



# Overcoming barriers to education

Peninsula Youth Connections  
evaluation

Stage 1 report

Sharon Bond

2011



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Peninsula Youth Connections is a partnership between the  
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67 Brunswick Street  
Fitzroy, Vic. 3065  
Australia

ABN 24 603 467 024

Tel: (03) 9483 1183

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## Abbreviations

BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CGEA	Certificate in General Education for Adults
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
FMP	Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region
JSA	Job Services Australia
PYC	Peninsula Youth Connections
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VET	Vocational education and training
YATMIS	Youth Attainment and Transitions Management Information System

## Summary

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 the PYC as a case study to reflect on the Youth Connection 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 eligibility requirements relating to age and educational attainment; ensuring 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 as 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, PYC provides regular and intensive case management to young people for up to two years, 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.

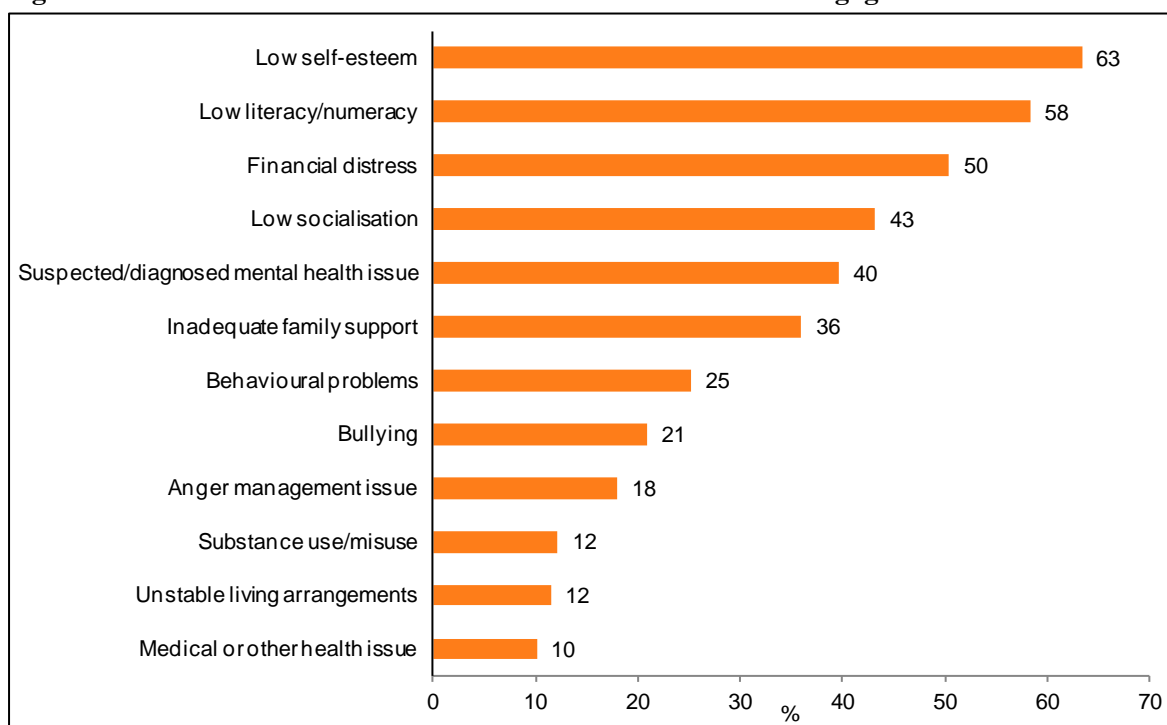
## The research

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 come from interviews with 24 school and community youth professionals working in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region (FMP). While this report presents one case 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 main 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.

**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.

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—both of young people and their families—represented a further barrier, particularly in relation to mental health, substance use and undiagnosed learning disabilities. Lack of decent and affordable housing was another barrier to participation in learning.

### 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 include students with different needs or 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 exit and 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. 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 the 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 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 should 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

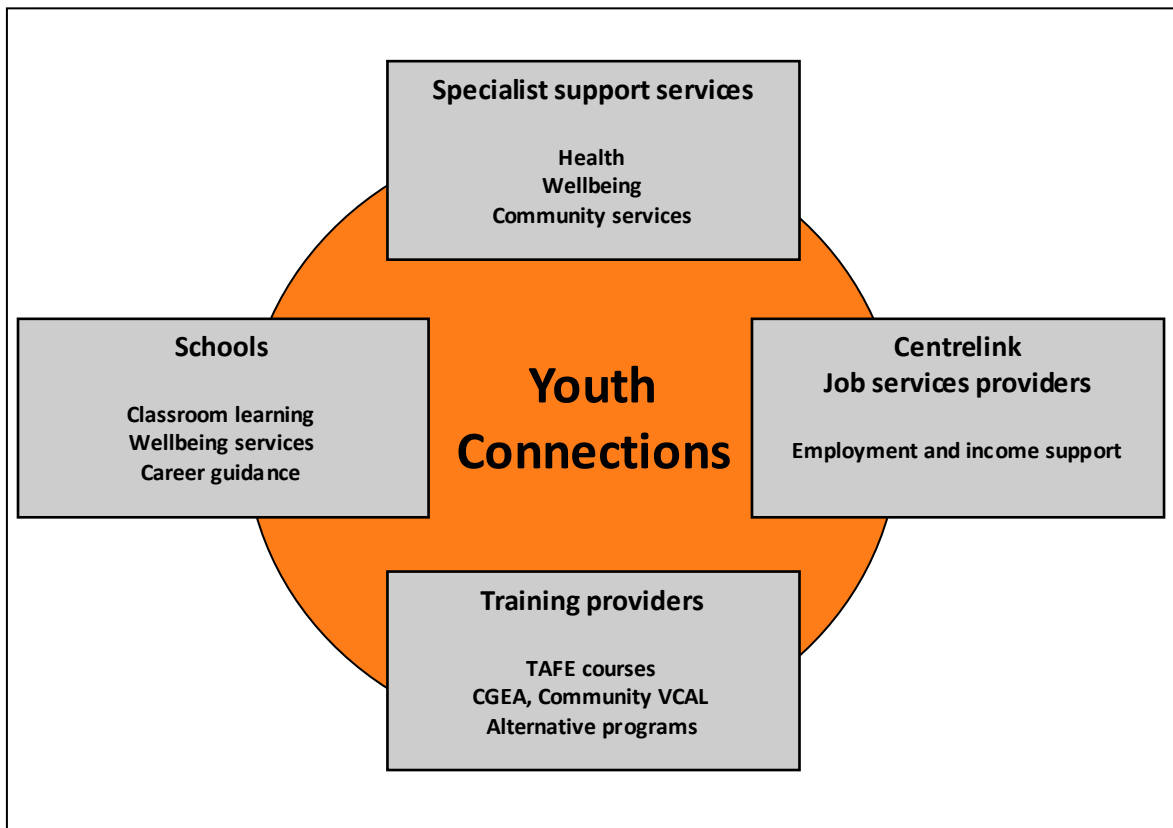
This research highlights the role of Youth Connections as an intermediary between multiple service systems: schools and alternative education providers, employment services and specialist health and community services (see Figure 2). It demonstrates the need to clarify the lines of responsibility for 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.

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.

**Figure 2 Youth Connections as an intermediary between service systems**



### 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.



# 1 Introduction

This report describes the first stage of a two-part evaluation of Peninsula Youth Connections (PYC), a program which provides personalised and intensive support to young people who are disengaging or disengaged from education, as well as working to build the capacity of local youth services. PYC is part of the broader Youth Connections program which is federally funded and has been delivered Australia-wide since January 2010. In the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria it is operated through a partnership between the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce.

The purpose of this report is to document the needs of young people who are disengaging from education, to investigate how PYC has implemented the federal Youth Connections program, and to assess the advantages and constraints of the program as a government response and how the program could be developed in the future.

