

Looking ahead

Lessons from the evaluation of
Peninsula Youth Connections

Stage 3 report

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Workplace Relations

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The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information, visit <www.bsl.org.au>.

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This report represents Stage 3 of a three-stage evaluation. Stage 1, *Overcoming barriers to education* (Bond 2011) and Stage 2 *Building relationships for better outcomes* (Barrett 2012) can be found at <<http://www.bsl.org.au/Research-reports>>.

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Summary

Peninsula Youth Connections (PYC) is the local expression of an Australian Government initiative to support young people at risk of disengaging from education and training. Operating in Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula, PYC is run as a partnership between the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Taskforce Community Agency. The program supports young people through intensive case management (Type 1 and 2 services), outreach and re-engagement activities (Type 3), and activities aimed to strengthen the capacity of other services to support young people (Type 4) (DEEWR 2011). Through partnering, hosting and participating in professional events, networks and committees, and conducting research, PYC also seeks to support and build the capacity of regional youth services. Youth Connections falls under the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions which is set to expire in December 2013.

While an interim report on a national evaluation found Youth Connections to be a particularly strong element of the National Partnership (dandolopartners 2012), it did not include in-depth evaluation of individual programs and activities. In order to provide a detailed assessment of the Youth Connections model in practice, Peninsula Youth Connections commissioned the Brotherhood's Research and Policy Centre to evaluate the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region model. This resulted in two major reports (Bond 2011; Barrett 2012).

This document reports on the third stage of the PYC evaluation, which addresses the program's role in strengthening regional capacity to effectively respond to the needs of young people disengaging from education. The research objectives for Stage 3 were to assess:

- the effectiveness of PYC outreach and re-engagement services (Type 3) and strengthening services in the region (Type 4) initiatives.
- PYC's alignment with other government and community services in the region.
- the implications for government policy.

Findings

The evaluation found the program to be highly successful. The young people experienced the program as responsive, flexible and supportive, and the majority of participants achieved positive outcomes. As exemplified by PYC, Youth Connections represents a consolidation of the effective elements of previous programs, promoting greater coherency and integration in regional youth services.

PYC's emphasis on outreach and re-engagement services benefited the severely disengaged by increasing resilience, social skills and self-esteem, serving both an outreach function and providing further assistance to those being case managed. Most activities were supported by, and helped build relationships between, regional services and community stakeholders, although this kind of capacity building was time consuming. Prior to Youth Connections, regional service was undermined by periodic program changes. Overall feedback from other regional services about PYC was positive. Program strengths included its clearly articulated model, cohesive program identity and strong coordination. Since the Stage 1 evaluation, the level of connection and communication with other services had significantly improved. While the provision of more regular PYC case management at other service sites was requested by some interviewees, the program's full caseload indicates the need for greater DEEWR investment in case work for this to take place. A further finding related to the need for greater cohesion and partnership between community youth and

family services and school student support services, given that schools cannot resolve many non academic barriers to participation in isolation.

On the basis of the evaluation and the Brotherhood's broader research and policy knowledge base on young people, education and training, the following recommendations are made.

Recommendations

In order to improve Australia's transition outcomes, initiatives must continue to focus on raising outcomes among the most disadvantaged young people beyond the conclusion of the National Partnership in 2013.

- Given the positive evaluation of Youth Connections at the national and local levels, and the high level of demand both from young people and related services, **funding for Youth Connections should be continued and expanded beyond 2013.**
- **Continued funding should be sustained and predictable.** Short project cycles, program rebranding and associated competitive tendering have proven counter-productive to the provision of consistent, holistic and integrated services, and contribute to siloing and fragmentation in the youth sector.
- The first line strategy for addressing youth disengagement is preventive efforts within schools. **Youth Connections' focus should remain on providing intensive services to more severely disengaged young people.** However, even additional funding for disadvantaged students such as that proposed under the Review of Funding for Schooling, will not entirely address disengagement. Therefore **Youth Connections should have additional resourcing so that youth workers can better support schools to retain younger students facing multiple disadvantages.**
- **Funding should also be expanded for Type 3 re-engagement activities.** To avoid duplicating the council's street-based outreach, PYC focussed its outreach efforts on community organisations who referred young people for case management. However, Type 3 activities also serve to engage and retain existing PYC participants. These activities were important to young people already receiving case management to enhance progressive outcomes, such as community connectedness and self-esteem, which case management alone would not be able to achieve. Type 3 should be reconfigured to encourage activities to both engage new potential clients, and to help current clients to achieve critical outcomes required for future wellbeing and economic and social inclusion.
- **A greater emphasis on careers planning is recommended** within the Youth Connections program, including strengthening linkages with careers professionals and associated networks. The potential for such linkages, and the possibility of co-locating any new youth careers service with Youth Connections, should be taken into consideration in the National Careers Development strategy and any new iteration of the Youth Attainment and Transitions National Partnership.

Systemic issues

- Low socioeconomic status remains a strong predictor of suboptimal education outcomes. This demands **a continuous effort from policy makers to mitigate the multiple forms of disadvantage** (e.g. economic, health, social) that act as barriers to educational engagement.

- Young people facing multiple forms of severe exclusion and disadvantage, particularly financial and housing instability and lack of family support, may require more **fully integrated service provision such as that offered by the youth foyer model** (for e.g. in Victoria, Western Australia, New South Wales and the ACT) which integrates education, training and employment, health and wellbeing support with stable student accommodation so young people's needs are addressed concurrently. More broadly, **strategies coordinated between education and community services systems need to be in place during the learning years to strengthen families to assist young people** in these circumstances.
- **A focus on holistic student wellbeing must complement academic and learning support** programs in schools. Literacy and numeracy skills remain central in mitigating some of the effects of disadvantage on achievement.
- **Vocational education and training options and alternative settings should offer comparable quality to Year 12.** Certificate III should replace Certificate II as the indicator for Year 12 equivalence in future policy. Strengthened quality control and monitoring measures for non-school training organisations and standardised definitions and monitoring of outcomes for students engaging in non-school education are also recommended.
- Care needs to be taken in shaping policy to **ensure that students are not indiscriminately funnelled into alternative settings because of the non-academic challenges they face** (such as family circumstances, socioeconomic status, and mental health), as opposed to their aptitudes and preferences. As a universal service, schools remain the best opportunity to prevent disengagement. Enhanced capacity to address non-academic challenges is required within schools.
- The issue of younger students (under 16 years old) disengaging is particularly problematic as there are very few non-school based opportunities for this cohort and they can easily fall between the cracks of existing services. **Maintaining these younger people in schools remains the first priority in preventing their disengagement**, and additional funding for disadvantaged students is recommended in the Review of Funding for Schooling to enable schools to provide greater support for younger students. **An inclusive whole-of-school approach to student wellbeing is required**, including non-stigmatising and universal assessment of student barriers, early identification of risks to student completion, and coordinated, integrated support from schools and community services.

1 The evaluation of Peninsula Youth Connections

The evaluation of Peninsula Youth Connections (PYC) was undertaken to provide a detailed assessment of Youth Connections in practice. There have been three stages. Stage 1 focused on unmet needs which act as barriers to young people's participation in education, broader systemic factors which impede young people's learning, and the advantages and constraints of the model (Bond 2011). Stage 2 focused on young people's perspectives on the program, outcomes achieved, and ongoing challenges that they face (Barrett 2012). Summaries of the findings from Stage 1 and Stage 2 are included as Appendices in this Stage 3 report.

Peninsula Youth Connections allocated some of its program funding to commission the Research and Policy Centre of the Brotherhood of St Laurence to conduct a two-stage evaluation of the program. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) funded this project which focuses on PYC's role in strengthening regional capacity to effectively respond to the needs of young people disengaging from education. This stage included interviews with PYC staff and stakeholders from other local education, training and youth services.

Specific aspects of the young people's responses from Stage 2 were also analysed. Note that direct quotes are not attributed to positions (e.g. Manager of Organisation X) to avoid identifying individuals.

The research objectives for Stage 3 were to assess:

- the effectiveness of PYC outreach and re-engagement services (Type 3) and strengthening services in the region (Type 4) initiatives
- PYC's alignment with other government and community services in the region
- the implications for government policy.

The next three sections present findings from the Stage 3 consultations. The final section discusses policy implications, drawing on the three stages of the PYC evaluation and on the Brotherhood's broader research and policy knowledge base on young people, education and training.

2 The effectiveness of PYC outreach and re-engagement activities (Type 3) and strengthening services in the region (Type 4)

Outreach and re-engagement services were found to be a particular emphasis of PYC, assisted by the employment of a dedicated re-engagement officer. These activities provided a point of re-connection for the severely disengaged, and worked to increase their resilience, social skills and self-esteem. While the activities had an outreach function they were also found to benefit those already receiving case management. The vast majority of the activities were supported by regional services and community stakeholders, and were found to strengthen collaboration and relationships between regional services. However, this kind of capacity building through partnership took time to achieve and can easily be fractured by program restructure and competitive tendering.

