



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Submission  
to the Department of Education and Training  
Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in  
Australian Schools

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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## Summary

Education is fundamental to reducing inequality. Through our research and practical experience in designing and delivering programs and services, the Brotherhood of St Laurence is well placed to understand the cause and effects of educational disadvantage, how it can escalate over the life course and interventions that can make a difference. Education is the stand-out factor associated with improving life chances, sustaining employment and being part of community life. A solid education can change the trajectory of a child's or young person's life, even if they are living in circumstances of poverty or disadvantage.

In keeping with the Brotherhood's mission to eradicate poverty, this submission reflects on strategies which will contribute to our aspiration to create a school system in which all students, regardless of background and experience of disadvantage, can flourish and become adults and citizens who share in and contribute to the wellbeing of the nation.

These include:

1. The establishment of explicit national objectives, indicators and targets directed at improving school outcomes for students experiencing disadvantage, and publish related annual data on system-wide outcomes for the purposes of monitoring the impact of reforms and future development.
2. The need to embed high support, flexible learning models as a core offering of Australia's school system to support the engagement of highly vulnerable children and young people.
3. The development of a systemic approach to rapidly identify those who disconnect from school and engage support for them to return to education.
4. The need to strengthen careers exploration and vocational education in schools to better equip students to transition to work or further learning.

## The Brotherhood of St Laurence and the education of children and young people

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the BSL continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence welcomes both the Australian Government's commitment to increase school funding in accordance with the Gonski reforms and this opportunity to contribute ideas about the redesign of the school system and reducing inequities within it.

The school system plays a decisive role in the structure of opportunity available for young people in Australia, with the capacity to foster social mobility or, alternatively, perpetuate existing inequities. There is clear evidence that high-performing school systems are those that minimise the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on educational outcomes. Excellence and equity go hand in hand.

**Recommendation 1:**

**Establish explicit national objectives, indicators and targets directed at improving school outcomes for students experiencing disadvantage, and publish related annual data on system-wide outcomes for the purposes of monitoring the impact of reforms and future development.**

There is a stark educational performance gap between Australia’s more vulnerable students and their peers. Nationwide data shows the impact of a range of demographic factors, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, location, disability, gender, language background and most significantly socioeconomic status (SES), on educational outcomes:

- There is a gap of up to 28 percentage points in the achievement of Year 12 or equivalent qualifications between students from the lowest and highest SES groups – 60.6 per cent and 89.1 per cent respectively. <sup>1</sup>
- Non-attendance rates are almost five times higher in 50 of Australia’s most disadvantaged areas (22.1% compared to 4.5% in least disadvantaged areas). <sup>2</sup>
- Some 42% of Aboriginal children, and 33% of children from the lowest SES quintile, start primary school developmentally vulnerable, compared to only 15% from the highest SES quintile. <sup>3</sup>
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander children are 40% less likely to finish high school and 60% less likely to attend university compared to non-Aboriginal children. <sup>4</sup>
- Children attending school in remote locations are only a third as likely to attend university as those living in a major city. <sup>5</sup>
- There is significant disparity between the maths, reading and science scores of students in the highest socioeconomic group from those in the lowest, equivalent to approximately two-and-a-half years of schooling. <sup>6</sup>
- Increasing ‘residualisation’ of our school system is compounding disadvantage, with 28% of the variance in student performance outcomes related to differences between schools. High ICSEA (more advantaged) schools are attracting students (and with them, higher

<sup>1</sup> Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S 2015, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre 2017, *Educate Australia fair? Educational inequality in Australia*, Focus on the State Series, No. 5, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, Western Australia.

<sup>3</sup> Masters, G N 2016, *Five challenges in Australian school education*, Policy Insights, Issue 5, Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell, Vic.