To understand the context, it is useful to consider the extent of disengagement in Australia, the consequences for young people and broader society, and the response by policy makers.

## Australian context

Young people who are not fully engaged in education or employment represent a small but significant minority in Australia. In 2010, 16.4 per cent of 15–19 year olds were not fully engaged in education or employment but rather were employed part-time, seeking work or not in the labour force (in FYA 2010, Table 3, from ABS 2010). Early school leavers were less likely to be engaged in further study or full employment, and the percentage of these who were not in the labour force, were seeking employment or were in part-time work only, was more than double that of Year 12 completers (57% with Year 10 or below, 47% of Year 11 leavers, 25% of Year 12 completers) (in FYA 2010, p. 20, from ABS 2009).

There is a strong imperative to address school disengagement. A report prepared for the Victorian education department by Stephen Lamb and Suzanne Rice who drew on a range of other studies, described the consequences of low attainment this way:

Not completing school and failing to gain equivalent education and training qualifications is associated with poorer labour market outcomes and greater insecurity in building careers. Consistently, research in Australia and overseas shows that early leavers are more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings, and over the life-course accumulate less wealth. They also more often experience poorer physical and mental health, higher rates of crime and less often engage in active citizenship. In addition to the costs for individuals, there are also social costs associated with increased welfare needs (DEECD 2008a, p.6).

The European Commission has identified three categories of cost in relation to ‘school failure’:

- private costs, e.g. unemployment and earnings, health status, lower lifelong learning participation and life satisfaction
- social costs, e.g. criminality, intergenerational effects, unemployment, less social cohesion
- fiscal costs, e.g. lost tax revenue, public expenditure on income support, health, criminal justice (Psacharopoulos 2007).

Australian modelling confirms the economic benefit of increasing educational attainment. The lifetime cost to the country for every early school leaver in 1999 was estimated to be \$74,000 (DSF & NATSEM 1999). Australian research in 2002 modelled the impact of providing Year 12-equivalent education to 50 per cent of early school leavers. The hypothetical initiative was found to have an estimated net present value of \$8.2 billion using a 5 per cent discount rate, with a benefit–cost ratio of 3.3. Collecting taxes of 25 per cent of the increased earnings of students and businesses would equal the present value of outlays. In addition, it would increase employment by 18,000 and save \$80 million per year in income support (in Psacharopoulos 2007, pp. 26–27). Likewise, modelling by the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance indicates that increasing the basic level of educational attainment, by improvements within schools and transitions from school, could add 3.2 per cent to the GDP by 2030 (DPC 2007, pp. 8, 48).

The European Commission maintains that early school leaving ‘hinders smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ (p. 2). Thus raising attainment is essential to boost skill levels and employment while tackling deprivation and social exclusion, with a positive impact on the lives of individuals as well as the economy and society at large (European Commission 2011).

Indeed, addressing disengagement and lifting attainment rates for Year 12 or equivalent education has been a priority of both federal and state governments for some time. In 2009 they committed to lifting Year 12 or equivalent attainment to 90 per cent by 2015. To achieve this, the Council of Australian Governments established the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions, also known as the Compact with Young Australians. The Compact includes a National Participation Requirement which makes participation in schooling to Year 10 level or equivalent compulsory, with full-time participation in education, training or employment mandatory for those under 17. Additionally 20–24 year olds are entitled to government-subsidised education or training. Finally for those aged under 21, full-time education or training is required for the receipt of Youth Allowance or Family Tax Benefit A (DEEWR 2011).

The National Partnership facilitates initiatives to enhance engagement, attainment, transitions and career development. These initiatives include the School Business Community Partnership Brokers, and as described in the next section, Youth Connections.

## Youth Connections

Youth Connections represents a consolidation of four federally funded programs which had operated for varying periods until December 2009 (DEEWR 2009), and in Victoria, one state-funded program. These earlier programs, which targeted different cohorts of young people, included:

- **Youth Pathways:** a program for students aged 13–19 who were already disengaged from school, or enrolled in school, but classified most at risk of not making the transition to Year 12 and further education, training or employment. The purpose of the program was to support young people to continue or re-engage in school and complete Year 12, participate in alternative education or training or prepare for employment. A minimum of six hours individual case management was provided by case managers based predominantly in secondary schools. The case management process included an assessment undertaken with each young person, identifying strengths, barriers to school completion, and agreed goals and actions to help the young person engage/re-engage.

- **Connections:** a program for students aged 13–19 who had already disengaged from school which assisted them to re-engage with education such as through alternative school and accredited training programs.
- **Mentor Marketplace:** a program for 12–25 year olds at the greatest risk of disconnection from their families, communities, education, training and employment. Mentors provided practical support and guidance to these young people.
- **Youthlinx:** a prevention and early intervention program for young people aged 11–16 to build self-reliance, strengthen family engagement and community involvement.
- **Youth Transition Support Initiative (YTSI):** This program was funded by the Victorian Government from 2007 until September 2010 and was offered in 12 of the state’s Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) areas, each staffed by two full-time transition workers. The program provided transition and personal support for 15–19 year olds who had disengaged from school prior to Year 12. A formative evaluation indicated that large caseloads (80 clients per case manager annually), high client needs and narrow eligibility requirements posed challenges. The development of networks and partnerships was found time-consuming but effective, while the intensive support for young people was seen as valuable (DEECD 2008b).

The Youth Connections model was developed to build on the best elements of these programs, remove duplication, better integrate Commonwealth programs with similar state and territory programs, and align geographic service delivery regions (DEEWR 2009). With funding of \$286.8 million it was to operate from January 2010 to December 2013 and be run by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, with administration to be transferred to the states and territories in 2012 when the program was more established. However the November 2010 election of a Liberal government in Victoria cast doubt on whether the state would adopt a program conceived by the federal Labor government, and in July 2011 it was decided that DEEWR would continue to administer the program until the end of its funding.

The stated objective of Youth Connections is to:

provide a national, flexible, individualised and responsive service to assist young people who are most at risk of disengaging from education or training and therefore not attaining Year 12 or equivalent and not making a successful transition to further study, training or work. The objective of Youth Connections is to support these young people to attain Year 12 or equivalent and to help them make a successful transition through education and onto further education, training or work (DEEWR 2010b, p.9).

Youth Connections supports early school leavers and those at risk of disengaging from school to re-engage with education and training through the provision of flexible, individually tailored case management and referral to other services as needed. To be eligible, participants must be Australian citizens, permanent residents or humanitarian visa holders, be aged 13–19 and reside in the region where they are seeking the service. They cannot be employed or primarily looking for employment. Moreover, participants must fit within one of the following service categories (summarised in Figure 1.1):

- Type 1 services involve short-term, low-level engagement activities and the development of a re-engagement plan with young people **still attending school but classified at high risk of disengagement**. They face personal, literacy and numeracy barriers in education and are most at risk of disengaging from education.

- Type 2 services are only provided to those **classified at high and imminent risk or who have disengaged from education** (e.g. young people who face multiple barriers with complex personal situations and no plans to re-engage in Year 12 or equivalent). This includes:
  - Type 2a services provided to those who are at ‘imminent risk’ of disengaging or who have done so in the last three months.
  - Type 2b provided to those who are severely disengaged from education, family and community, and have been so for more than 3 months.
- All clients receive individual case management guided by a re-engagement plan; advocacy support; referral to other regional services as appropriate; personally tailored services to promote education, training or employment outcomes (including through alternative learning facilities); and mentoring.
- Type 3 services are youth activities, determined according to local need, for the purpose of engaging with those who are at risk of disengagement or disengaged from education.

**Figure 1.1 Youth Connections service types 1–3**

Type	Target group	Service
1	Attending school but at high risk of disengagement	Case management
2a	At high and imminent risk of disengagement from school or recently disengaged	Case management
2b	Disengaged from school more than three months ago	Case management
3	At risk of disengagement (with a focus on the severely disengaged)	Activities program

A fourth type relates to regional youth services rather than to individual young people.

