendations outlined within this submission are focussed on remedying issues and augmenting systems within the educational sphere.

RESPONSES TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between about nine and fourteen years of age;

The Federation views education as a fundamental aspect of development, fostering individual and collective success. As such the needs of children generally must be catered for within the

¹ Introduction, Federation of P&C Associations of NSW, *P&C Handbook* 2008

curriculum, structures and services offered by our education systems, as a common platform available to all students irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class.

The Federation perceives two major issues in the development of children of this age. Firstly, the risk of student disengagement with the schooling experience and with the content of their studies during this period. And secondly, the underlying and fundamental need of children in this stage of life to feel a sense of belonging. More could and should be done in a school setting to support children through this stage, particularly as it is marked by the already complicated and challenging transition from primary to high school education.

Combat Disengagement

The first issue of "engagement in the classroom" is a somewhat ambiguous term. For the current purposes the definition supplied in the Australian Government publication *'Schooling Issues Digest: Student Motivation and Engagement'* will be adopted:

Engagement, defined at a broad level as a sense of school belonging, has a weak relationship to achievement, though it does influence whether students remain at school. Engagement, defined more specifically as attitudes to and interest in a particular learning domain (e.g. reading) or self-efficacy in a domain (e.g. mathematics), is a strong predictor of achievement in the respective domains.²

This definition gives rise to two potential positive outcomes of student engagement and on the flip-side two crucial concerns that may arise from disengagement. Disengaged students are less likely to continue study and are more likely to leave school earlier in life. Also, disengaged students are less likely to achieve to their full potential within a certain discipline or at a more extreme level across all academic endeavours.

The negative implications of leaving school before completion are recognised by many studies into the issue. *The McGaw Report* which focused on reform of the Higher School Certificate in NSW, noted, "they [early leavers] are generally ill prepared for adult life. There are few employment opportunities for the early school leaver."³ Research conducted by National Centre for Vocational Education Research in 1999 indicated that:

"Early school leavers face intense competition in the labour market. The rising demand for skilled labour makes it hard for them to find stable employment, and often may prevent their smooth integration into adult society."⁴

As this demand rises, it continues to exacerbate the relationship between leaving early and unemployment or underemployment.

The changes that occur within and around a child between 9 and 14 years of age are vast. These years bridge the gap between childhood and adolescence and are accompanied by a shift in values, perceptions and relationships. The child becomes more focused on image and conforming with peers, at times withdrawing from the family unit, becoming more self-centred and more withdrawn or resistant to authority at home and in the classroom. This coupled with

² *'Schooling Issues Digest: Student Motivation and Engagement'*, research report prepared for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2005.

³ *'Shaping their Future: recommendations for the reform of the Higher School Certificate'*; Department of Education and Training, 1997.

⁴ *'Research at a glance: Early School Leavers and VET'*; National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 1999.

the complex transition into a new learning environment and daily structure, leave children in this age group at high risk of disengagement. Of course this is not the case for every student. However, the increased possibility posed by this developmental stage, is an issue of great significance and needs to be addressed in order to combat disengagement in the education system.

The Federation strongly concurs with the following statement made by the Australian Government '*Schooling Issues Digest: Student Motivation and Engagement*':

*Engagement in learning is both an end in itself and a means to an end... students need to engage actively with schooling. Such engagement will lead to higher quality educational achievements, and these in turn will prepare the way for a dynamic process of engagement, learning and achievement throughout life.*⁵

Federation advocates the notion that strong engagement in educational facilities (i.e. the school community) and curriculum (i.e. specific topic areas or academic fields) is a central need for all students during these crucial transitional years of education.

The issue of disengagement is vast and will take an extensive, systematic approach to remedy effectively. The recent report *Developing Life Long Learners in the Middle Years of Schooling*⁶ hones in on this issue through asking this question, "*What practices, processes, strategies and structures best promote 'lifelong learning' and the development of 'lifelong learners' in the 'middle years of schooling'?*"⁶

In light of these detrimental effects, the Federation upholds the recommendations made in this report, with the expressed view of reducing disengagement amongst students in the middle years of the education process. In particular, table 1.3 included in the report at page 33-34 (see Appendix A) provides a succinct though thorough outline of what the Federation agrees are appropriate measures to combat this issue.