Relationship building through outreach and re-engagement activities and strengthening services in the region

PYC places a strong emphasis on outreach and re-engagement activities, and employs a dedicated re-engagement officer. The Stage 2 evaluation found that from January 2011 to March 2012, 655 young people participated in PYC's outreach and re-engagement activities (Barrett 2012). As part of standard reporting, PYC staff are asked to identify aims for each re-engagement activity and to rate the success of the activity in achieving these aims. Table 2.1 shows how often each potential aim for outreach and re-engagement activities was selected, as well as the average of the success ratings for each aim on a scale from 1 (least successful) to 5 (most successful).

Table 2.1 Aims of outreach and re-engagement (Type 3) activities, and ratings of success

Aim	How often selected	Average of ratings*
Activities supported by regional services and community stakeholders	92%	3.9
Increased young people's resilience, social skills and self-esteem	88%	4.2
Connected with young people severely disengaged from education/family/community	88%	4.3
Young people moved from Type 3 activities to individual case managed support	68%	3.2
Engaged families of severely disengaged young people	24%	2.8
Reconnected with severely disengaged young people identified in previous activities	12%	3.0

*Ratings were from 1 (least successful) to 5 (most successful) Source: Barrett 2012.

The success ratings indicate that the outreach and re-engagement activities have particular strengths in connecting with disengaged young people and contributing to progressive outcomes such as strengthened self-esteem.

Outreach and re-engagement activities provided at PYC so far have included multi-occasion activities (e.g. programs operating for a school term) that offer accredited training or work on personal development or team building. Others were one-off recreational events such as barbeques. Most of the activities were conducted in collaboration with at least one other local service and were

attended and supported by PYC case managers. Some were initiated by PYC in response to identified needs; others were existing activities which PYC case managers assisted with.

Both young people and professionals reported that the activities were important in helping participants regain a sense of routine, engagement and social connectedness. Providing enjoyable, recreational or non-training activities as part of re-engagement services is a positive step in promoting community and social engagement, and their impact on progressive outcomes indicates the importance of a providing range of activities that broaden the narrow work and learning agenda that tends to characterise Australia's youth policy.

The more vocationally oriented courses, such as trades 'tasters', are important in recognition of the winding pathways young people increasingly take in the transition from school to work. Such courses are a way for young people to experience a range of different vocational education and training (VET) subject areas and learning environments, and build confidence in their ability to engage in education and training. Many of the re-engagement activities also provided substantive progress towards achieving progressive and final outcomes (for example, activities included a self-esteem building group, and a trades training program).

There was considerable crossover between re-engagement activities and case management. One-fifth of the people attending re-engagement activities also received PYC case management. The majority of these young people received case management *prior* to participating in the re-engagement activities. As case managers also attend the activities, this enabled them to interact with these young people in less formal ways, which were often beneficial in encouraging engagement and the trust required for disclosure of difficulties and challenges.

There was a greater focus on re-engagement than on outreach in the design of activities to avoid duplicating the efforts of the local council which was outreach focussed. The activities were not primarily designed to find and recruit disengaged young people within the community; only 6.6 per cent of PYC's participants were initially referred into Youth Connections through Type 3 activities. The activities were more aligned with supporting and strengthening re-engagement in accompaniment with individual case management. Given the benefits young people gained from Type 3 activities in their current form, the already high demand for PYC's services from participants who were demonstrably experiencing significant disadvantage, and the considerable efficiencies represented by the merging of case management, and community outreach and re-engagement services, this appears to be an effective way of designing and implementing outreach and re-engagement services.

As well as benefits to the young people participating, outreach and re-engagement activities also yielded benefits in strengthening collaboration and relationships between regional services. PYC often conducted Type 4 (strengthening services in the region) activities, which built upon relationships formed during the design of Type 3 activities. The relationship building and transfer of skills and information between the different organisation staff members through co-planning and implementation of outreach and re-engagement activities was thought to contribute to strengthening services in the region, and the combination of the two activity types was a strategy to promote the sustainability of PYC program activities.

It's about linking Type 3 and Type 4 together... there has to be a reason why you're doing it... if we cease to exist what's going to be here?... Hopefully we're leaving behind a legacy of programs that really suit the community.

Examples of Type 4 outcomes that began with co-administering Type 3 activities included strengthening other organisations' knowledge and capacity to access project funding, designing sustainable tools and programs suitable for engaging young people, and building cultural awareness for engaging Indigenous young people. The service linkages made through outreach and re-engagement activities were discussed with particular enthusiasm by PYC case managers, and several staff members felt that the program now had more requests for collaboration with other services than they had the time or resources to fulfil.

We're constantly having phone calls from different agencies asking if we can assist on programs and we are always going out to other programs saying 'we're doing this program, would you like to assist us? Can we assist you?' It's been really positive to strengthen collaboration.

'Patient work': the necessity of consistent and sustained support to build a cohesive youth services network

Social capital refers to 'the set of resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between and among people' (Warren 2005 p. 136). A complementary concept is that of relational power; the capacity to achieve mutually desired ends through collaboration and the joint giving and accepting of influence. Building social capital within and between schools, community organisations, students and parents is increasingly recognised to be essential to provide holistically for children's educational, physical and emotional development. Likewise, efforts are increasingly being made to shift away from top down and one-way communications between service/education providers towards a greater emphasis on building relational power in these interactions.

Warren states that 'community organisations can play a valuable role as an independent force in collaborations with schools and in the political arena. But they require a strategy to build trust and collaboration ... in order to build relational power' (2005, p. 138). The outreach and re-engagement and strengthening services in the region activities undertaken by PYC are excellent examples of such strategies for building social capital between schools, services, governing bodies, and the students and families they serve. The value—indeed the necessity—of building social capital is well exemplified by PYC's experiences in the field of Indigenous engagement.

Working within Aboriginal communities you've got to have connections. That's what I did in the first few weeks. I went out and got myself known... You've got to go out there and for them to get to know you and the service you're going to be providing. A lot of services don't know that, they just jump feet first. When they do that, [services] won't refer to them, kids that get referred there don't want to go there, because they don't know the process. You've got to get yourself known, that's the big thing... that's how it's done, it's not done through an email or by phone. It's done in person.

The Indigenous case manager's role is an example of the overlap between individual support services, outreach and re-engagement activities, and strengthening services in the region. The Indigenous case manager provides individual support services, but also has a strong role in building links between PYC and Indigenous services, including being able to introduce other case managers and bring them into Indigenous events, as well as providing formal and informal cultural awareness training for Indigenous young people, PYC staff, schools, education providers and other agencies.

The assessment of community need, and the establishment of effective links and smooth partnerships, takes time. For example, in a program with a four-year life cycle this may take the

first year to 18 months. Successfully building social capital requires sustained and consistent investment of resources—what Warren terms an ‘investment in patient work’ (Warren 2005, p. 165). The periodic restructure, rebranding and retendering process which has characterised the evolution of re-engagement services in Australia hinders establishment of relationships and trust between organisations and individuals. It also hinders their ability to provide ongoing community impact. The competitive tendering process which usually follows a major program restructure, for example, sets up conditions which may undo cooperative relationships. Short-term contracts and staff turnover associated with project revision continually re-fracture the network of relationships among individuals representing services and act as a disincentive for people to invest in building strong links. The Brotherhood’s evaluations have highlighted how indispensable such relationships are for a truly holistic and integrated service setting to allow young people’s successful transition from education to employment, and meet their broader wellbeing needs.

3 PYC in the regional services context

Overall, the feedback from representatives of other services in the region¹ about PYC was positive. It was commented that a strength of the program was its cohesiveness as a single entity with a clear program identity. Several people stated that this was aided by the strong community presence of the Brotherhood, an initial focus on a clearly articulated model for service delivery, and strong program coordination. Significant improvements in connection and communication between PYC and other services since Stage 1 were evident and most interviewees seemed well aware of the core function of the program. Some expressed a desire for PYC case managers to spend more regular time onsite in their services. Given the program’s full caseload, this indicates the need for greater investment by DEEWR in casework component of the program to enable this.

Relationships with schools

Stage 1 of the PYC evaluation recommended clarification of the respective roles and responsibilities of schools and Youth Connections in addressing disengagement, and explanation of key aspects of the program for schools. The Stage 3 consultations indicated that division of responsibility between schools and PYC had been more clearly delineated and was well understood. This had been achieved through efforts by case managers to represent themselves and the program in schools and in professional associations and networks (including via Type 4 activities), strong program coordination, and good collaboration with the regional education office.