<sup>4</sup> Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S 2015, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Thomson, S, De Bortoli, L, Buckley, S 2013, *PISA in Brief: Highlights from the full Australian report: PISA 2012: how Australia measures up*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell, Vic.

funding and social capital) at a much greater rate than lower ICSEA schools (enrolment growth of 11 vs 1.4 full-time students per school per year).<sup>7</sup>

Some positive directions are outlined in the Australian Government's Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes Report, and we acknowledge that targets and strategies around disadvantaged student groups already exist (e.g. attainment and attendance targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and a strategy to improve school attendance in remote communities). However, there is an urgent need to redouble efforts with an explicit focus on low SES students. Clear targets for this cohort of students, backed by tangible, evidence-informed measures (e.g. interventions in the Teaching and Learning Toolkit) and transparent reporting of progress are needed to drive the interventions and cultural change required to address educational disadvantage.

Some possible targets and indicators are:

- **Setting a COAG target to increase Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates to 85% for low SES students by 2020 and 90% by 2025.** Presently, there are COAG targets designed to improve national attainment levels overall, and to halve the attainment gap for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students; however there are no specific targets for low SES students despite their being identified as a priority group in the Melbourne Declaration.
- **Setting a COAG target for school attendance, in line with the OECD average, including specific targets for low-SES students.** Australia has higher rates of absenteeism than the OECD average. Australia's ACARA data shows students in the lowest ICSEA schools attend school 84.2 per cent of the time, compared to 94.1 per cent in the highest ICSEA schools. PISA data from 2012 found 25.7% of Australian students reported 1–2 days truancy in a two-week period, compared to the OECD average of 15.3%. This figure rises to 31.1% for students in the lowest SES quintile of Australian students (compared to 20.5% in the highest SES quintile).<sup>8</sup> National attendance targets should be set and measured for all SES groups. These would be in addition to the Closing the Gap target for school attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

**Recommendation 2:**

**Embed high support, flexible learning models as a core offering of Australia's school system to support the engagement of highly vulnerable children and young people.**

A range of complex barriers impact on school engagement, both in and beyond the school setting, including problems within the home, learning disorders, undeveloped literacy and numeracy skills, mental health issues, bullying, low self-esteem and a combination of low expectations (from

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<sup>7</sup> Masters, G N 2016, *Five challenges in Australian school education*, Policy Insights, Issue 5, Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell, Vic., p. 2. Centre for Policy Development 2016, *Uneven playing field: the state of Australia's schools*, authors C Bonnor & B Shepherd, CPD [Sydney], p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S 2015, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

teachers, family and community) and limited adult support.<sup>9</sup> Students experiencing disadvantage are more likely to have their learning impacted by these factors. Without dedicated support, many fall behind in classwork, and this in turn often triggers disengagement from mainstream schooling.

While teachers and other school staff work hard to engage and retain more-vulnerable students, they are often ill-equipped to offer the high level of personalised support needed by those who face challenges.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, teachers frequently lack the training and skills to identify and effectively support the learning of children and young people experiencing disadvantage, and many schools lack the resources to create effective, inclusive learning environments.<sup>11</sup>

For highly vulnerable students who are at risk of disengaging or are already estranged from conventional schools, there is a need for high-support, flexible learning options to cater for their educational reengagement. The Brotherhood's research and practice experience, operating a special assistance school in Frankston (the David Scott School) and delivering middle years engagement programs (such as RESET based at Monterey Secondary in Frankston), has shown the following key elements are pivotal to advancing the education of highly vulnerable young people:

- an unconditionally inclusive ethos and a corresponding approach to governance
- a positive education, trauma-informed approach
- tailored and flexible pedagogy and curriculum
- intensive wellbeing support
- an emphasis on building social and emotional literacy
- a culture of high expectations
- small group learning
- strong community and family engagement
- a focus on equipping students for their next steps
- harnessing the resources and expertise of the broader community to provide the breadth of support required by these students.

Despite the demonstrable value of high-support, flexible learning options, access to them is a lottery. Programs tend to be chronically underfunded, are of varying quality and are often marginalised by the mainstream education system.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Barrett, A 2012, *Building relationships for better outcomes: Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation stage 2 report*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

<sup>10</sup> Hanson-Peterson, J 2013, *Do training programs equip teachers with skills to teach disengaged students? A preliminary scan*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

<sup>11</sup> OECD 2017, *How do schools compensate for socio-economic disadvantage?*, PISA in Focus, no. 76, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<sup>12</sup> Te Riele, K 2014, *Putting the jigsaw together: flexible learning programs in Australia – final report*, the Victorian Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, Melbourne.