- Type 4 services involve building the capacity of regional education and service providers. This includes early identification of young people at risk, sharing best practice information and developing collaborative service links ((DEEWR 2010b)).

Youth Connections measures a broad range of both progressive and final outcomes achieved for young people. These include outcomes related to personal development, improved health and wellbeing, and the removal of other life barriers, as well as connection with and progress in education, training and employment pathways. Additional outcome measures relate to collaborative regional relationships and building local service capacity through Type 3 and 4 activities (DEEWR 2010a).

## Peninsula Youth Connections and the local context

Having introduced Youth Connections as a national program, some introduction is needed to the setting where PYC is delivered.

The Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region is located some 40 kilometres south-east of the Melbourne central business district. The PYC region extends from Carrum in the north and encompasses the entire Peninsula as far as Portsea in the south. While the seaside location attracts some quite affluent residents, there are also pockets of extreme and intergenerational disadvantage. In the Melbourne statistical subdivision (MSD), Frankston ranks eighth most disadvantaged and the Mornington Peninsula 15th most disadvantaged out of 31 local government areas on the SEIFA

Index of Disadvantage (Frankston City 2011). This should be remembered when examining the educational statistics presented below.

The region's estimated population in 2010 was 276,236. Of these some 36,381 or 13.2% were aged 10–19 years. The educational attainment of its population is lower than in Melbourne as a whole:

- Young people aged 15 and over were more likely to have left school at Year 10 or below (36.8% Frankston; 35.5% Mornington Peninsula), compared with the MSD (27.9%).
- Year 12 completion rates were comparatively low (35.8% Frankston and 36.8% Mornington Peninsula, compared with 48.6% MSD).
- Young people living in Frankston were less likely to hold any post-school qualifications (50.1%) than Mornington Peninsula (46.1%) and MSD residents (45.9%) (FMPLLEN 2011).

On Track data for early school leavers living in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region who exited school in 2009 indicates lower than average university entrance: 34 per cent compared with 49 per cent across Victoria. Rates of participation in VET Certificates III and IV and in traineeships were similar to state averages, while the proportion of apprentices was slightly higher. The percentage of full-time employees were also above state averages (11.2%, compared with 7.6%), along with the part-time employed (19.8%, compared with 11.8%) and those looking for work (6.6%, compared with 4.9%) (DEECD 2010).

Critical issues for young people in the region include access to secure housing and to public transport (which affects the take-up of education and training). The Adolescent Community Profiles for Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula areas in 2010 highlight some areas in which young people's learning, health and wellbeing was worse than the Victorian average. These indicate the sorts of issues that may affect Youth Connections clients:

- The rate of Year 12 attainment or its equivalent for 19-year-olds was lower in Frankston (69.8%) and the Mornington Peninsula (77.2%) compared with Victoria (79.8%).
- Only 12.6 per cent of Frankston adolescents ate the minimum recommended serves of fruit and vegetables each day (compared with 19% for Victoria)
- The proportion of Frankston adolescents who felt able to access dental services was lower than the proportion reported for Victoria (70.2% compared with 78.3%)
- Teenage pregnancy rates were higher in Frankston than in Victoria (16.4 compared with 10.6 per 1000)
- Psychiatric hospitalisations were higher in Frankston (9.3 per 1000) and marginally higher on the Mornington Peninsula (6.9) compared with Victoria (6.7 per 1000).
- Community-based orders rates were higher among Frankston adolescents than in Victoria (2.3 compared with 1.5 per 1000).
- Child protection substantiation rates were considerably higher in Frankston and slightly higher on the Mornington Peninsula compared with Victoria (6.9, 4.8 and 4.4 per 1000 respectively).
- Reported crime for 2009–2010 was higher in Frankston (89.6 offences reported per 1000 people compared with 67.3 for Victoria) (DEECD 2011a, 2011b).

## Report outline

This report continues with a concise literature review examining some of the causes of youth disengagement, and means of addressing it (Chapter 2). This is followed by a description of the evaluation method (Chapter 3).

Drawing on the accounts of youth professionals in the FMP region (both in and outside schools), Chapter 4 examines the needs and barriers faced by young people who are disengaging from school. Given this chapter's focus on individual factors, Chapter 5 takes up some of the barriers to engagement inherent in the education system. Chapter 6 discusses the delivery of PYC as a response to these needs. In addition to mapping and evaluating aspects of the program, it uses the PYC example to reflect on the broader Youth Connections model.

Finally, Chapter 7 brings together the main findings of this report and their implications for the development of the Youth Connections program and youth policy generally.

Several client stories provided by PYC staff are presented throughout the report as tangible examples of both young people's needs and the program's function.



## 2 Literature review

A literature review was conducted to examine educational disengagement, with a focus on some of the causes identified in other research. Key factors in disengagement such as socioeconomic status, the support available from home and school, and the importance of positive relationships were explored in more detail as highly pertinent issues on the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula. The chapter also briefly examines some of the ways disengagement can be addressed, such as through early intervention, providing support for students exiting the school environment, and ensuring the schools are meeting the needs of all learners.

### Causes of disengagement

A common observation in the literature is that there are multiple causes of disengagement and early school leaving. Te Riele (2010) describes young people's lives during and outside school hours as a 'complex jigsaw puzzle' in which learning and school commitments must be balanced with family, social and recreational life as well as part-time employment. Building on Te Riele's notion of 'parallel complexities', the recent Making a Difference study illustrates the ways in which family breakdown, moving home and school multiple times, and material disadvantage can split student energies so that schooling ceases to be a priority (Skattebol 2011).

Various authors have highlighted the following student and school-related factors which tend to be associated with disengagement and early school leaving:

- gender, i.e. being male
- an Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background
- place-based disadvantage, e.g. access to public/private transport, services and information, access to computers and the Internet
- socioeconomic disadvantage, e.g. cost barriers to participation in learning (fees, uniform, equipment and materials); parents' education level, participation in employment, the extent to which education is valued
- an unstable family environment, e.g. domestic violence, family breakdown, unmet welfare needs
- student desire to work and/ or earn an income
- low prior academic achievement and motivation, e.g. earlier struggles or failure at school
- lack of access to learning support for those experiencing difficulty
- the school relational community, e.g. the quality of relationships between teachers and students, mutual respect, building connectedness and belonging, support to address issues such as bullying
- school rules and limited acceptance of difference, e.g. students perceived as a threat to 'school image', students excluded from class and missing work
- limited school teaching/learning focus, e.g. failure to deliver a curriculum balance between academic and applied learning, cater to different learning styles, offer personalised and flexible learning and teach to mixed ability groups, and create a young adult learning environment
- lack of school relevance to experience, employment aspirations and the labour market (DEEWR 2008, pp. 3,6; Gray & Hackling 2009; European Commission 2011; Ross & Gray 2006; Stokes 2000, pp. 29–31).

The multiple and complex barriers (both individual and systemic) highlighted in these studies are consistent with those identified by the present study in relation to young people in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region. Three factors—socioeconomic status, the support available at home and from school, and the relational aspects of school—will be further described given their relevance to the evaluation findings presented later.

### Socioeconomic status

In *Undemocratic Schooling*, Teese and Polesel highlight the role of socioeconomic status in school disengagement, arguing that the school system perpetuates class difference through funding arrangements and a biased curriculum focused on university entrance and a subset of students, while neglecting the learning and wellbeing of others. They argue that these systemic biases then produce more disengagement than material disadvantage:

Working-class children are more vulnerable to early school leaving through the uncertain relationship they have with the curriculum rather than through the economic hardship of their families (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.134).

McInerney supports this, noting that the impact of middle-class values on the school curriculum combined with the meagre resources of schools in low-income areas entrenches the status quo. He also argues that policy responses to disengagement either pathologise students and their families or blame teachers and schools. Consequently, attempts to ‘raise standards’ through new accountability measures and testing regimes act as a surrogate for addressing socioeconomic difference. This shifts the focus away from the ‘inequitable structures and practices that contribute to social exclusion and educational disadvantage in the first place’ (McInerney 2006, p.65).

### Support at home, support from school

Rowe & Savelsberg (2010) write that school retention and engagement policies are ‘based on the assumption that all young people have relatively uniform and stable social circumstances, such as supportive parents within a functional domestic context, and fairly secure housing tenure’ (p. 36). However, this is not always the case. Their Adelaide-based research of students who moved home frequently indicated the importance of secure, quality housing and familial support for engagement and Year 12 completion. The 2001 Counting the Homeless project found most young people experienced homelessness first as students: it identified some 8400 currently homeless students and a further 3800 who had experienced homelessness in the past three months. Family conflict, abuse and parental mental health issues were factors in case studies provided by school welfare staff. The report highlighted the role of schools in early intervention before homelessness became more permanent and students left school (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2003).

In a study with victims of child abuse and neglect, Frederick and Goddard (2010) similarly highlighted the role of an unstable home life and poor relationships in school disengagement. They found that the majority of victims leave both home and school by age 16, and listed the following ways that abuse and neglect impact school participation:

Leaving both home and school to escape violence, leaving school as a result of bullying and harassment from other students, hygiene-related social problems as a result of being neglected, chronic lack of confidence and lack of family support, and frequent moves resulting in social difficulties from constantly having to cope with new situations (Frederick & Goddard 2010, p. 26).

School support for the victims was rare; the authors noted that Victoria, where the majority of interviewees attended school, had the lowest ratio of school psychologists to students in the nation. Higher rates of psychiatric hospitalisations as noted in the FMP region suggest the need for greater intervention and support services. Frederick and Goddard noted there are no consistent nation-wide standards for welfare staffing ratios, guidelines and training. Similarly, while the Victorian Auditor-General (2010) reported that students' overall wellbeing had improved between 2006 and 2009, he also observed that there is no current, comprehensive policy framework for wellbeing and that evaluation of wellbeing programs and services is inadequate.

## Relationships

A criticism of the current literature is the tendency to define school disengagement as an extension of young people's pathological behaviour: 'It does not allow an understanding of students actively resisting engaging in what might appear to them to as a meaningless and at times oppressive activities and structures in school and society' (Atweh et al. 2007, p. 2). Atweh and colleagues argue that rather than blaming the victim or blaming the system, engagement should be conceptualised as an interaction between the two, as experienced through the *relationships* between students and the school.

Likewise, based on a three-year study of 209 students, Smyth (2006) found that young people disengage from school when they are unable to form sustainable relationships with peers, adults or the institution. Central to this was the lack of mutual respect. He found that schools were unable to provide some young people with 'the relational resources necessary to enable them to have a fulfilling and rewarding experience at school, and that failure had a severe impact on their subsequent life chances' (p. 3).

To address this shortcoming, Warren (2005) has suggested the concept of 'relational power', defined as relationships built on a common vision for schooling, a set of resources built on trust and cooperation, and a commitment to ensure that school meets the needs of marginalised students. At present, however, students are required to negotiate 'what it means to be a "good" student' according to narrow, institutional definitions (Smyth 2006, p. 8). Some do not succeed and Smyth argues:

Rather than blaming social structures or 'blaming the victim', we need to understand disengagement from school and early school leaving, in terms of the process that is played out in the relationship between young people and schools (Smyth 2006, p. 8).

## Addressing disengagement

In the literature, three key issues in addressing disengagement relate to early intervention, supporting students exiting the school environment and meeting students' learning needs. These issues are also highlighted in later chapters of this evaluation.

In terms of early intervention, school disengagement often begins in the middle years of education. Educational researcher Donna Pendergast maintains that because 'early adolescence' is a recent category, the past emphasis has been on literacy and numeracy in the early years and post-compulsory and vocational education in the later years. She warns about the consequences of inaction:

Indeed, the motivation for reform in the middle years is driven by an abundance of evidence of alienation and disengagement of young adolescents from learning that lacks relevance, and relies on inappropriate pedagogies and poor assessment strategies. The inevitable flow-on effect of disengagement from learning is underachievement, ultimately

leading to dips in educational attainment, and sometimes even declines in levels of prior learning, as well as a lack of interest in school, the increased chance of developing inappropriate behaviour and other undesirable social changes, the culmination of such effects being an increased probability that individual and collective potential is not reached. This ultimately affects the potential for young people to become active and contributing members of the knowledge economy, and of all aspects defining human capital in our society (Pendergast 2009, p. 13).

The Regional Youth Affairs Network (RYAN) describes the middle years, or ages 10–14, as a particularly risky period. Both RYAN (2010) and the NSW Parliament’s Committee on Children and Young People (2009) call for early intervention and measures to address the service gap for ‘the missing middle’. Likewise, research conducted in Melbourne indicates that significant numbers of young people under 15 disengage from mainstream schooling, and there is a lack of support and services to re-engage them with education (Beck & McNally 2010 unpublished).

With regard to support for exiting students, research in Queensland by Ross and Gray found that the support schools provide tends to be unplanned. They argue that school policy treats young people as passive consumers and excludes those who ‘refuse to be institutionalised’ and ‘stigmatise[s] those who resist the social magic of school’ (p.124). They found that students who ‘made trouble’ were given an information folder of local jobs and courses, and that those who left suddenly or ‘under a cloud’ were least likely to be given information. Few received an exit interview or letter of reference (Ross & Gray 2006, p.125)

In relation to meeting learners’ needs, a study of Indigenous young people’s education in the Goulburn Valley indicated that the ‘one-size-fits-all’ Year 7–10 curriculum represented a major challenge in attracting and retaining students. Unfortunately, by the stage that VET and VCAL programs offered alternative learning opportunities, the students had already left (Alford & James 2007).

There is growing evidence that alternative learning options may be a key to addressing some forms of school disengagement. The Australian Social Inclusion Board values non-school-based learning but notes that ‘while the Commonwealth-funded Youth Connections program includes access to alternative, flexible learning opportunities, demand for alternative learning far outstrips supply, and more is needed’ (DPMC 2011, p. 26). One type of alternative learning options is pre-vocational or ‘enabling’ courses such as those delivered in TAFEs. Research examining this ‘second-chance education’ suggests it provides the opportunity to change one’s life after experiencing illness, education failure, homelessness or some other issue (Ross & Gray 2006). Drawing on other research (Dawe 2004), Ross and Gray note that enrolments in pre-vocational courses tended to be by low socioeconomic status and Indigenous young people, those who were disenchanted with school or those who perceived TAFE as a more attractive option. Quality of staff and relationships, ease of pathways and student-centred learning were further factors in enrolment. Although pre-vocational courses were not found to produce upward mobility, they did serve to protect young people from downward mobility and enable movement into employment or further study.

The European Commission (2011) takes up several of these issues relating to school disengagement. They recommend that regional policy to address disengagement focus on:

- prevention (e.g. quality early childhood education, systemic language support)
- intervention (e.g. through early warning systems, universal or targeted programs, use of local community networks, mentoring and personalised learning support).
- compensation (e.g. financial and other support such as ‘second chance’ learning).

This literature review describes some of the causes of disengagement identified in existing research. It illustrates how socioeconomic status and available support from home and school play a critical role in student retention. In addressing disengagement, middle years initiatives, offering a varied curriculum, and alternative and second chance learning options emerge as important measures. These findings provide an important context for later chapters which examine the barriers to engagement experienced by students living in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region.

### 3 Method

This evaluation is being conducted in two stages. Stage 1 focuses on the unmet needs and barriers faced by young people in their educational engagement, as well as evaluating the program elements of Youth Connections as exemplified through PYC. The research method was approved by the BSL ethics committee, with additional permission obtained to interview school staff from the Department for Education and Early Childhood Development, and is described in more detail below. Stage 2 of the evaluation will focus on PYC's effectiveness in improving the social and economic inclusion of the disengaged young people in the FMP region. In this second stage, surveys and interviews will be conducted with clients who completed the program during the previous six months to examine the extent to which their personal, learning, employment and social needs were met and how they fared in the longer term.

#### Stage 1

The research questions guiding Stage 1 of the evaluation are:

- What are the needs of young people who are disengaging from education as summarised in existing research and as perceived by education and community service professionals working with young people in the FMP region?
- How has Peninsula Youth Connections implemented the federal Youth Connections program?
- Based on the Peninsula Youth Connections experience, what are the advantages of the program as a government response, what are the constraints and how could the program be developed in the future?

The method included a targeted literature review of Australian research on youth disengagement and recent policy. Quantitative analysis of the barriers to engagement faced by a sample of 139 exited PYC clients was also undertaken, using DEEWR'S YATMIS database<sup>1</sup>. Client information is entered by caseworkers into this database for administrative and assessment purposes.

Qualitative methods represent the main focus of this evaluation. In-depth, semi-structured interviews of 60–90 minutes duration were conducted in person with 24 youth professionals working in the FMP region:

- seven school professionals, including welfare and careers/pathway coordinators, selected from diverse government secondary colleges
- eight community professionals working for government and non-government agencies supporting young people in the areas of health, family, justice, education and employment

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<sup>1</sup> YATMIS has an administrative rather than research function. This places limitations on its value as a research instrument and its use in the evaluation as follows:

- (1) Cross-tabulations were not possible on the website, making re-entry of the data necessary for analysis.
- (2) Different methods of data collection mean client barriers may be identified by people whose assessments vary.
- (3) Identification of barriers depends on both their disclosure to staff and their inclusion in the YATMIS list.
- (4) YATMIS data is entered by providers to fulfil contractual requirements. Thus the outcomes entered for a client may (a) restate all the barriers to their engagement (b) be a strategic selection of outcomes or (c) be limited to the most easily achieved outcome, since only one outcome per client is counted in the basic reporting to DEEWR. Likewise, providers may be reluctant to select many outcomes given the risk of only achieving one and having this perceived negatively by DEEWR.

- five PYC case managers who worked directly with clients and had backgrounds in government and non-government youth support services (e.g. health, housing, education)
- four PYC management or administrative staff.

Participants were asked about the unmet needs and issues that they believed contributed to youth disengagement from school, and invited to share examples or case studies. They were also asked about their experience of the Youth Connections program and any of its predecessors. There were also questions about the role of schools and youth services in addressing disengagement, how the two sectors could work together and suggestions for improving regional services.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, then thematically analysed using NVivo software. In addition, some brief case studies were compiled of clients described by PYC staff during the interviews.

### Limitations

The study of PYC is a single small-scale study. Thus a limitation of this evaluation is that its findings may not be representative of Youth Connections across Australia. However, it is reasonable to believe that our findings based on PYC will have some implications for the broader delivery of the Youth Connections program.

A further limitation of Stage 1 is that it does not examine the outcomes achieved by young people or their direct experience. This experience is presented only by proxy through the personal stories provided by PYC staff. However, outcomes and the voice and experience of young people will be the focus of Stage 2.

DEEWR has commissioned a major evaluation of the Youth Connections program. This will include a detailed analysis of client outcomes and a process evaluation of the program drawing on data from YATMIS and other surveys, as well as program case studies and focus groups (DEEWR 2010a). It is hoped that the modest study of the Peninsula Youth Connections program will complement this national evaluation.

## 4 Unmet needs as barriers to learning for Peninsula youth

This chapter examines the unmet needs of young people and barriers to their participation in learning in two ways. Firstly, it analyses data on Youth Connections clients and the barriers to their engagement as identified on referral forms and by PYC case managers. Secondly, the unmet needs and barriers which impeded participation are described in more detail drawing on interviews with youth professionals.

In some respects, the findings in this chapter are reminiscent of Maslow's hierarchy of needs which postulates that lower-order needs must be fulfilled before higher-order functions can occur. Thus physiological, safety, love or belonging, and esteem needs must be met before self-actualisation can occur (Maslow 1943). The concept of social inclusion provides a further framework for consideration of young people's unmet needs and barriers. Social inclusion relates to the enhancement of human wellbeing and functioning to increase social and economic participation (e.g. through study, work, relationships with family and the community). Integral to this approach is the removal of the barriers to participation faced by particular groups (Morrison 2010).

The relative weight given to particular needs and barriers varied across the PYC client data and interviews. However, a common finding was that rather than facing one barrier, young people at risk tended to face multiple and complex barriers to engagement. Summing up this complexity and the role of Youth Connections in addressing it, a PYC staff member said:

If they've substance use problems and they've got mental health issues and they're homeless I'm not going to link them into an educational program first. I'd try and address those other issues—looking at getting them off the streets or couch surfing, linking them in with a psychologist, going with them to their Headspace appointment, making them comfortable about going on their own, linking them in with a drug and alcohol worker. You can't get someone into education if they've got so much going on. They're not ready.

### PYC client barriers to engagement

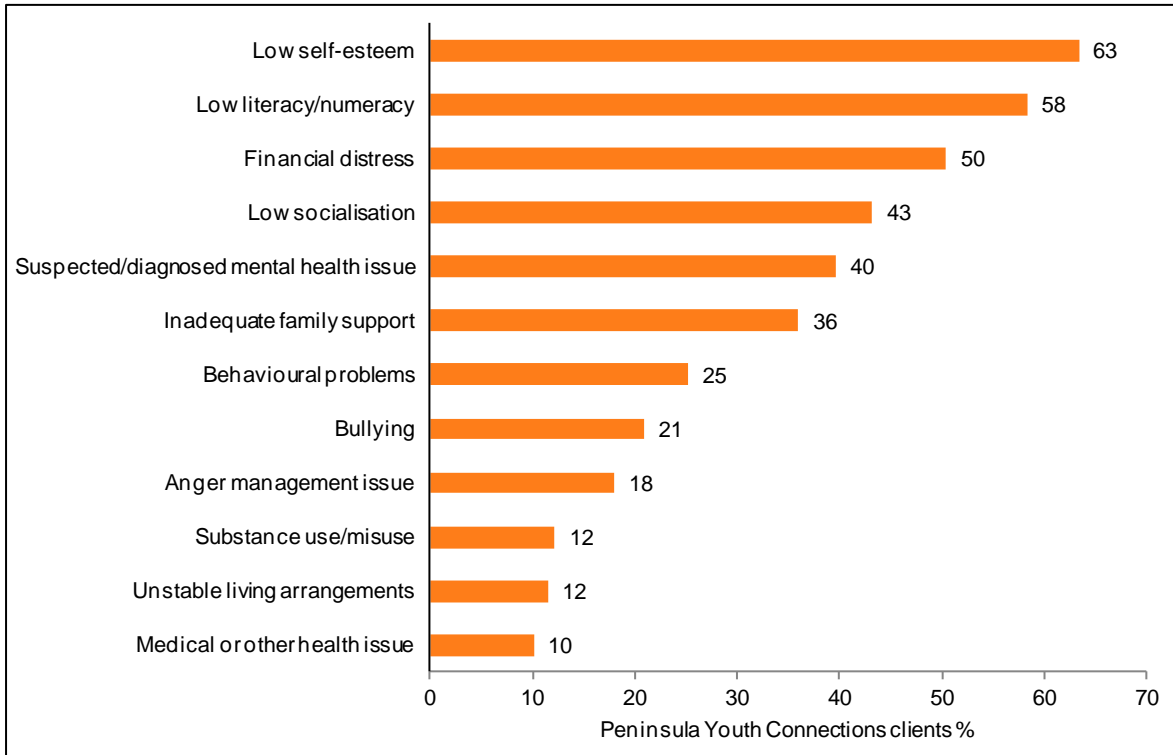
The barriers to engagement encountered by young people commencing PYC are illustrated in Figure 4.1. This data comes from the DEEWR YATMIS database and the barriers included are mainly personal attributes and circumstances rather than the systemic barriers to engagement which young people encounter (e.g. the way education is structured). This limitation of the data aside, it does indicate some important barriers faced by PYC clients.

The group of 139 young people who were disengaging/disengaged from school and whose barriers are presented in Figure 4.1 was 52 per cent male. While the average age of the clients was 16, some 14 per cent were aged under 15 and for this cohort there are few education or training options other than mainstream school. The graph indicates the prevalence of self-esteem issues, low literacy or numeracy and financial distress, each experienced by at least 50 per cent of the clients.

Low socialisation was a barrier for 43 per cent of the sample, while some 40 per cent were identified as having a suspected or diagnosed mental health issue. Inadequate family support was a barrier for 36 per cent of the clients. More than 20 per cent of clients were identified as having behavioural problems or suffering from bullying (the latter is a barrier for Zoe, see Box 6.1).



**Figure 4.1 Barriers to engagement: Peninsula Youth Connections clients**

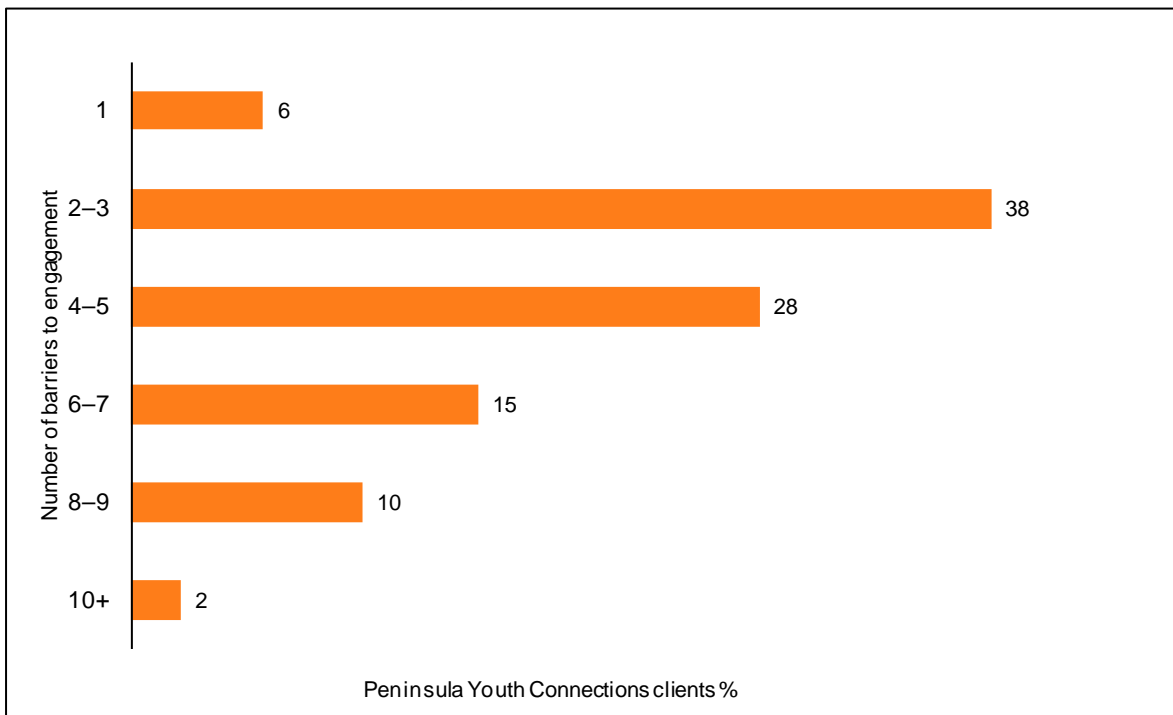


Notes: The data is for the first 139 clients to exit the program. Only those items which were barriers for more than 10 per cent of the sample are presented here.

Source: DEEWR YATMIS database, 2011.

As Figure 4.2 shows, the vast majority of clients (94%) faced more than one barrier to engagement in education, and 27 per cent had six or more barriers to engagement. The average client faced four barriers to engagement, while the maximum number faced was 13.

**Figure 4.2 Multiple barriers to engagement**



These two graphs and the story of Rosie (see Box 4.1) illustrate the multiple and complex challenges faced by young people in the region and highlight the need for intensive holistic support, such as that provided by Youth Connections.

**Box 4.1 Coping with complex circumstances: Rosie's story<sup>2</sup>**

Rosie had suffered sexual abuse, had substance abuse problems and a juvenile justice record. After quitting school in Year 8, she left home aged 16 hitch hiking. Picked up by a 40-year-old man (now her partner), she became pregnant. Around this time, she was referred to Youth Connections by Centrelink. As Rosie wanted to pass Year 10, her PYC case manager supported and covered the cost of enrolment in a Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA), but Rosie's difficulties in socialising resulted in conflict with her classmates. Other significant health issues were exacerbated by her pregnancy and she was unable to complete the course before having her baby.

Rosie's case manager worked with her Youth Justice Worker to link her to a parenting program for substance users; and over her pregnancy Rosie reduced her intake. Rosie also had a Child Protection Worker, with a second worker appointed to her baby. These workers provided a cot and some baby supplies. The case manager attended care team meetings with the other workers to provide continuous support and avoid duplication. This collaboration with the other workers provided greater resources and specialist care than would otherwise have been possible. Only a few weeks after having her baby, Rosie contacted her PYC case manager, wanting to re-enrol and complete her CGEA course. The worker noted a changed attitude in Rosie: 'She's totally turned her life around, she's not substance using anymore. When I speak to her about drugs, she just goes, 'No, I can't do that, I've got a baby now. I've got to look after my child'.

This case illustrates the benefits of Youth Connections working in partnership with other specialist agencies to address young people's complex needs.

## Regional youth issues, needs and barriers

In the last section, the barriers to engagement are represented as individual rather than systemic problems. The rest of this chapter adds depth to some of the personal barriers identified in Figure 4.1. Critical issues identified by the youth professionals interviewed included lack of personal support, stability or belonging; low access to resources; unmet health needs; and unstable housing. This analysis also illustrates the way that for disadvantaged young people, complex issues intersect to create formidable challenges to participation in education.

### Lack of personal support, stability or belonging

A major theme arising from the interviews was that instability and lack of support in young people's home lives impacted their self-esteem, while a lack of boundaries and structure at home made it difficult to engage at school. Lack of role models and acceptance within the broader community also had a negative impact.

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<sup>2</sup> Like other names used in personal stories in this report, Rosie is a pseudonym.

## Family instability

Family breakdown was a key cause of instability. At the extreme, criminal activity meant that parents and grandparents were periodically absent, serving time in prison. Family violence was a further problem, with both parents and young people noted as perpetrators.

Parental separation, divorce and remarriage, blended families and the arrival of new siblings also created instability. The lack of affordable counselling and support services for low-income families was highlighted; one interviewee suggested investment in these would reduce spending on the Sole Parenting Payment. For young people, changes to family composition could mean living at different houses on different weeks or weekends, and being constantly 'in between parents' with conflicting messages and rules. One school professional said that while schools acknowledged these social trends in theory, in practice the system was based on the assumption that each student had the support of two parents and grandparents. She observed that it was the students who lacked parental support who came to her wanting to leave school early.

Communication difficulties also created instability. Illustrating this point, a community professional said: 'Families are not able to communicate so they fall out and ignore each other rather than address and manage the situation'. As a consequence parents were not involved in their children's activities (e.g. sport) and children 'go off and do their own thing', spending a lot of time away from home or leaving entirely to spend time with others in similar situations. Others said parents felt powerless to enforce house rules and regular school attendance, or avoided being prescriptive because they wanted to be 'mates with their kids'. Another community professional said that these difficulties were exacerbated among parents who had themselves not experienced an authoritative parenting style, and among those with mental health, drug and alcohol issues. She said the young people she saw had been 'exposed to a lot' and tended to be 'more independent and out of control' because:

The parents haven't put in place control mechanisms ... [or said]: 'Yes you can go to this party or have a sleep-over'. The kids have said: 'I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that' and parents are like: 'Oh whatever, okay'.

Youth professionals observed that chaotic and unstructured family environments without ground rules and boundaries had a negative impact on school attendance, which tended to be disorganised and irregular. Unaccustomed to structure at home, these young people found it difficult to tolerate the structure and rules inherent in mainstream schooling. One community professional described how some young people's inability to cope with structure impeded their participation at school and in the workplace:

A lot of them do disengage from school because the mainstream school environment just doesn't suit them. The rigidity of it and the structure of a mainstream school is probably more than they can or are willing to cope with. It results in low literacy ... They have challenges with authority and they have challenges of being told what they need to do.

He went on to say this translated into problems in the workplace:

Some of them can get a job but can't keep it. We'll prepare them, get them ready for an interview, they'll go for the interview, they'll get the job, they might work there for a day or two or a week and then someone tells them they have to do this or that, [and] they fall out with them and leave. The other thing that happens is because they are in this group of people that are hanging around not really tied to any structure in their life or routine, they

go and start a job but then they see all of their friends are still just sleeping in all day, playing Playstation all afternoon.

### **Lack of self-esteem, role models and community acceptance**

Self-esteem was a related issue highlighted by youth professionals. Some young people were observed to lack support and encouragement at home, even through a simple verbal affirmation such as: 'Good job'. Likewise, difficulties at school led to negative rather than positive feedback. Interviewees observed young people's need for—and absence of—opportunities to achieve success, whether through recreational activities (e.g. football) or school. These unmet needs were also linked to increasing rates of mental illness such as anxiety and depression.

Some interviewees emphasised the role of mentors such as community volunteers, police, business people and teachers in developing positive, respectful relationships with young people and helping to build this self-esteem. Since many young people were observed to lack positive role models, connecting a young person to the right person at the right time could make a real difference. These community members also worked to broaden young people's career aspirations and provide links to opportunities such as work experience. This is critical for young people otherwise lacking these social networks.

At the same time, some interviewees observed that public places such as shops and community venues were generally not a place of belonging and acceptance for young people. One school professional said there was a perception that young people were not 'acceptable' in public during the day. Others referred to reports of some young people 'harassing traders' at the local shops, which led to schoolchildren in general being unwelcome during school hours. Several interviewees spoke of the 'mischief' (crime) involving disengaged young people and the lack of local activities for young people, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This raises the larger issue of the limited opportunities available to young people to participate in their community and be perceived in a positive light. Subsequently, negative characteristics attributed to disengaged young people become labels that stigmatise them and further limit their participation. A PYC staff member elaborated by discussing both the challenges and importance of creating community spaces where young people are welcome, to facilitate their social and educational engagement:

Once you have a community hub and you've got a mixture of people there, often young people's behaviour can be seen as problematic ... [It] would be delightful if it was a community hub where everyone felt valued and safe, had a sense of belonging, and there was no intimidation from any generation ... That would be really valuable in this region because young people who are disconnected from their family and disconnect from school really need somewhere where they can feel safe and valued and respected and without those things they're not going to move into education because it's physically impossible.

### **Low access to resources**

Interviewees described how inadequate community and material resources acted as a barrier to participation in learning. This included place-based disadvantage in the form of the limited support services and transport options in some areas; and the cost of enrolment and equipment for school and vocational learning.

### **Place-based disadvantage and inadequate transport**

The location of the FMP region had an impact on both the services accessible to young people and their ability to participate in education, training and employment. While Frankston housed many community services, these were lacking further down the Peninsula in places such as Mornington,

Rosebud and Hastings. Likewise, alternatives to mainstream schooling, vocational and tertiary education were scarce. Inadequate public transport and the requirement of 120 hours experience to obtain probationary driving licences acted as a barrier to work experience and vocational training. Young people's reluctance to leave a familiar community was a further factor.

Discussing this issue, a school professional observed that it was difficult to get disengaged students to walk 400 metres to school, so travel to alternative education providers further afield was even more problematic. She added that parents of Year 7 and 8 kids were reluctant for them to travel unaccompanied on public transport. In one area, to get to some VET courses, school students had to locate a parent willing to carpool or rely on public transport: if they missed a morning train, they had to catch two different buses to get to training in Frankston. In addition to the 60–90 minutes travelling, trip times were extended when people had to wait for connecting services. One boy who left home in Mornington at 6 am, travelled for several hours on multiple buses to attend pre-vocational training in mechanics in Dandenong. Several interviewees said access to other trades training was similarly limited. One community professional provided this example:

I know [someone who] is trying to get into bricklaying at the moment. There are only three courses that are even remotely accessible. One's at Berwick, one's at Croydon and the other one's at Rosebud and none of them are easily accessible. None of them. For him, it's going to be really challenging ... [It will take] several different buses and trains to get to any of them. It's not even a straight route.

In addition, the interviewee said the closest bricklaying course had only 15 places.

Overall, limited access to resources limited some young people's aspirations. A school professional said: 'Young people are just really switched off to opportunities because everything is so far away. [The] distance [requires] a huge effort to get them to where they need to be'.

### Cost as a barrier to participation

The costs of participation in education and training represented a significant barrier to engagement, as also shown by other Brotherhood research (Bond & Horn 2008, 2009; Myconos 2011). One community professional estimated that their agency assisted 70 per cent of their clients with the cost of education items such as uniforms, books and camps. A PYC staff member observed that the expensive uniforms meant that some of her clients had got into trouble at school for wearing incorrect clothing, and the Youth Connections program had to contribute to education costs. Another staff member described costs as a barrier to retention for her clients, most of whom were in years 7 to 10:

The students that I'm working with now, if they were even to stay on to Year 12, I don't know how their parents would pay those fees, those elective costs, and I've never had anyone reach that point at a public school.

Some school professionals sought financial assistance from the State Schools' Relief Fund, Youth Resource Centres and or local emergency relief agencies. One school used class sets of textbooks in Years 7 and 8 while a community program assisted parents to buy laptops for Year 9 students with electronic texts provided. Another school ran a uniform shop and allocated \$10,000 of the school budget to support families with costs; the interviewee added 'It sounds like a lot', but with such a large student population, 'It doesn't stretch a long way'.

The costs of school-based VET studies and TAFE and community-based training were also noted. While school-based VET costs were for materials only, students might have to pay \$400 per

subject. At the extreme, one interviewee said VET material costs were as much as \$1000 for some subjects at her school. The effect was that young people missed out or were forced to choose courses unrelated to their vocational aspirations. One school professional commented:

It doesn't put them in a very good situation, to choose a course that you have to choose because it is low cost ... Like you can do business because that doesn't cost much, but you may not want to do business.

### Family social and cultural capital

Youth professionals frequently observed that the resources available to families (material, cultural/knowledge and social) influenced the aspirations, educational and employment outcomes of their children. Two quite different groups were described in this regard: families where parents had left school early and the long-term recipients of income support.

Some young people had parents who had left school early to take up apprenticeships. Many had achieved success, now owning cars, boats and million-dollar, ocean-front properties. However, they tended not to value school education because it was unrelated to their own success. These values were often internalised by their children, who underestimated the importance of Year 12 completion. These parents often believed that their children could achieve success through a similar career path to their own. However, reflecting the view of many interviewees, one community professional said: 'This goal is not realistically achievable. It's not something that society can offer them anymore'. Thus while the families' possessed considerable social and cultural capital (e.g. skills and trade networks), social change limited its value for their children.

Other families, especially in certain parts of the FMP region, were characterised by entrenched poverty. Intergenerational unemployment meant that parents and even grandparents had relied on the government for their income and sometimes their housing. This meant that children were not exposed to the traditional patterns of parents going to work. One interviewee said that during the day the homes of these children were full of adults who were not always proactive in reinforcing school attendance. A common view was that these families place a low value on education, one school professional commenting that some parents said to their children: 'School's not worth a pinch of beans, mate'. This negative attitude impacted upon communications between families and the school and was also internalised by children.