There were however still some challenges for case managers in the day-to-day practice of supporting schools. The feedback on relationships between PYC case managers and schools was characterised by variability. While case managers had strong relationships with some schools, they had poorer communication with others. Within schools, there might be strong communication with one section (e.g. welfare) but not with another (e.g. coordinators or principals). PYC case managers most often cited the management of clients identified as having risky or challenging behaviours as a source of tension. The perception remained that in some cases schools were more geared towards propelling these students into external programs than promoting their re-engagement, and tended not to involve PYC until the situation had reached a crisis point. However, there were also many positive examples cited of strong working relationships with schools, and improvements in school-

¹ For confidentiality, the other services consulted cannot be named. For an overview of the range of services operating in the region, readers are referred to the FMP LLEN 2012 Environmental Scan and the Peninsula Youth Pathways Guide 2010-2011, both available at <www.fmpllen.com.au>.

led initiatives to encourage student engagement such as in-house alternative education programs for younger students, as well as school buy-in to region-wide initiatives such as the Southern Youth Commitment which seeks to improve the referral of young people and build the capacity of local education and community services.

Community services, employment agencies and education providers

Figure 3.1 represents the frequency of engagement with different services, based on the interviews with young people. The centrality of school wellbeing, health services, especially mental health, and other personal support services is evident, as well as a range of learning providers and employment services. Given the prominence of family issues in the barriers to engagement discussed in Stage 2, it is worth noting that family agencies were not mentioned frequently in young people’s interviews.

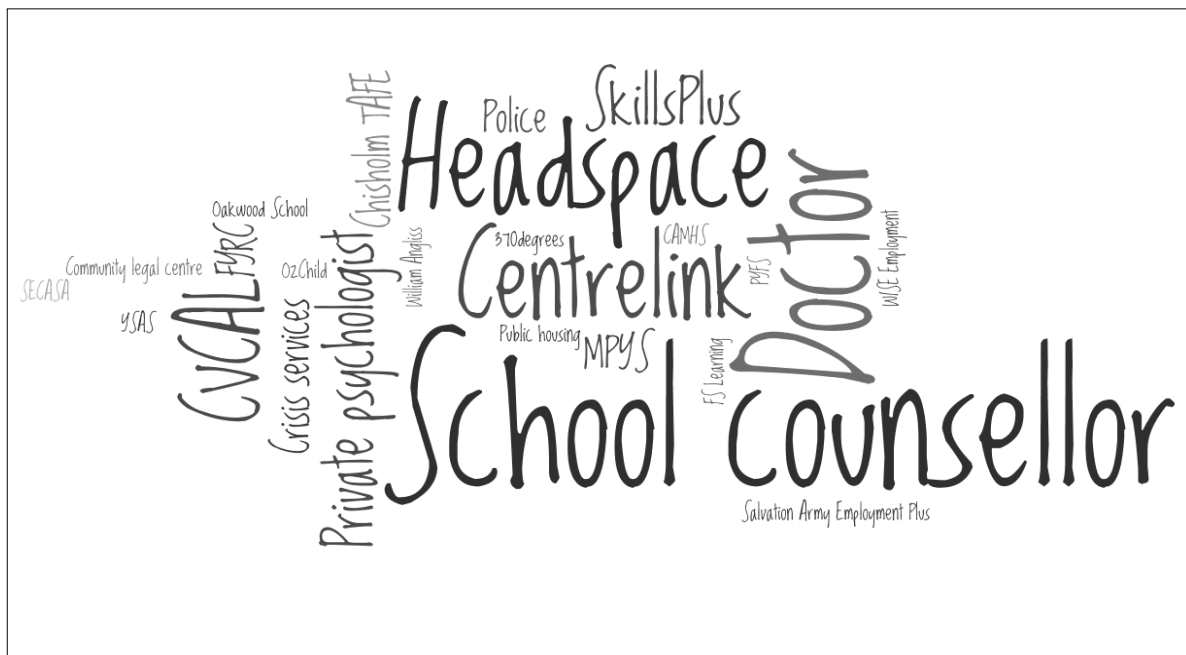


Figure 3.1 Services young people engaged with prior to, during, or after participating in Peninsula Youth Connections

The word sizes represent the frequency with which services were mentioned by young people interviewed.

Relationships with education and training, and health and wellbeing services in the region were reported as strong, and the understanding of the objectives and function of PYC by other services appeared to have improved since Stage 1. This was attributed in part to efforts of PYC staff members to represent the program in the community and these relationships were particularly strongly encouraged by the co-delivery of outreach and re-engagement activities between PYC and community agencies.

Stage 2 found that a very high prevalence of suspected or diagnosed mental health issues existed in the young people participating. The benefits of strong awareness of and collaboration with services provided by Headspace were evident, and outcomes for young people with mental health issues were particularly positive. The strong awareness of mental health issues and success in assisting young people demonstrated by PYC and other youth services is commendable: the high prevalence of these issues in the region mean that a sustained focus will be required to continue this good performance.

Partnership Brokers

In Victoria, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) were awarded the contract as School Business Community Partnership Brokers, another of the programs under the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions. The program is focused on building partnerships to support young people to attain Year 12 or equivalent qualifications and reach their full educational and social potential. Providers aim to broker sustainable partnerships between education and training providers, business and industry, parents and families, and community groups to foster a strategic, whole-of-community approach that supports young people's learning and development. Collaboration between PYC and the LLEN had been somewhat delayed initially, but had strengthened more recently. While LLEN Partnership Brokers undertake strategic work, the term, 'brokerage' was frequently mentioned in descriptions of PYC's role, most often in terms of brokering relationships between agencies and individuals to facilitate meeting individual clients' needs:

If a young person's got a difficulty, they can link in to the expertise required, rather than overlapping... it's about [case managers] facilitating, brokering, the expertise in the area.

Differentiation between the LLEN's Partnership Broker role and some of the roles undertaken by PYC, especially in terms of Type 4 services, was sometimes a little unclear. Interviewees noted that stronger information sharing between the LLEN and PYC had the potential to allow PYC to feed information about emerging issues and trends for young people in the region to the LLEN. The representation of PYC on the LLEN board, and PYC attendance at LLEN-coordinated local association meetings point to increasing levels of collaboration between the two.

Duplication

No significant areas of duplication were identified by interviewees. PYC staff noted that there had been particular discussion around the intersection of roles of PYC providers with JSA providers, as well as with local council youth workers. In both cases the distinct roles had reportedly been clarified, with the aim of capitalising on the comparative advantages of each service provider. For example, one staff member identified complementarities between outreach services provided by local council youth workers and the outreach and re-engagement activities provided by PYC.

There's aggressive outreach, where you go walking the streets, shopping malls, whatever, to get young people in, or there's outreach as in being based in a community setting. We do the latter. The reason is there are already people doing aggressive outreach—the councils have aggressive outreach. So rather than recreate the wheel, we're asking them to make referrals to us when they've done the outreach.

While many noted some overlap with other services, this was well within PYC's role as a broker between clients/families and other services and education providers, as well as the role of PYC as a safety-net which helps stop young people falling into the divisions between siloed services; as one interviewee described it, a 'fabric of an organisation, which tries to mesh service provision together'.

Case managers noted that occasionally young people referred were not suited to the program: these tended to be young people who already accessed a range of services, and who were not currently intending to re-engage with education, often being more motivated to enter employment. Victoria is unique in requiring that central triage system is operated by case managers to manage referral into the program, eligibility and prioritisation. The central triage function allowed referrals to be

assessed in a standard way and inappropriate referrals to be more easily identified and was considered a positive strategic aspect of the program, but one which did place further pressure on case managers' time.

Case managers avoided duplication with other services by taking different levels of prominence in young people's lives, depending on the level of services they were already receiving. The length and flexibility of participants' potential engagement in the program was of benefit here, in that case managers were able to build relationships with participants who, at some times during their engagement, faced multiple barriers which needed to be addressed before re-engagement in education could be considered. Case managers described sometimes sitting in the background while participants negotiated more pressing needs in collaboration with other services, and being able to come to the foreground once a window of readiness and opportunity for the young person to engage with education was identified.

Sometimes we can't provide a service for a young person but maybe Headspace or YSAS [Youth Support and Advocacy Service] can, and because you have had some contact with the young person you can sort of support that transition. And when they're ready, they come back. People like Headspace are great because sometimes we'll have a relationship with a young person, and the young person is like 'No, I don't want it, I don't need it' and you can kind of go for a few months and you'll get to a point where you can get that referral in, or maybe to another service. So we're working together with other services to try and get that almost seamless.

Gaps

The consultation identified several gaps in the current service provision which included options for disengaged young people aged under 16; intensive support (beyond that provided by Youth Connections) for young people facing severe family, housing and financial barriers; and careers planning for disadvantaged young people.

Younger students disengaging

The most frequent continuing gap cited by service providers was the lack of options for students disengaging from school before the age of 16, and interviewees almost unanimously stated that systemic change to mainstream education was required to prevent disengagement at an earlier age, including during primary school.

The strongest messages from interviewees were that:

- For younger students, the focus should remain on preserving their engagement with mainstream schooling. Community agencies were wary of providing programs for these students which could take them out of, and risk further disconnecting them from, the school environment. Programs run within schools to provide learning alternatives, such as McClelland College Connect, were positively regarded.
- Quality, well-resourced wellbeing support within schools is fundamental for supporting students at risk of disengaging. This includes support to reintegrate previously disengaged students back into schools if they choose to return; however there was a perception that once a student left, they were unlikely, and were often not supported to, return to their school.
- For students who were unable to stay engaged at mainstream schools, alternative department institutions such as the Oakwood School were considered promising options.

Youth Connections' emphasis and comparative strength was in providing services for older and more severely disengaged young people. Particularly in Victoria, one of the main differences from previous programs was a de-emphasis of services for young people still at school. As such, Youth Connections providers in Victoria allocate 5 per cent of funding to services for young people still in school but at risk of disengaging (Type 1) as compared with between 5 and 30 per cent in other states and territories. Thus, while efforts of PYC to support young people still in school appeared to be successful, they are by nature of the contract, very limited and the onus is strongly on schools to ensure successful transitions for these young people.

Youth Connections appeared to provide a strong safety-net for those young people at imminent risk or already disengaged (Types 2a and 2b) to enter into alternative training and education. It was rare for older disengaged students to return to mainstream schooling, and there was some perception that although younger Type 1 participants were supported to stay in school, the sustainability of these outcomes was uncertain. Further research examining the longer term outcomes for Type 1 participants, including how many transferred into Type 2, is required to clarify this.

Intensive support for young people experiencing severe, multiple disadvantage

The PYC Stage 2 evaluation found that four out of five former participants were engaged in work or education three months after exit. The remaining one in five not engaged in education or employment were likely to be facing barriers around financial and housing instability and lack of family support (i.e. from the unstable contexts barrier group described in Stage 2).

The prominence of family issues as barriers to engagement was discussed in Stage 2, and it was recommended that PYC focus on further strengthening engagement with family agencies in the region, encouraging referrals to help young people address family issues, and increasing the proportion of re-engagement activities with a family component. More broadly, these issues highlight the importance of strategies throughout the learning years to address and strengthen family support, and the necessity of strong coordination between education and community services systems to assist young people in these circumstances.

Overall, the group of young people experiencing unstable contexts and not engaged in education and training may require more intensive support than the Youth Connections model provides. Young people facing multiple forms of severe exclusion and disadvantage may require fully integrated service provision such as that proposed under the Victorian Youth Foyer model which integrates education, training and employment support with stable student accommodation and assistance with health, wellbeing and social participation, allowing young people to address interrelated issues concurrently.

Strengthened careers planning for disadvantaged young people

There was a noticeable absence of long-term career goals in young people's discussion around their education, training and employment choices. Young people's motivators for their current training or education choices often concerned what was geographically close, what was affordable, what their friends did, and what they could get into quickly. Their long-term goals, or the perceived quality of the education and training, were less often cited than might be expected.

A careers plan can strengthen young people's engagement with education and their capacity to make informed study and career choices, and use of planning tools such as Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) reflects this. However, careers planning for adolescents needs to be flexible, take into account the non-linearity of many adolescents' transitions to work, be based on a consideration of the individual's strengths, and be accurate and up-to-date. This requires consideration of the

changing labour market and associated job opportunities, particularly in the ‘blue collar’ and low-skilled service industries. For these reasons, careers planning for adolescents should be delivered by skilled and knowledgeable practitioners (BSL 2010b), particularly where student disadvantage has been identified. The level and intensity of this type of careers planning support is outside the current capacity of many schools and for young people with multiple disadvantages may be too complex for the limited individual attention available from JSA providers. The Brotherhood has previously recommended that greater emphasis be given to professional career planning for young people as part of an integrated student development service within schools (BSL 2011). It is also recommended that any new non-school government funded vocational and careers advice service for young people be co-located with Youth Connections providers, potentially as part of the National Careers Development strategy.

4 Preventing school disengagement

As a consequence of disengagement and the breakdown of relationships at school, the evaluation found that young people saw themselves as unable to fit into ‘the mainstream’. It highlighted the contribution of non academic barriers to leaving school and the need for greater cohesion and partnership between community youth and family services and school student support services, given schools cannot resolve many non academic barriers to participation in isolation.

Re-engagement programs such as Youth Connections are vital to helping young people find a pathway back into education and training; however they cannot fully mitigate the negative effects of the initial disengagement. These experiences have ongoing effects on young people’s self-esteem and identity, and damage their confidence about being able to engage in future education and training. Young people struggling to stay engaged at school may not be learning what is on the curriculum; we need to consider what they are learning instead—about themselves, about their ability to get along with people, about how they can expect to relate to people in authority, and about their future:

Learning is ubiquitous in human experience throughout the life cycle, and humans are very good at it... Students in school, like other humans, learn constantly. When we say they are ‘not learning’ what we mean is that they are not learning what school authorities, teachers, and administrators intend for them to learn ... (Erickson 1987, p. 340).

This question was prompted by the experience of interviewing participants in the course of the PYC evaluation. The interviews were not designed to focus on the reasons for disengagement with mainstream schooling. However, the most animated sections of interviews with case managers and other regional service providers tended to concern reflections on disengagement from mainstream schooling. For example they spoke of how some schools wanted to refer the ‘difficult kids’ to Youth Connections and alternative programs away from the schools, when instead schools had an obligation to provide a pathway for their students.

Likewise, young people talked about their time at school with more energy and detail than any other topic, and the interviews unintentionally yielded a lot of information on the experience of disengagement from students’ points of view. Challenging personal circumstances outside school and negative relationships and experiences at school resulted in their being labelled and stigmatised. Disengagement from school had an ongoing effect on their self-esteem and identity, and many shed tears as they related this part of their story:

Sam: The teachers didn't really like me too much I guess ... because I got bullied I didn't really want to show up that much, and when I did show up I didn't do any work, so my reports were pretty bad. So that just took away any confidence that I had, so I didn't really think I'd be able to do anything.

Through the process of disengagement and breakdown of relationships at school, these young people constructed identities for themselves as different, and often referred to themselves as people who were not able fit in to 'the mainstream'. This had real consequences for their sense of potential for re-engaging in other training and education. In a follow-up survey of 52 young people three months after finishing Youth Connections, the two most frequently endorsed remaining barriers to engaging in education, training and employment were low self-esteem and previous negative experiences with teachers and students.

Analysing the role of schools in disengagement was outside the scope of this evaluation. However we note here firstly the central place of the school experience in forming young people's identities, and secondly the importance of the *relationships* young people had within schools. As Smyth states:

When we fail to place relationships at the centre of schooling and allow the experiences of increasing numbers of students to be degraded, corroded, fractured, fragmented and rendered meaningless, then we fail in one of our most fundamental responsibilities as citizens in a democracy (Smyth 2006, p.4).

Just as strong relationships with case managers formed the cornerstone of successful experiences at Peninsula Youth Connections, fractured relationships with adults at school characterised young people's descriptions of their disengagement.

The accounts of Peninsula Youth Connections participants echoed previous Brotherhood research findings that often young people exited schools due to 'push' (e.g. negative school experiences) rather than 'pull' factors (e.g. attractive employment and training options) (Taylor 2009). The Brotherhood evaluation highlighted how many of the barriers these young people faced were non-academic (e.g. relationships with family, other students and teachers, financial issues, mental health issues etc). However, this should not be interpreted as meaning that responses to these challenges must therefore also lie outside the school environment.

Many of the young people interviewed identified common positive characteristics of the employment and training options they had re-engaged with after Youth Connections: adult, hands-on learning environments, small class sizes and respectful and collaborative relationships with teachers. Stage 1 of the Brotherhood evaluation found that VET options in schools were perceived to be reserved for the young people struggling with mainstream curriculum but not presenting challenging behaviours—perhaps suggesting that these were young people with fewer and more purely academic barriers. The feedback from PYC participants showed that the same elements of alternative education programs, when combined with holistic wellbeing support, were also beneficial to them.

5 Policy implications

The evaluation of Peninsula Youth Connections has important implications for government policy. Improving transition outcomes for young people, including raising Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates, will have strong economic and social benefits both for individuals and the broader community. Crucial to achieving this goal is improving outcomes for young people experiencing the most disadvantaged circumstances (Review of Funding for Schooling 2011).

This evaluation can inform policy beyond the National Partnership on Youth Transitions and Attainment and the current Youth Connections Contract which expires in December 2013.

This section consolidates findings from the three stages of the evaluation and amalgamates these with the Brotherhood's broader research and policy knowledge base on young people, education and training. The recommendations presented in the summary of this report reflect the policy implications discussed in more detail below.

Program issues

Continue and expand funding

The conclusions of the Brotherhood's evaluation support national findings that Youth Connections reaches disadvantaged young people and fills an important role in lifting Australia's overall youth transitions attainment. While Peninsula Youth Connections manages its case load well, there continues to be a waiting list, and demand exceeds capacity at a national level (dandolopartners 2012). Feedback from regional services indicated that they supported the Youth Connection model as implemented by PYC, and the only consistent suggestion for change was for more intensive face-to-face involvement with the service, including having PYC case managers onsite in other local services more often. Given the positive evaluation of Youth Connections both at the national and local levels, and the high level of demand both from young people and related services, **funding for Youth Connections should be continued and expanded beyond the conclusion of the National Partnership in 2013.** Consideration should be given to uncapping Youth Connections' funding to ensure that all disengaged and multiply disadvantaged young people can be supported.

Expand funding for Type 3 re-engagement activities

To avoid duplicating the council's street-based outreach, PYC outreach was to community organisations who referred young people for case management. However, Type 3 activities serve a greater purpose than simple recruitment. Type 3 re-engagement activities were important to young people already receiving case management to complement and enhance progressive outcomes, such as community connectedness and self-esteem, which case management alone would not be able to achieve. **Funding should be expanded for Type 3 activities** and these should be reconfigured to encourage activities to both engage new potential clients, and to strengthen the effectiveness of the program in helping current clients to achieve critical outcomes required for future wellbeing and economic and social inclusion.

Provide sustained and predictable funding

Disengagement from school is a long-term, systemic issue, and cannot be addressed with short-term project-style interventions. One of the strengths of Youth Connections is in assisting young people to navigate what is often a fragmented and confusing array of services and options. Another

key strength is in linking with and partnering with a wide range of organisations and sectors to meet specific community needs. Frequent program rebranding and associated competitive tendering is highly counter-productive to this. In order to provide consistent, holistic and integrated services and overcome siloing and fragmentation in the youth sector, **Youth Connections requires continuous, predictable funding.** Alterations at this stage carry the risk that Youth Connections falls prey to the same patterns of short-term funding and implementation that have rendered it necessary in the first place.

If changes in the administration and funding structures of Youth Connections must occur (for example, a handover to states and territories) it is recommended that this be done in the least disruptive possible way for continued service delivery by Youth Connections providers. Significant changes at this stage would risk a loss of the solid foundations of trust and cooperation between services which are highly important for creating a joined up services environment for young people, and were found in the Brotherhood evaluation to be particularly important in the field of Indigenous engagement.

Maintain support for, but independence from, schools

Data from the Brotherhood evaluation indicated that the quality of communications between schools and other youth services was highly variable and was perceived to depend mainly on relationships between the individuals involved and the level of resources available to the school wellbeing team.

Cross-sectoral partnerships at both the individual and organisation levels are required to harness the full range of resources and specialist expertise available for supporting young people at risk for disengagement. A service like Youth Connections, which brokers and maintains relationships between services at the level of individual young people, is required under these circumstances.

However stakeholders consistently stated that preventive efforts within schools should be the highest priority for addressing youth disengagement. Facilitating coordination and communication between services and schools is an important function of Youth Connections, but this should not detract from the growing emphasis on schools to provide holistic support services for students. **Youth Connections' focus should remain on providing intensive services to more severely disengaged young people, but the program should have additional resourcing so that youth workers can better support schools to retain younger students in mainstream learning settings.**

Increase focus on careers planning

PYC is successful in re-engaging young people with education and training, and more broadly providing social and community engagement opportunities. One area which could be strengthened is PYC's interaction with careers guidance structures, both through Partnership Brokers and through schools, in order to more closely tailor outcomes to young people's particular skills and to the opportunities available. Careers planning for adolescents needs to be delivered by skilled and knowledgeable practitioners, particularly where student disadvantage has been identified. This is outside the current capacity of many schools and disengaged young people facing multiple sources of disadvantage may require more than the limited individual attention available from JSA providers. **A greater emphasis on careers planning is recommended within the Youth Connections program,** including strengthening linkages with careers professionals and associated networks. The potential for such linkages, and the possibility of co-locating any new youth careers

services with Youth Connections, should be taken into consideration in the National Careers Development strategy and any new iteration of the Youth Attainment and Transitions National Partnership.

Systemic issues

Stakeholders consistently stated that Youth Connections is an effective program, which is functioning well within its mandate, but expressed concerns regarding broader systemic contributors to disengagement that fall beyond the scope of Youth Connections.

Address socioeconomic barriers to educational outcomes

Findings from national education literature, the National Partnership evaluation, and the Brotherhood's PYC evaluation show that socioeconomic status remains a strong predictor of suboptimal education outcomes. **This demands a continuous effort from policy makers to mitigate financial barriers to engagement.** This includes ensuring affordable access to VET in both mainstream and non-mainstream education and for both younger and older students especially given recent changes to VET sector; strong action to alleviate transport barriers; and financial assistance for those students who require help with expenses such as uniforms and equipment.

Provide more-intensive support for young people facing multiple, severe forms of disadvantage

The PYC Stage 2 Evaluation found that approximately four out of five former PYC participants were engaged in work or education three months after exit. Those facing barriers around financial and housing instability and lack of family support were more likely than other young people *not* to be engaged in education or employment. This group of young people may require more-intensive support to re-engage with education. **Young people facing multiple forms of severe exclusion and disadvantage may require fully integrated service provision such as that proposed under the Victorian Youth Foyer model** which integrates education, training and employment support with stable student accommodation and assistance with health, wellbeing and social participation, allowing young people to address interrelated issues concurrently.

Address literacy and numeracy in re-engagement programs

Literacy and numeracy were rarely raised in interviews throughout the PYC evaluation but they were major barriers to education and training. A focus on holistic student wellbeing is important; however there is a risk that education institutions become dichotomised into 'academic' and 'welfare' schools (Dinham 2010). While the results of the PYC evaluations highlighted many of the non-academic issues affecting young people's engagement with education, **literacy and numeracy skills remain central in mitigating some of the effects of disadvantage on achievement.** Readers are referred to previous Brotherhood policy submissions on strengthening literacy and numeracy and the role of learning support programs (BSL 2010b).

Focus on quality and relevance of alternative training and education options

PYC participants reported that their choices for education and training were often based on convenience and availability of options. Their long-term goals, or the perceived quality of the education and training, were less often cited than might be expected. Within the cohort interviewed, aiming for transition back into mainstream school or into university was rare—the majority had engaged in VET and alternative education in non-school settings.

No young people spoke positively about the times in their lives when they had been disengaged from work and study—all reported having wanted to be active. Case managers stated that as a first step towards re-engagement, *any* course or activity was critical to opening up to re-engagement. However, first steps to engagement must not be confused with longer-term, sustainable outcomes.

The economic benefits of completing Year 12 exceed those from completing any other qualification in Australia (Leigh 2008). Research also shows it is the quality, rather than the type, of education that most influences outcomes (Hattie 2003). Efforts are therefore needed to ensure that VET options and alternative settings offer comparable quality to Year 12.

Under the National Partnership performance indicators, a Certificate II qualification is considered and equivalent outcome to Year 12; however most Certificate II training courses are clearly not equivalent in scope or quality to Year 12. **It is recommended that Certificate III replace Certificate II as the indicator for Year 12 equivalence in future policy. Strengthened quality control and monitoring measures for non-school training organisations, and standardised definitions and monitoring of outcomes for students engaging in non-school education are also necessary** to gauge the quality and equivalence of non-Year 12 pathways for young people.

Enhance capacity to address non-academic challenges within schools

‘Not every kid is cut out to be a student.’ This sentiment was echoed by many people interviewed, and recommendations for the young people described this way included greater flexibility of education delivery, and better supported transitions to work-oriented, hands-on learning. While these suggestions have merit, it is also important to differentiate between possible reasons for young people’s educational difficulties. There are certainly young people whose learning style and aspirations make traditional education less appealing or relevant to them. However, whilst recognising the value of catering for young people’s learning styles, interests, and aspirations, it is important to consider what else may be behind disengagement. The PYC evaluation noted the striking proportion of young people for whom poor mental health and adverse familial, accommodation and financial circumstances were key hindrances to engagement with education. Whilst these are barriers to engagement at school, they do not reflect the individual young person’s interests, capabilities and aspirations. Alternative education and training settings are one important strategy, however **care needs to be taken in shaping policy to ensure that students are not indiscriminately funnelled into alternative settings by consequence of their backgrounds or the challenges they face**, as opposed to their aptitudes and preferences. As a universal service, schools remain the best opportunity to prevent disengagement. Enhanced capacity to address non-academic challenges is required within schools.

Strengthen efforts to keep young people in schools

The most consistent piece of feedback from professionals consulted for the PYC evaluation was that the primary emphasis must remain with schools to promote student retention and achievement. There continues to be some lack of consensus on the best way to support younger people who are attending school but are at risk of disengagement. Few alternative settings are available to younger people (below 16) disengaging from school, and there are aspects of the mainstream school environment which many considered inappropriate to meet these young people’s needs, such as large class sizes, lack of hands-on learning opportunities, inflexibility of education delivery, and inadequately resourced school wellbeing programs.

Maintaining younger people in schools remains the first priority in preventing disengagement in those below 16, and schools must ensure that support is available for younger students.