In response to continued underfunding of Community-based VCAL (compounded by increased needs-based SES funding not flowing through to community settings), the Brotherhood switched from delivering a flexible learning program attached to the state school system to establishing a specialist independent school (which is predominantly federally funded) for highly vulnerable young people.

National funding and policy levers need to be adjusted to ensure high-support, flexible learning approaches are embedded as a legitimate part of public school systems across the nation, and accessible across the nation. This must be underpinned by a robust quality framework, clear accountabilities and adequate resourcing.

**Recommendation 3:**

**Establish a systemic approach to rapidly identify those who disconnect from school and engage support for them to return to education.**

For young people who are barely attending or have disconnected from school, there is currently no systematic, national approach for identifying and reaching them. There is neither accountability for ‘losing’ students prematurely, nor clear responsibility for reaching out to school-aged young people who are out of school. In fact, the trend towards greater government school independence and principal autonomy, together with My School and the league table approach to reporting school outcomes, may discourage schools from actively seeking to retain students who are struggling, or may even encourage them to try to move students on.

The Mitchell Institute reported there were 38,000 19-year-olds in Australia in 2014 who had left school prematurely. They estimate this group will collectively cost taxpayers \$315 million a year, or \$12.6 billion across their lifetimes, due to disconnection from study and work.<sup>13</sup> This carries significant implications for our national economic viability as we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The closure of the nationally funded Youth Connections service at the end of 2014 left a major gap in assistance for young people to re-engage with education or training. Youth Connections had proved effective at supporting young people to maintain or renew their engagement with education or training and was particularly successful with young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.<sup>14</sup> While the federally funded Transitions to Work service has since been established, its primary focus is on employment and training outcomes, rather than reconnection to school. Consideration could be given to capitalising on

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<sup>13</sup> Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S 2015, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

<sup>14</sup> Youth Connections National Network 2013, *Destination study: where are they now?* Six months after completing a final outcome with Youth Connections, 94.2% of young people surveyed reported that they stayed at school, continued studying elsewhere or started working. Two years later, 81.5% of young people reporting were still in education or in employment.

the existing infrastructure of TTW and intentionally expanding its remit to include school reengagement.

Some state initiatives have been developed to fill the gap left by the closure of Youth Connections. The Victorian Government is funding small-scale initiatives targeted at reengagement. While positive, these programs mostly sit outside the school system and lack the scale, scope and intensity to have a significant impact. For example, the Navigator Pilot (running in eight locations) is aimed at getting 12–17 year olds back to school. The Brotherhood delivers Navigator in partnership with Anglicare in Melbourne’s west. Navigator provides intensive outreach support, works with both young people and their families, makes connections with local services and supports, and works with schools to plan re-entry. Early results from the pilot are promising. However the service is vastly oversubscribed; its waiting lists show that many young people are missing out. With disengagement of children at earlier stages a live issue, the need to expand the eligibility criteria to include primary-aged students has also been identified.

A national approach is needed to identify and rapidly re-engage young people who are disengaging from school or who drop out of school prematurely. It should be integrated in the school system and re-engagement strategies should build on the evidence of what works, using evaluations from the Navigator pilot, Youth Connections and international models (e.g. in Denmark, Norway, Finland).

The Brotherhood would like to see a comprehensive re-engagement service for young people that:

- rapidly identifies young people who are disengaging or who have fallen out of education. It should include accountability measures requiring schools or education providers to report disengagement in real time
- uses a place-based model that harnesses local resources and community knowledge to support re-engagement
- focuses on early intervention, working with young people before they are effectively out of school
- caters for a wider age range – enabling work with primary students at risk of making a poor transition to secondary school
- is integrated with support for young people to engage with VET and explore career pathways relevant to their strengths and aspirations.

While we recognise the costs associated with establishing this kind of service, it is reasonable that government education funding should provide for all young people of compulsory school age. It follows that those who are out of school are entitled to have some of the funds that would have been spent on their school enrolment redeployed to support re-engagement.