Promote Belonging

The second fundamental requirement for this age group on a general scale is a core need for belonging. This is related to classroom engagement, but reaches deeper emotional, physical and relational levels. The reasons that this need is particularly pronounced in this age group are again linked to the inherent developmental changes at this stage of life.

Erik Erikson's theory on the eight developmental stages of humans explains the significance of belonging to this age group in particular. The 9-14 year old age group spans across two of Erikson's stages and within these a sense of belonging is clearly seen as an implicit need of children developing through this age group. The first stage, from six years through to puberty, is entitled 'Industry vs. Inferiority'. Here the young person analyses their self worth by comparing themselves with their peers. Notably, Erikson places particular emphasis on the role of the teacher in making sure the child does not feel inferior. The next stage, 'Identity vs. Role Confusion', occurs during the teenage years. The need for a sense of belonging and acceptance is again reflected in this stage where the young person begins questioning their

⁵ *Schooling Issues Digest: Student Motivation and Engagement*, research report prepared for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2005.

⁶ *Developing Life Long Learners in the Middle Years of Schooling* commissioned by The State of Queensland, Department of Education and the Arts, 2005.

notions of self, and identity is shaped as the individual struggles to answer internal questions like 'Who am I, where do I fit in?' and 'Where am I going in life?'⁷

As a common platform available to all children, schools bear great responsibility to nurture this sense of belonging. Furthermore, an emphasis should be placed on this need in the programming of other youth support services and these too should be made available to all children.

Proposed actions to foster a sense of belonging include:

- Implementation of relational curriculum focused on building relationships in the classroom and achieving outcomes through teamwork and collaboration.
- A bigger focus on combating issues that threaten a sense of belonging, e.g. bullying, prejudice and disengagement.
- Embracing diversity in the school and school community with the view of developing a more confident sense of self in students.

The structure of the education system is such that the age group under review must undergo a dual transition, not only from childhood to adolescence but also from primary to secondary education. However, with the implementation of these recommendations and a detailed analysis of the needs of this group, resulting in more practical and specialised support, it is very possible that this coincidence could prove beneficial to both processes.

2. The extent to which the needs of children and young people in the middle years vary according to age, gender and level of disadvantage;

Naturally there is great disparity among the individual needs of children in this age group. These vary according to specific age, gender and level of disadvantage, as set out in the terms of reference for this inquiry but are not limited to these categories. The Federation recognises cultural, ethnic, physical ability, mental ability, linguistic, geographic, economic and social diversity among children in NSW and urges policy makers to do likewise.

A system that services the individual needs of all children is paramount. Although it is recognised that mastering such an arrangement in a practical and viable way presents a huge challenge. Implementing such strategies in everyday setting means striving towards a system that identifies and caters for diverse is an invaluable investment in the youth of Australia, as the future of the nation. Students require special protections and recognition of individual needs is essential to provide a safe and healthy educational sphere.

One particularly disturbing trend is in the difference of emotional wellbeing according to age and gender (see Appendix B)⁸. According to this indicator, two negative trends emerge: firstly, the older the child, the greater incidence of emotional and behavioural problems and secondly, a generally higher incidence level in boys than girls. Part of this incidence level is based on the fact that many emotional, mental and behavioural issues first arise during puberty. Many problems might exist, but might not be manifest as strongly until the child develops more. These trends underscore the urgent need for understanding the factors impacting students.

⁷ Outline of Erikson's theories compiled by Wendy Sharkey. <www.muskingum.edu/~psych/psycweb/history/erikson.htm>

⁸ "Emotional well-being" NSW Commission for Children and Young People.

<http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/kidsstats/health/emotionalwellbeing/tablesummary.cfm>. 1 May 2008

Age, gender, and socio-economic status are not left behind when a child enters the classroom. Instead, these factors influence how they learn and relate to others. An effective approach to facilitating a smooth transition across the middle years must look carefully at the factors that impact these students. The task of ensuring that the needs of all children and young people in this age group and in general are met, is complex, but vital. In order to achieve this, a strategic and systematic approach must be adopted. This approach must uplift the most disadvantaged, while not neglecting the needs of other students.