This also extends to a necessity to ensure that high quality VET and alternative learning options are available within schools, are equitably funded, and are accorded equal status, and that the learning environment is made attractive, accessible and relevant for students.

The successful retention of at-risk students in mainstream schools requires additional resources in order to ensure their full attendance and participation in learning. The Brotherhood has previously called for reform of student support structures into a more efficient and effective single Student Development Service in each school, which would facilitate an inclusive whole-of-school approach to student wellbeing, non-stigmatising and universal assessment of student barriers, early identification of risks to student completion, and coordinated, integrated support between schools and community services. Such a service structure would consist of a team of staff focused on the students' individual development and wellbeing and would bring together under a single system the current array of student wellbeing and career pathway planning support programs.

As highlighted in the Brotherhood evaluation, barriers to education are often multiple and complex, and comprise both academic and non-academic issues. While the responsibility falls primarily within schools to support student educational attainment, schools cannot resolve all the challenges facing their students in isolation. **Greater coordination is needed both within the youth services sector, and between youth and family services and schools. The Youth Connections model demonstrates ways in which this can be done effectively.**

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Overcoming barriers to education

Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation stage 1

Sharon Bond

Peninsula Youth Connections (PYC) is the local expression of an intensive case management program funded by the Australian Government for young people at risk of disengaging from education or training. Operating in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region south-east of Melbourne, PYC also includes re-engagement activities for young people, and seeks to build the capacity of local youth services. The purpose of this evaluation is threefold: to identify the unmet needs which act as barriers to young people's participation in education; to signal the broader systemic factors which impede young people's learning; and to use PYC as a case study to reflect on the Youth Connections model's advantages, constraints and opportunities for development.

Key points

Interviews with school and community professionals showed that:

- **Unmet needs act as barriers to young people's engagement in learning.** Critical barriers identified included a lack of personal support, family stability or a sense of belonging to the broader community; low access to material resources due to neighbourhood and family disadvantage; unmet health needs; and a lack of decent, affordable housing.
- **Systemic barriers also impede young people's education.** Interviewees, many of them based in schools, had clear ideas about what needed to change; and the research illustrated the positive steps taken by some schools. They described how some disengagement occurred as a consequence of the different learning environments of primary and secondary school. Interviewees also described the excessive requirement to conform; schools' limited flexibility in catering for students who have caring responsibilities, health difficulties or different needs; and the undersupply of wellbeing support. Other barriers included a curriculum-centred approach, a bias towards academic pathways; and

limited access to genuine vocational pathways. Further barriers included narrow views of how to engage students in learning; students' limited access to effective re-engagement and alternative programs; the negative impact of school ranking systems; and non-adherence to exit procedures.

- **The Youth Connections model has potential for development.** Key strengths of the Youth Connections model are its flexible, holistic approach and intensive case management. Areas for development include broadening the eligibility requirements relating to age and educational attainment and ensuring that the client outcomes counted by DEEWR have equivalent benefits for young people; improving communication with referring professionals; and addressing program sustainability. Moreover, given the demand for support for long-term disengaged young people and the responsibility of schools to retain their students, shifting the Youth Connections program focus to those already disengaged from school should be considered.
- **Youth Connections improvement needs to take into account the broader service environment.** Working with the state education department could clarify the respective roles and responsibilities of schools and Youth Connections, as well as build schools' capacity to address disengagement before young people leave school. Consideration is also needed of the intersection between Youth Connections and Job Services Australia, and the role of local government in providing strategic service planning expertise.

Youth Connections focuses on addressing individual barriers to engagement and building regional capacity to work with at-risk youth. In the broader service context, a key challenge is how Youth Connections can help to address systemic barriers to young people's engagement.

Background

Peninsula Youth Connections commenced in January 2010, part of a national program funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) as the successor to other programs such as Youth Pathways, Connections, Mentoring Marketplace and Youthlinx. Operated in partnership by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce Community Agency, PYC provides regular and intensive case management for up to two years for young people, ranging from those who are at high risk of disengaging from school to those who have long been disengaged. Recruitment occurs via direct referral and re-engagement activities, often delivered with other agency partners. Through hosting and participating in events and committees, and conducting research, PYC also seeks to support and build regional youth service capacity.

The research

The evaluation of PYC consists of two stages. Stage 1 (reported here) included a literature review and the analysis of available client data; but the main findings came from interviews with 24 school and community youth professionals working in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region (FMP). While this report presents one case study which may not be representative of Youth Connections nationally, it is likely that the experience of PYC has lessons for the development of Youth Connections overall.

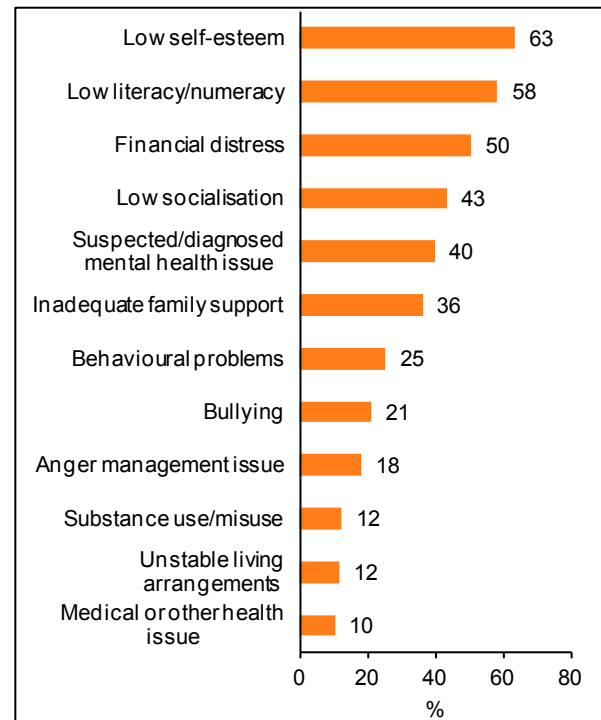
Unmet needs act as barriers to young people's engagement in learning

The barriers to engagement encountered by young people in FMP when commencing the program are illustrated in Figure 1. The average client faced four barriers, which indicates the complexity of their circumstances.

Interviewees elaborated upon the ways that young people's unmet needs prevented them from engaging in learning. Key issues included a lack of support and stability in their families, and a lack of belonging in the broader community; place-based disadvantage (e.g. lack of access to services and transport) as well as family material disadvantage; and limited social and cultural resources to support learning and career pathways.

Unmet health needs—of both young people and their families—represented a further barrier, particularly in relation to mental health, substance use and undiagnosed learning disabilities. A lack of decent,

Figure 1 Peninsula Youth Connections clients' main barriers to engagement



Note: The data is for the first 139 clients to exit the program. Source: DEEWR YATMIS database, 2011.

affordable housing was another barrier to participation in learning. As a school professional observed:

If they don't know where they're going to live tonight they're not going to be engaged in doing history or cooking. I had one girl in that circumstance, I just used to find her around the school just out of class not doing anything ... she seemed to be the parent of her mother and her life was just crazy ... It isn't any wonder she couldn't sit in a class and have all those things going around in her head and concentrate or [that school would not] even be important to her at the stage she is at.

Systemic barriers to participation in education

Both community and school professionals described a range of systemic barriers to young people's education. Culture shock as a consequence of the different environments of primary and secondary school impacted the attendance and participation of Year 7 students in learning, and the involvement of their parents at the school. Further barriers included the perception of schools as authoritarian systems where conformity to rules was a prerequisite for the opportunity to learn; lack of system flexibility to provide for students with different needs and with caring responsibilities; and insufficient resourcing of wellbeing support for students.

The narrow framing of engagement, with limited opportunities for broader learning, building esteem and soft skills development, was noted, as was limited access to effective short-term re-engagement and alternative programs. Interviewees described the negative impact of school ranking systems on staff willingness to retain or accept the transfer of underperforming students, the lack of adherence to exit procedures by some schools and the lack of transfer options available for students aged under 15.

The lack of a learner-centred approach and the bias toward academic pathways in the current system were identified as critical barriers to the retention of students who did not fit into that model and felt they gained nothing from school. Elaborating, one school professional said:

There's a lack of alternatives to Year 8 and 9. If they don't fit into the traditional curriculum in the classroom you do lose a lot of kids. Kids switch off and whether they stop coming to school or whether they just switch off and keep coming ... [This group is] the bigger problem for the learning environment because they just sit there and either distract [others] or distract themselves and pretend to be learning. They get to the end of Year 9 and they've failed everything, or even half way through Year 10 and they've failed everything, but the system tends to keep pushing them through.

A final barrier identified was schools' lack of emphasis on vocational pathways (that is, quality training that provides essential work skills and leads to decent employment) as a legitimate choice.

Developing the Youth Connections model

Strengths of the Youth Connections model identified by interviewees were its focus on intensive case management; its flexibility in addressing a broad range of client barriers; and its ability to respond to youth service gaps, through youth re-engagement and community capacity building activities.