**Recommendation 4:**

**Strengthen careers exploration and vocational education in schools to better equip students to transition to work or further learning.**

In a modern economy that emphasises skills and workplace experience, the transition from school to work can be problematic for all young people, and particularly for young people experiencing disadvantage. These young people typically lack the necessary social capital – resources, networks, and access to opportunities and support – to mitigate the increased risks associated with the changed labour market.<sup>15</sup>

Many young people are unaware of the vocational options available, lack insight into their natural aptitudes, have an inadequate knowledge of employer expectations, and lack rudimentary vocational skills. Many are simply not ready for what is expected of them in the workplace and find it difficult, if not impossible, to gain a job. The youth underutilisation rate (combined unemployment and underemployment figures) was 31.5 per cent in February 2017, the highest it has been in almost 40 years.<sup>16</sup>

We welcome the government's moves to develop a National Career Development Strategy and urge an emphasis on young people experiencing disadvantage. Our experience working with young disadvantaged people who are struggling to transition from school to work has identified a range of factors that should be considered in the design of this strategy:

- Quality vocational guidance recognises and builds on each student's strengths and aspirations.
- Career exploration should commence early, where possible embedded progressively in the secondary school curriculum and tailored to the young person's developmental stage, needs and circumstances.
- Provision of real world opportunities is essential, including access to work tasters and meaningful work experience.
- Place-based approaches are required that respond to local and regional labour market demands.<sup>17</sup>
- Students should be supported to compile an 'address book' – a resource of employer and community contacts they can draw upon to build their networks and connections into work.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cuervo, H & Wyn, J 2011, *Rethinking youth transitions in Australia: a historical and multidimensional approach*, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, D with James, S, Mallett, S, McTiernan, N, Orchard, N & Cull, E 2017, *Transition to Work Community of Practice: practice guide*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne; Buick, J, Mallett, S & James, S 2014, *Education First Youth Foyer employment offer conceptual framework*, Hanover Welfare Services and Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne.

<sup>17</sup> Nous Group 2014, *DEECD School-Industry Engagement Project with LLENs and WLCs*, Nous Group, Melbourne.

To complement the careers advice that students receive in school, there is a need for a network of local vocational hubs available young people. Hubs would provide a comprehensive picture of the vocational options available and draw in employers to provide a realistic picture of the range of employment opportunities in different industries, in a changing and dynamic labour market. The Knox Innovation, Opportunity and Sustainability Centre (KIOSC) provides a strong example of a model that uses partnerships with the Local Learning & Employment Network, local government and local businesses to expose young people to vocational learning.

Less than half the Australian population goes on to attend university after school, and only a quarter of young people experiencing disadvantage (from the lowest SES quintile) do. Accordingly, high quality vocational education in school – incorporating exposure to practical, work-based learning options – is critical to making school relevant and engaging for these young people, and to building the foundations to explore pathways to work and accredited qualifications.

There is scope for COAG to continue its earlier reform work on VET in Schools, with a view to improving its design, delivery, status and quality. Key areas for attention include:

- ensuring school funding provides equal weighting to vocational education opportunities and academic ones
- increasing investment in the VET workforce, similar to the investment in school teachers
- ensuring that all students gain 21st century skills, regardless of whether they are pursuing a vocational or academic pathway<sup>19</sup>
- promoting VET options in middle years in a way that does not force a choice between academic or vocational pathways. Students should be encouraged to experiment with VET, knowing that it can be credited to the senior year certificate leading to university, or alternatively leading to vocational training within the VET system.
- ensuring that participation in school-based VET does not undermine future training and employment options
- incorporating vocational learning in mainstream teacher training courses
- strengthening links between schools and industry to provide an all-important ‘line of sight’ to employment<sup>20</sup>
- equipping young people to make informed decisions about VET pathways.

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, D with James, S, Mallett, S, McTiernan, N, Orchard, N & Cull, E 2017, *Transition to Work Community of Practice: practice guide*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne.

<sup>19</sup> Torii, K & O’Connell, M 2017, *Preparing young people for the future of work*, Mitchell Institute Policy Paper, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, D with James, S, Mallett, S, McTiernan, N, Orchard, N & Cull, E 2017, *Transition to Work Community of Practice: practice guide*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne.