



*Submission to the Review
of Alternative Education in
Victoria*

Brotherhood of St Laurence
May 2009

Brotherhood of St Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy Vic. 3065

ABN 24 603 467 024

www.bsl.org.au

Contact:
Emily Duizend, Strategic Development Officer
Through School to Work
Brotherhood of St Laurence
(03) 9483 1392
eduizend@bsl.org.au

Introduction

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (the Brotherhood) 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 Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty, guided by principles of advocacy, innovation and sustainability. Our work includes direct service provision to people in need, the development of social enterprises to address inequality, research to better understand the causes and effects of poverty in Australia, and the development of policy solutions at both national and local levels.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is currently undertaking a review of alternative education in Victoria. The review aims to deliver improvements for future practice, including:

- development of a clear policy framework, based on evidence, to inform future arrangements for, and provide a consistent and sustainable approach to, alternative education programs funded by DEECD
- a more coherent approach to the purpose, eligibility, access, funding, accountability and evaluation of these programs

This submission to the consultation considers the issues in light of important recent policy documents:

- *Blueprint for Early Childhood and School Reform*,
- *Strengthening School Support Services*
- *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools – Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*
- *The Melbourne Declaration National Goals for Education*
- *Smarter Schools National Partnerships Agreements*
- *The MCEETYA Action Plan 2009–2012*
- *The COAG meeting communiqué regarding Jobs, Training and Youth Transitions*

BSL acknowledges that alternative education occurs in many forms. The submission focuses on education programs offered in settings outside the traditional school environment.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence values this opportunity to contribute to the review.

What's working well / what's not, in terms of providing support to young people at-risk of disengagement from school?

The need for alternative education settings

The Brotherhood of St Laurence believes that all young people should be guaranteed education to a year 12 standard regardless of where this occurs. Our understanding of the impact of poverty and disadvantage on children and young people suggests that the best settings for some young people to achieve educational success may be outside the traditional school environment, as such settings are often better equipped to provide a more holistic and flexible learning approach and address the familial, social and environmental barriers to educational achievement.

There are various reasons why the traditional education school system often does not work for various categories of students, including those most vulnerable in society (state wards, refugees, and young people from backgrounds of generational poverty and unemployment). Many mainstream schools not adequately understand the social context that can limit commitment to learning and do not respond adequately to young people's support and educational needs. Traditional schools face constraints around budgets, class sizes, expertise in remedial literacy and numeracy, constricted pedagogical approaches and the economic imperatives to score highly on measures such as ENTER scores. The increasing emphasis on maximising choice for parents about their children's education can exacerbates the residualisation of some schools and the exclusion/drop-out of students who have fallen behind.

Alternative education settings continue to be needed for their ability to provide a more suitable learning environment for some young people unable to thrive within traditional mainstream school. The increasing number of community based providers offering Community VCAL and learning support programs is evidence of the continuing need for more student-centred pedagogical approaches and supportive learning environments. The lack of such responsiveness within some traditional schools is a cause of educational disengagement for many young people. BSL believes the need for more alternative education settings and approaches is likely to continue despite the range of planned reforms to education provision, and particularly in light of the recent COAG agreement regarding the provision of youth allowance to young people who leave education before completing year 12, many of whom face barriers that make them unlikely to remain positively engaged within a mainstream school.

Challenges facing alternative education settings

Unfortunately, in some cases alternative education providers have become seen as a 'dumping ground' for young people whom traditional schools do not feel equipped to support. Once the young person has left the school, there is often little follow-up by the school. For reasons more related to the imperatives of school budgets rather than individual student needs, DEECD student funding will often stays with the school, particularly if a young person leaves after the school census date, rather than travelling with the young person to their new education setting. This situation disadvantages both the young person and the alternative education provider.

Young people within alternative education also often face stigmatisation by the community, as do the providers themselves. This situation is compounded by the poor fit of current measurements of educational success, which cover certain aspects of student learning, but not student wellbeing and pathways outcomes, which alternative settings may be achieving more successfully than traditional schools, particularly for students at risk.

Finally, the value and place of non-school based learning within the education system as a whole, remains largely unacknowledged in policy documents guiding the future of education in both Victoria and Australia.

What are the priority areas for improvement in alternative education?

BSL hopes that current policy reforms will strengthen the active attendance and participation of all students in traditional school. However, to improve education participation and inclusion for all young people, alternative education environments must be included in this reform process, and be valued and supported to enable catch-up learning or complementary models of education for those unable to stay in mainstream schools. Alternative education continues to be marginalised in education policy documents while paradoxically, its importance, particularly for low socioeconomic areas, is increasingly recognised in those same documents. This is seen in the MCEETYA action plan (consultation draft), a companion to the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, states that all Australian governments will support:

encouraging a strong focus on the education needs and well-being of individual students, including personalised planning for the learning provision of targeted support to address the learning and development needs of disadvantaged students and the mobilisation of tailored services from outside the school (MCEETYA 2008, p. 11)

Towards an integrated system of ‘learning options’

The DEECD *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Reform* outlines a goal of a more integrated system that can support all young people to achieve year 12 or equivalent. To achieve this requires a re conceptualisation of alternative education. All education settings and approaches should be valued as parts of the same system, with shared goals. If not, non-mainstream education will continue to be viewed and resourced as the poor cousin of traditional schools, with a stigma attached to those who participate in it. This is played out through:

- negative community attitudes to alternative education settings
- unequal access to resources required to provide a sustainable high quality education environment for young people
- frequent absence of shared planning, resources, knowledge and skills between mainstream and non mainstream settings
- narrow measurements of academic success, excluding and further marginalising non mainstream educational settings and participants, and constricting mainstream schools’ capacity to develop the innovative and flexible operational arrangements and learning opportunities that may be required to ensure all children and young people are able to succeed.

If all education settings and approaches were regarded as valued *learning options* within the same education system, this would shift the community away from the deficit view of ‘alternative education’ towards a view of the education system as a socially inclusive education continuum that is able to meet the education goals of all children and young people in Victoria. This would provide a foundation for

- better supported transitions for young people moving between traditional and alternative education settings
- promotion of partnerships between government and non-government education providers, parents and the community
- sharing of skills and knowledge across the education system, as well as a commitment to high expectations regarding student outcomes
- greater scope for innovative and flexible learning opportunities and corresponding operational arrangements .

Such enhancements would help to achieve an inclusive education system where children and young people receive the support and learning opportunities they need to successfully complete year 12 or equivalent and move into a successful adulthood.

What are the core elements of an effective approach to alternative education?

All children and young people should have access to the most appropriate learning environment to enable them to complete year 12 or equivalent and transition into meaningful future pathways, regardless of whether that is within a traditional school or alternative education setting.

If alternative education settings are to provide the high quality outcomes for the young people who require them they need to be explicitly included in the reforms such as those outlined in the COAG *Smarter Schools National Partnerships Agreement*. This inclusion is currently not explicit, indicating that alternative education settings remain undervalued or not understood by governments. It is likely they will continue to be under-resourced and have low expectations placed on them until this situation changes.

Other core elements of an effective approach to alternative education are:

1. A collective community responsibility for the educational achievement of all young people
2. Comprehensive mapping of alternative education provision in Victoria in order to
 - aid more effective local planning
 - document the contribution of alternative education to the overall system
 - raise awareness of successful approaches for young people who do not 'fit' the traditional education model
 - provide a basis for deeper policy attention to the resource inequities faced by alternative education providers
3. A supported by a program of parent and community engagement to change community perception, reduce stigma and help parents see alternative education as a valid option.
4. Equitable resourcing arrangements for infrastructure, materials and workforce, with dedicated student resource funding for those attending alternative education settings.
5. Quality teaching and leadership:
 - Teacher registration, recognition and the standards-based national framework for teacher and school leader professional learning should all apply consistently to all, including those employed in non mainstream settings, and should include an emphasis on applied learning approaches.
 - The talents and passion of teachers who would like to teach in non mainstream education should be nurtured:
 - Pre service teachers should experience placements in a range of education environments
 - Career pathways into and from alternative educational environments should be supported as a valid option without financial penalty
 - Practising teachers should have the opportunity to experience teaching in a non mainstream educational environment
 - All teachers should be provided with professional development about the impact of social exclusion
6. Local planning, resourcing, integration and communication involving government, mainstream schools, other educational environments and the community, to support the educational engagement of all young people, if this is appropriate for the young person.
7. Use of the Victorian Student Engagement Policy guidelines as a tool for developing integrated arrangements between mainstream schools, other educational settings and the community.
8. Better integration between school and other educational environments, including learning support programs, to support the literacy and numeracy needs of young people
9. Harnessing of lessons learnt by the non-mainstream education sector to develop within the mainstream school environment more inclusive and adaptable learning approaches that respond to the individual's capacities for learning.
10. The creation of an in-school organisational stream that brings together the array of student support, such as transition workers, school, Managed Individual Pathways, student welfare,

careers advice and student support services, and provides a triage assessment process for all students. This would provide an excellent foundation for understanding the needs of all students in the school and for better planning, sharing of resources and skills, and better student transition arrangements between traditional and alternative education settings. (For further details see BSL's submission to the Vulnerable Youth Framework discussion paper).

BSL submissions related to this topic

Growing up in an inclusive Victoria: Submission to the Victorian Government on the Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform, May 2008,

<http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/BSL_subm_early_childhood_devt_&school_reform_blueprint.pdf>.

Submission to the MCEETYA consultation on the National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, October 2008,

<http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/BSL_subm_Nat_Dec_Goals_Edu.pdf>.

Valuing all young people: submission to the Victorian Government on the Vulnerable Youth Framework discussion paper, September 2008,

<http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/BSL_subm_vulnerable_youth_framework.pdf>.