However, the research did identify aspects of the program that could be strengthened. Recommendations for DEEWR include:

- Broaden eligibility to include 12-year-olds (so as to accord with the age of Year 7 students) and young people with Certificate II.
- Adjust final outcomes measured by DEEWR to ensure that they are of equal weight and benefit to young people (by contrast, the current outcomes of returning to education and attending for 13 weeks are not equivalent).

- Improve communication with youth professionals (e.g. through information resources and feedback mechanisms).
- Address program sustainability issues such as staff turnover due to poor remuneration and short-term contracts; and strengthen regional youth capacity by moving to a system of continuous improvement rather than frequently replacing the youth programs on offer.
- Given the level of demand for support to the long-term disengaged and the responsibility of schools for student retention, consider whether the Youth Connections focus should be shifted even further towards the long-term disengaged.
- Offer re-engagement activities not only as a means of recruiting young people but also as a valuable stepping stone for clients referred to Youth Connections by youth professionals.

Youth Connections and the broader system

Additional findings relate to the place of Youth Connections within the broader service environment which includes schools, community agencies, Job Services Australia providers and local councils. There is a need for clarification of the responsibilities of different government departments (education, employment, youth wellbeing and support) as well as greater collaboration between services.

Recommendations include that:

- DEEWR collaborate with the state education department to communicate the respective responsibilities of schools and Youth Connections in addressing disengagement and explain key aspects of the program (e.g. how it works, what schools can expect).
- Regional education offices develop an up-to-date information resource listing local youth services to build schools' capacity to refer students appropriately.
- The state education department introduce early intervention programs to address the observation by interviewees that disengagement is occurring earlier and earlier, even by the middle years of primary school.
- DEEWR, together with the education department, develop an instrument to measure the number of disengaged young people in each local area and plan services.
- Given the often blurred line between study and employment, the relationship between the separate Youth Connections and Job Services Australia

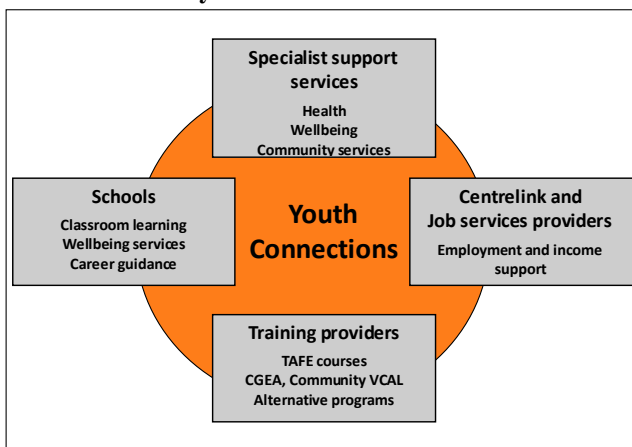
providers requires review to ensure young people receive appropriate and consistent support.

- Providers of youth services explore multi-service sites as a means of increasing access to youth-friendly services and developing best practice.
- The potential for local government to provide planning expertise to youth agencies should be explored to ensure more strategic service provision.

Youth Connections as an intermediary between service systems

This research highlights the role of Youth Connections as an intermediary between multiple service systems: schools and alternative education providers, employment services and specialist health and community services (see Figure 2). It demonstrates the need to clarify the lines of responsibility for youth engagement and wellbeing, as well as to ensure that artificial service boundaries, such as those between education and employment, do not prevent young people receiving the support they need.

Figure 2 Youth Connections as an intermediary between service systems



Moreover, it suggests that services for disengaged young people need to be youth-specific, employ qualified specialists, and provide access to individually tailored and intensive case management, and material and human resources, to support young people to enter appropriate training or identify pathways into decent and sustainable work.

Addressing systemic barriers to education

A focus of Youth Connections is addressing the barriers young people face to participation, supporting them to fit within educational structures and negotiating exceptions for individuals with special needs or locating alternative learning options for them. However, this study indicates that systemic barriers

also impede young people's education, so a broader challenge is how the program, and the government more generally, can address limitations within the education and training system and ultimately commit to a policy of 'education for all'. While the program includes regional capacity building activities, and providers that can advocate for systemic change, their influence is limited, with state-federal divisions representing a further complicating factor. To truly address disengagement, the government and Youth Connections must influence systemic change, and this will require greater collaboration and integration between services.

For further information

The full report, *Overcoming barriers to learning: Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation* (PDF file, 522 KB), may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website.

For other relevant publications, see <www.bsl.org.au/publications.aspx>.

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Building relationships for better outcomes

Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation: Stage 2

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This research constitutes the second part of a three-stage evaluation of the Peninsula Youth Connections (PYC) program. PYC is the local expression of a program funded by the Australian Government to assist young people at risk of disengaging from education and training. Operating in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region south-east of Melbourne, PYC includes intensive case management, outreach and re-engagement activities for young people, and seeks to build the capacity of local youth services.

Key points

- **Overall, young people's needs were addressed effectively through the intensive case management approach.** The majority of participants—84.5 per cent—achieved at least one kind of outcome, and at follow-up, 72.5 per cent were engaged in education. The program approach was particularly beneficial for young people facing mental health issues/stressors, interpersonal issues and learning issues. Young people with unstable family and financial contexts and risky behaviours also benefited, but faced greater ongoing challenges. The difficulties faced by young people from unstable contexts were echoed at a broader level by the finding that young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods were more severely disengaged from education, and achieved fewer outcomes.
- **Complex and intersecting relationships exist between young people's characteristics, backgrounds, barriers to education, and the outcomes they achieve.** The findings from this research demonstrated the complexity and diversity of issues faced by young people disengaging from education and training. Relationships were found between demographic characteristics (such as age, gender and area socioeconomic disadvantage), barriers faced, and outcomes achieved, illustrating the necessity for programs to provide integrated and holistic services which can be adapted and individualised to fit the needs of young people negotiating varied pathways through education and service structures.
- **Young people particularly valued the relational aspects of the PYC program.** The young people interviewed and surveyed were positive in their assessment of the program and the benefits they derived from participation (Figure 1). They identified the following as strengths of the program: friendliness, personal support, encouragement, informality, flexibility, persistence and enjoyment. By far the most prominent message from young people was that the individualised and personal support they received through the relationship with their case manager was a vital factor in their successful engagement with the program.
- **Gains made from PYC participation appeared to be sustained, in the face of ongoing challenges.** Most of the young people followed up after exit were engaged in work or study. However, they faced ongoing challenges around housing and finances, as well as mental health and self-esteem.
- **Disengagement from school left a powerfully negative impression on young people, and was an experience which in itself formed a barrier to future engagement.** Although PYC had largely positive impacts on participants, a re-engagement program cannot fully mitigate the negative impact of these earlier experiences on young people's self-esteem and confidence. The systemic issues underlying these experiences will be considered in Stage 3 of the PYC evaluation.

Background

Peninsula Youth Connections commenced in January 2010, part of a national program funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Operated in partnership by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce Community Agency, PYC provides regular and intensive case management for up to two years for young people, ranging from those who are at high risk of disengaging from school to those who have long been disengaged. Recruitment occurs via direct referral and re-engagement activities, often delivered with other agency partners. Through hosting and participating in events and committees, and conducting research, PYC also seeks to support and build regional youth service capacity.

The research

This stage of the evaluation focuses on the experience of the program from young people’s perspectives, and seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What concerns do young people present to PYC with, and how do individual barriers affect their progress through education, their engagement with the service and their outcomes?
2. How is the PYC model experienced by young people, and is it successful in meeting their needs?
3. How do young people fare after exiting the program? Are outcomes sustainable, and what ongoing challenges do young people face?