3. The activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience;

Resilience is a trait of utmost importance and one that has great significance in coping with the amount of change that accompanies the middle years. There are a variety of activities, services and supports that are particularly important for developing resilience during these middle years. These include school-based opportunities, as well as out of school supports and services delivered via the family and community spheres.

In a school setting, this must be achieved by the specific systemic support of children during the middle years of schooling. This should include an allocation of resources to enable the two traditional halves of the K-12 continuum to work collaboratively, as well as classroom structuring to assist with transitions. The Federation agrees with the principles set out by Professor Tony Vinson in the paper he delivered at the CornerStones Conference⁹ and implores the Committee for Children and Young People to address the short fallings Professor Vinson has discovered and conveyed, in relation to the primary to secondary transition process occurring in NSW schools.

The promotion of extra-curricular activities as an essential, not additional, element of the child's education and development is one strategy with the potential to provide very positive outcomes. This will provide opportunities for children and young people in these middle years to develop the necessary characteristics to prepare them for a well-adjusted and productive adolescence and adulthood. This is a recommendation that has simple practical application. It is suggested that funding be allocated to organisations that provide quality extra-curricular activities, across a broad range of disciplines; thus making extra-curricular activities accessible to all children, regardless of levels of disadvantage. Special interest extra-curricular activities, not only provide young people with additional skills, they also foster personal growth and a sense of belonging. The Federation recommends that these additional activities should become a more pivotal and expected aspect of the education system.

The main body of aid that is necessary to promote resilience in the middle years is through additional interagency support. Only through different departments working together to promote health, education and security can appropriate safeguards be put in place to aid students when they need to most. The adversity that affects students in the middle years is not limited to isolated spheres. Problems at home are not left at home. Additional school counsellors, before and after school programs, breakfast programs, and community programs to combat different forms of abuse, drug use, and other struggles affecting students are the most effective way of providing the scaffolding that develops resilience. Cooperation and

⁹ *Good Transitions: Through the eyes of primary and secondary principals*, paper presented at the CornerStones Conference, Sydney, 22-23 September 2006.

understanding of the complex relationships affecting children in the middle years is necessary to see effective and lasting positive change.

4. The extent to which changing workplace practices have impacted on children and young people in the middle years, including possible changes to workplace practices which have the potential to benefit children and young people in the middle years; and

For a multitude of reasons our society places a large amount of pressure on parents and caregivers to be a part of the workforce. This pressure has increased over the past decade to a point where the workplace practices impact upon the child or children. This overall trend has had great impact on children in the middle years.

The current landscape of the workplace and its implications of family life are summarised by Professor Suzan Lewis of Manchester Metropolitan University:

[There exists] an assumed separation between work and family domains and reflects the traditional gendered division of labour... which constructs the ideal worker as one who works continuously and full time and does not allow family to interfere with work. This persists, albeit often in modified forms, as we embark on the twenty-first century, but is increasingly inappropriate not only because of the growing numbers of women with children or other family responsibilities in the labour force, but also because the assumption of a continuous "career" based on an androcentric linear model no longer fits men's or women's experiences in the contemporary labour market (Halford et al., 1997).¹⁰

With more parents returning to the workforce and returning earlier, the issue of caring for children outside of school hours is a growing concern. Many P&Cs run the Out of School Hours (OOSH) Care facilities at schools. These important services must be supported and utilised by the government to ensure a healthy transition for students across the middle years. An area for further thought and discussion may be the culmination of OOSH care with special interest extra-curricular activities, so that this time may be used as an educational opportunity to target specific issues facing young people.

The increased pressures placed on parents in the workforce have a profound impact on children. Around transitional years, parents start to allow children more independence, and less monitoring. This, coupled with longer working hours and less time and energies focused on the regulation of a child's activities by the parent, has a huge impact on social and relational development. The Federation concurs with the following statement by the Australian Institute of Family Studies:

Children have different needs that vary with their temperament and developmental stage. Parents differ in their capacities to provide the different kinds of attention and interaction that children need. This indicates the need to consider the amount of "time" available as only one of the critical factors that influence quality of family life.¹¹

That is to say, the impacts of workplace and employment pressures will effects each child and family differently. As such parents should be encouraged to include children in discussions and

¹⁰ 'Restructuring workplace cultures: the ultimate work-family challenge?' Suzan Lewis 2000

¹¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Family and work: the families perspective', *Family Matters Journal* No.59 2001

decision making, in order to achieve the right balance for that family unit. Greater flexibility in workplace practices will give parents the space to make healthy decisions with the family in mind.

5. Any other matter considered relevant to the inquiry by the Committee.

The Role of Parents in the lives of 9-14 year olds

One of the principal functions of the Federation is to advocate the rights of parents, and to strongly promote the fact that parents, as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of the children.

It is imperative that any examination of children in any age group should include an examination of the roles of parents in the lives of these young people. As discussed above in response to the set terms of reference the lives of children aged 9-14, are marked with two major transitions. Because of this there are a multitude of issues and challenges that may become apparent, particularly with regard to the child's educational experience. Also outlined above are the many differences in context and background children in this age range.

The Federation believes that catering for this vast diversity in the needs of children aged 9-14, and children and young people generally, could be made substantially easier by strengthening the degree of parent participation in the education system. An investigation conducted by America's National Committee for Citizens in Education conducted in 1994 noted *"that the most accurate predictor of student achievement is the extent to which the family is involved in his or her education"* and that *"the family makes critical contributions to student achievement from the earliest childhood years through high school, and efforts to improve children's outcomes are much more effective when the family is actively involved."*¹²

The Federation suggests that positive effect on the education of children is due to the fact that parent participation is the most effective way of ensuring individual needs are met. By concentrating more on fostering a partnership between parents and educators, the Department will be better equipped to support children and provide services that better facilitate the transition from child to young person, primary to secondary education to ensure more positive outcomes in education for this age group that will resonate in later years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales affirms that:

"The middle years of schooling approach facilitates the transition from primary to secondary. Years 5-8 are a discrete developmental stage and require a focused approach to learning and teaching" and that *"systematic support of the middle years of schooling should include an allocation of resources to enable the two traditional halves of the K-12 continuum to work collaboratively."*¹³

The middle years under review in the inquiry require specific support services and educational approaches that facilitate the transition from primary to secondary education. These approaches must also take into account the other documented developmental requirements of

¹² 'A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement' Berla, N & Henderson, A eds. 1994

¹³ Premise 1.II.B Section 6: Policy of the P&C Federation, *P&C Handbook* 2008 (66)

this age group and work to minimize associated risks and maximise opportunities specifically relevant to children and young people aged 9-14 years.

In particular the Federation recommends:

- A specialised strategy to reduce disengagement during this transitional stage of a young person's education. With the aim of improving retention rates in NSW high schools.
- An increased focus on fostering a sense of belonging in students.
- A broader recognition of diversity within the NSW education system and the application of this on a practical level in schools.
- An individualised approach to meeting the needs of children in this age group.
- The development of a multitude of values in students through education.
- Adoption of the notion that education is a fundamental device to help each individual attain their full potential, self confidence, a sense of individual worth and as a result the development of resilience.
- The promotion of and allocation of resources to a broad range of quality extra-curricular activities as an essential part of a child's education. With the view of developing well roundedness in the skills, abilities and hobbies of young people.
- The implementation of support to overcome the impacts of the demands of the workforce on families, recognising that within the 9-14 age group such impacts can vary greatly.
- Increased recognition of the role of parents in the education system, especially as an effective means of ensuring the individual needs of students are met.

The Federation would like to thank the Children and Young People Committee for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. We look forward to hearing the results and welcome any further discussion this may evoke.

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APPENDIX A:

From 'Developing Life Long Learners in the Middle Years of Schooling', a report commissioned by The State of Queensland, Department of Education and the Arts 2005

Table 1.3: Aspects of schooling contributing to the development of lifelong learners in the middle years, at 33-34.