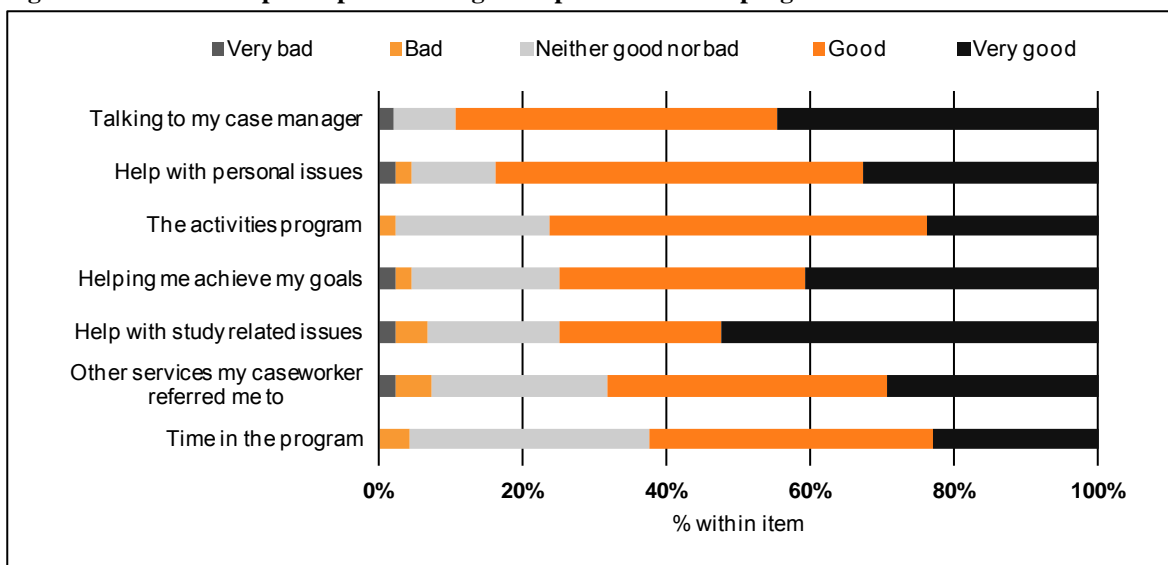
Qualitative data were gathered from consultations with 16 young people who had participated in PYC and 9 PYC staff members. Quantitative data on 228 PYC participants who exited from January 2011 to March 2012 were taken from the program management information system and referrals database. Fifty-two former participants contributed additional quantitative data through a purpose-designed follow-up survey.

There was an almost even split of girls and boys in the participant group, who came largely from suburbs of high socioeconomic disadvantage in the FMP region. The program was seeing an increasing number of Indigenous young people, following the employment of a dedicated Indigenous case manager.

Positive engagements with young people

Overall, the results of the evaluation indicated that PYC is successfully connecting with young people in the FMP region who are disengaging from education and training. The young people consulted rated the program highly (see Figure 1), spoke positively about their experiences with PYC and placed a particularly high value on the relationships they had formed with their case managers. Participants often framed the positive effects of the program in terms of social reconnection, re-establishment of routine, and building confidence and self-esteem. Analysis of outcome data from the program management information system confirmed the overall achievements of the program’s activities, indicating that the majority of participants were benefitting from PYC.

Figure 1 Former PYC participants’ ratings of aspects within the program



Note: n=52

Providing individualised support to young people facing multiple intersecting challenges

Looking in more detail at the types of barriers faced by young people entering PYC yielded some contrasts in the ways benefits were achieved by different groups. Five broad groups of barriers were identified: unstable contexts, risky behaviours, learning issues, mental health/stressors and interpersonal issues.

PYC was particularly effective in assisting young people who faced barriers in the form of mental health issues, difficult life events and interpersonal issues, including bullying (Figure 2). Young people with risky behaviours including substance use, juvenile justice infringements and anger management issues, as well as young people from unstable contexts marked by financial and housing instability and family conflict, benefited from the program as well, but also faced considerable continuing challenges. The impacts of family difficulties on engagement with education were particularly evident.

The complex findings which were produced by differentiating between participants based on barriers, engagement and outcomes reflected the highly diverse experiences and needs represented in the PYC caseload, and showed the need for a holistic, integrated and intensive case management approach.

Addressing a continuum of needs

The Youth Connections model specifies three levels of connection with education and training, and requires that

providers enrol a distribution of young people at all three connection levels based on predetermined quotas:

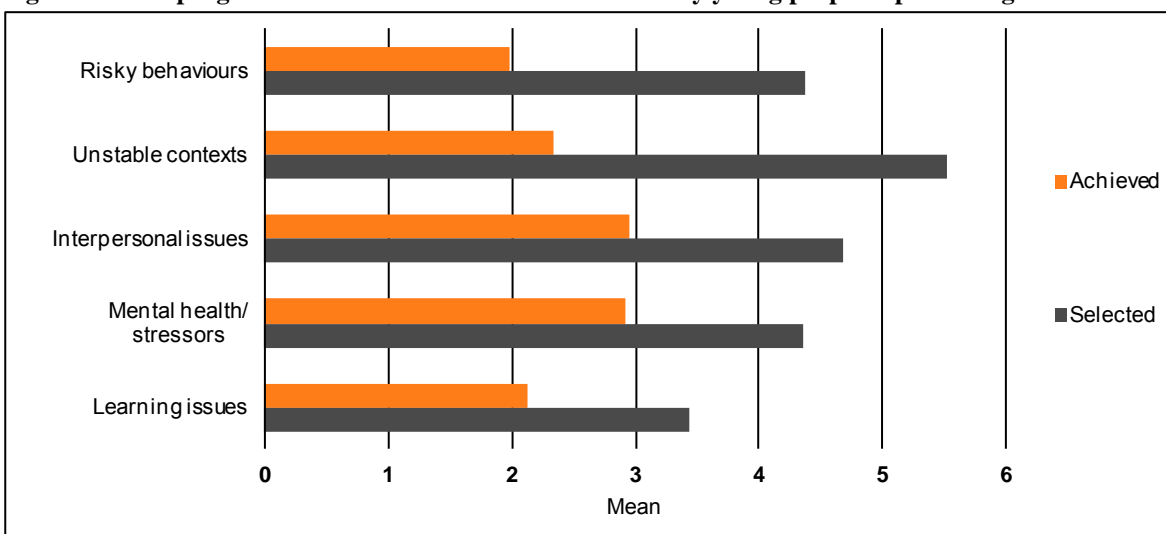
- Type 1: At risk of disengagement (20%)
- Type 2a: Imminent risk or recently disengaged (30%)
- Type 2b: Severely disengaged (50%).

At 14%, PYC was seeing somewhat fewer Type 1 participants than the program guidelines quota. Youth Connections differed from previous similar programs in placing increased emphasis on more severely disengaged young people, and in Victoria, the percentage of funding allocated to Type 1 case management is lower than the standard. PYC staff commented on the high demand for services from severely disengaged young people in the region, but also felt that preventive services for students at risk for engagement were necessary. Outcomes were similar among the three connection levels, indicating that PYC was successfully tailoring services to meet the needs of young people at differing levels of connection with education.

Engaging young people through informal, flexible modes of service delivery

The young people interviewed spoke favourably about the informality and flexibility of the case management approach. Many referred to their case manager as 'more like a friend' and contrasted the comfort with which they were able to interact with case managers with less successful previous interactions in which they had felt constrained or confused by more formality.

Figure 2 Mean progressive outcomes selected and achieved by young people experiencing different barriers



Features of the flexible program approach included:

- The ability for young people to contact case managers in person, by phone, email or text, and without a formal appointment
- Case managers' willingness to meet young people at home, school or a public place
- Enrolment durations long enough to build strong relationships, accommodate young people's changing needs and readiness to engage, and the opportunity to enrol multiple times

Young people's pathways after PYC

The majority of young people who were followed up three months after exit from PYC had maintained some form of outcome (Table 1).

Table 1 Former PYC participants' activities three months after exiting the program

Activity	%
Currently working	36.5%
Currently studying	72.5%
Either studying or working	78.8%

n=52

These young people were often juggling the demands of multiple roles. They nominated social connections with friends as some of the most satisfying elements in their lives; however they frequently did not have the time or opportunity to participate in many activities other than work and study. Even given the positive outcomes many had achieved, ongoing material hardships were common, as well as continuing difficulties with self-esteem, confidence and mental health.

Speaking to young people about their time in mainstream school, it was evident that disengagement had left a powerfully negative impression on many, and was an experience which in itself formed a barrier to future engagement. Although PYC had largely positive impacts on participants, a re-engagement program cannot fully mitigate the negative impact of these experiences on young people's self-esteem and confidence. The underlying systemic issues that this highlights will be considered in the next stage of this evaluation.

Next steps

Overall, the evaluation results affirmed the appropriateness and effectiveness of PYC's service delivery in meeting the needs of young people in the FMP region at risk of disengagement from education. However, Stage 2 relied on information collected from PYC staff members and from those former participants who were contactable and who volunteered to participate. A broader perspective on the function of PYC in the region is required to formulate

recommendations and policy implications, and this will be achieved by the third stage of evaluation.

Stage 3 of the evaluation is currently underway, and includes assessment of PYC's efforts to strengthen community partnerships to respond to the needs of young people who have disengaged from education or are at risk of doing so. The key content areas are:

- young people's experiences interacting with mainstream schools and with other services
- PYC's method of delivering Type 3 (outreach and re-engagement) and Type 4 (strengthening services) activities
- the alignment of PYC with other services in the region, including schools and the national Partnership Brokers
- potential gaps or areas of duplication in the regional services environment.

Data from interviews and focus groups with PYC staff and external stakeholders will be analysed to yield a report focusing on the broader systemic and policy implications of the combined PYC evaluation findings.

About the project

This evaluation has been undertaken with the support of Peninsula Youth Connections partners, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce, and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

For further information

The full report, *Building relationships for better outcomes* (PDF file, 1 MB) by Anna Barrett, may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website. Other research publications are available at <www.bsl.org.au/publications.aspx>.

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