Structure	Provides	Alignment of CPA (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) Heterogenous, flexible student groupings Team-teaching Time to think and reflect Time to explore authentic tasks Opportunity to discuss achievements with adults Access to knowledge and research Resources and ICT's Incentives (financial/cultural to participate) Community-oriented Inspirational leadership Fluidity between subjects/years
Culture	Focuses on Provides Celebrates Promotes	Learning to learn and learning outcomes Support for risk-taking Inspiration Learning achievements/developments Innovative practices and change Teachers as Lifelong Learning models and mentors
Assessment	Based on Integrates Considers Developed through Developed around Informed by Encourages & Promotes opportunity for Provides	Outcomes Integrates Learning outcomes I.T. skills and processes Authentic assessment Individual learning styles Negotiation with the learner Individual learning goals Reflection of learning Self Assessment Opportunity for follow up discussion
Curriculum	Based on Revolving around Incorporating Explicitly develops Developed through Focused on Recognises Revolves around Establishes Caters for Recognises	Holistic approach/integrated curriculum Reduced curriculum content Cross-disciplinary problem-solving Learning outcomes Social practices (collaboration, communication etc.) Negotiation with the learner Connection to the learner Learning Processes/Skills Learner needs Learner-centred activity Learning goal-setting Individual learner differences and abilities Individual learning styles Individual social and cultural identities
Pedagogy	Based on Developed through	Constructivist approach Collaboration with teachers
<i>Teaching</i>		Negotiation with learners

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focused on Provides Exhibits Revolves around Establishes Caters for Recognises Identifies/Celebrates Promotes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges/Problem-based (Intellectual rigour) Supportive and fun learning environment Ethical awareness Learner-centred activity Learning goal-setting Individual learner differences and abilities Individual learning styles Individual social and cultural identities Individual achievements and skill developments Reflection on learning
<i>Learning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed through Revolves around Focused on Explicitly develops Involves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negotiation with teachers Collaboration with others Problem-solving Goal-setting and evaluation Individual learning styles and needs ICT & Learning skill development (listen, discuss...) Social practices (collaboration, communication etc.) Risk-taking Participation in discussions Reflection on learning (needs, styles, processes, goals, achievements)
<i>Relationships</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focused on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication with other adults Strong teacher/student and student/student relationships

APPENDIX B:

NSW Commission for Young People website:

<http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/kidsstats/health/emotionalwellbeing/tablesummary.cfm>.

"Emotional well-being: Table Summary".

Children aged 4-12 years with emotional or behavioural problems in the past six months, as reported by parents or carers, NSW, 2001 (per cent of parents or carers)

		Males	Females	All
Overall	Overall	34.6	27.1	30.9
Age	4 years	19.5	15.6	17.6
	5 years	35.9	26.6	31.3
	6 years	30.1	22.5	26.4
	7 years	33.5	25.9	29.8
	8 years	31.3	31.7	31.5
	9 years	36.2	29.9	33.1
	10 years	39.4	27.4	33.6
	11 years	43.8	28.8	36.4
	12 years	41.6	35.4	38.6

Note: Table based on 6,503 respondents. The question "During the past 6 months, do you think that [child] has had any emotional or behavioural problems?" was asked of parents or carers.

Source: NSW Child Health Survey 2001. Centre for Epidemiology and Research, NSW Department of Health (unpublished data).

Comment

In 2001 almost one-third (30.9%) of parents or carers reported their 4 to 12 year old had an emotional or behavioural problem in the past six months.

Emotional or behavioural problems were reported more frequently for males than females (34.6% and 27.1% respectively). The reported prevalence of emotional or behavioural problems generally increased with age:

- 17.6% of 4 year olds
- 31.5% of 8 year olds
- 38.6% of 12 year olds.

The biggest change in emotional and behavioural problems appears to be associated with 5 year olds, with an approximately 80% increase in such problems at that time, followed by some downward adjustment at 6 years.

Subsequent age trends are more consistent for males than females, with females showing substantial variation in emotional wellbeing in the later years, but typically at lower rates than for males.