The place-based nature of disadvantage was also observed. PYC staff said their clients were often concentrated in particular estates and even streets. Material deprivation also limited the social and cultural networks and life experiences available to young people to foster their learning and career development. Examples include family friends able to provide career advice or work experience, and opportunities to go on outings or participate in other recreational and cultural activities. One community professional said learning experiences could include staying at a farm, working on a carpentry project, participating in adventure activities (e.g. mountain biking, sailing), escaping daily routines to spend time in nature camping or bushwalking. He observed:

You get some kids that have zero experience ... My son went [on a school trip] planting trees in a wetlands. He came home and he said: 'Dad I had to show a kid how to use a shovel'—and this is in Year 7.

You get some really impoverished families— their experience of eating out is McDonalds and their experience of eating at home is McDonalds as well. Some of those kids don't do anything. [The] kids actually get to do nothing. You know, they've never been camping.

These forms of broader learning were regarded by many interviewees as essential in building the self-esteem, social skills and life awareness needed to succeed at school.

### Unmet health needs

Unmet health needs were prevalent among the families of disengaged young people in the FMP region. Parents' mental illness left some young people without housing, while other young people became carers for their parents. These added responsibilities compounded the educational barriers they faced. Several interviewees observed that some young people attended alternative courses such as CGEA because they offered greater flexibility for those with special needs. This was the case for one girl who needed to take time out to care for a mother with bipolar disorder.

Some young people's own mental health was a barrier. Some youth professionals believed depression, anxiety and other conditions had increased in prevalence, and become key factors among 'school refusers'. One explained: 'I've had conversations with parents this year, where their child has suffered from anxiety since grade six; they're now in grade eight and they've never attended a day of school'. The need for early diagnosis and treatment was highlighted, but service demand exceeded supply.

Undiagnosed disabilities represented another unmet need. Community professionals reported that their clients' learning difficulties were not being diagnosed early or at all, and students were being progressed through the year levels on the basis of age rather than the attainment of reading and writing skills. A school professional noted that students with conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were often not classified as 'disabled enough' to receive funding for aides, with the result that they were not learning and prevented others from doing so:

There is not a lot of stuff for them. To my mind I don't think that they would really be enjoying being in a class, being told off all the time and getting attention in a bad way.

Likewise, a PYC staff member said mainstream schooling did not provide the learning support that young people needed to succeed, leaving them 'afraid' to ask for help and of being seen as 'stupid'.

Substance use was also a significant barrier that contributed to an unpredictable home environment. For example, some young people were described as having to deal with 'three parents in one day': 'scattered' and disorganised in the morning, in more control by midday when they had started drinking, and drunk by the evening. Both parental drinking and drug use were modelled to young people who also assumed these habits. One worker observed that with intoxication, violent and antisocial behaviour became an issue, along with other crime such as theft. While some parents sought help for their children's substance use, others were observed to be 'in denial' and difficult to engage. Describing the prevalence of the issue, a school professional said:

I've got a lot of young boys who just are falling, [they] are spiralling downwards in relation to their study, in their engagement with school and risk-taking behaviour.

She added that it was a difficult issue to address because students had to disclose the problem and voluntarily seek help to be referred to drug and alcohol agencies. Even when help was sought, long waiting lists for detoxification programs compounded the difficulties. Moreover, when schools staff became aware of drug dealing, they had to obtain evidence and a warrant before they were permitted to search lockers. Elaborating on the difficulties in addressing cannabis use, a community professional said there was a perception that cannabis was not really illegal. In his view, growing and dealing was a 'survival thing' to support individual habits and contribute to family finances.

## Unstable housing

Housing and homelessness were also regarded by youth professionals as a critical regional issue, and one which serves to illustrate the multiple and complex reasons why young people disengage from school. Parental separation, financial stress and high rents produced housing insecurity, and some young people went to school unsure where they would be sleeping that night. One school professional said entire families sometimes became homeless. With limited housing stock and long waits for local housing services, some children came to school dirty, were teased and became stigmatised. She said that housing services were ‘pointless’ if there was no supply of housing. She hoped to win the lottery so she could convert a nearby empty building into youth housing.

One person estimated that some 40 senior students at one school were either homeless or living independently. Another school professional said that the low quality of affordable rental properties affected young people’s self-esteem, and alternative housing did not always accommodate the whole family, with older children left to make other arrangements. Frequent moves often meant a change of schools and the cost of new uniforms and books. For students who already disliked school, this added to their disengagement.

Other situations which led to young people leaving home or being ‘kicked out’ included parents’ mental health issues, domestic violence and abuse, young people’s substance use and the general breakdown of relationships between children and their parents. PYC staff said some young people ‘went missing’ for weeks or even months. Eddie’s story (see Box 4.2) illustrates how substance use and homelessness could interact to contribute to disengagement.

### **Box 4.2 Substance use and homelessness: Eddie’s story**

Eddie stopped attending school early in Year 8 and was referred to Peninsula Youth Connections. He also had a support worker to address his substance abuse issues. His PYC case manager said that his mother felt unable to deal with the situation and was ‘on the verge of kicking him out of home’. Around this time, Eddie left home and ‘went missing’ until midway through the year. A frequent cannabis user until this point, he met again with his PYC case manager and said he wanted to return to school, and he stopped using.

His former school willingly agreed to a trial period, but then a misunderstanding led to the school asking him to take a week off to defuse a conflict with other students. While this was not a suspension or expulsion, Eddie interpreted it that way, and ‘feeling let down’ he ‘went missing’ for another week and resumed drug use.

Sometime later, the PYC case manager referred him to another drug and alcohol worker and he stayed clean for several months. Having disengaged from school, Eddie told his case manager he wanted to become a pastry chef but there were no courses starting at that time of year. However, the Brotherhood Frankston High Street Centre was able to deliver Certificate II in Hospitality. After completing this course, Eddie enrolled in the Community VCAL program also at the centre. His PYC worker said he still had unresolved issues, and transport difficulties meant he sometimes called asking for a lift to school. Nonetheless, he had attended every day of classes for two months and was committed to graduating.

This case study demonstrates the young age at which disengagement from school can occur, and the impact of other issues such as substance abuse and homelessness. It also illustrates that the right support when young people are ready to make a change can lead to re-engagement.



Youth homelessness was described by several interviewees as often beginning with young people leaving home to ‘couch-surf’ with friends for a few nights. When young people stayed with comparative strangers and drugs and alcohol were involved, physical and sexual assault became more common. While couch-surfing had its risks, one PYC staff member said the dire lack of local housing support meant staying with a friend was the best option for homeless young people. Other youth professionals described the young people sleeping on the beach in Frankston and nearby. Not all of these young people were local; some gravitated to Frankston attracted by friends, the proximity of services and the beach. Among locals, professionals observed an unwillingness to leave their community to find emergency housing. For example, one 22-year-old accessing a health service had been on the public housing waiting list much of the last six years and was unwilling to leave the area. Describing his experience of family rejection and homelessness, a community professional said school was one of the first things to go as ‘daily survival’ became the priority. The young man slept on the beach, his health deteriorating over time. She described his drug habit as a ‘coping mechanism’: being ‘bombed out’ meant he did not have to deal with the reality of his situation.

A school professional described the case of a Year 10 student who was frequently out of class. The girl’s home life was chaotic: after being evicted, she and her mother lived with her grandmother, but when her mother moved to rural Victoria, the grandmother did not want the girl to remain. When she moved in with relatives 40 kilometres away, the poor public transport and distance from school led to her leaving. Describing the impact of such instability on student engagement, the school professional commented:

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 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.

Before the student left school, the interviewee said that she had to defend the student and explain her situation to her teachers, reflecting that students sometimes require ‘a more nurturing environment than what a school can provide’.

Others observed that alternative learning settings can sometimes be more suitable for homeless young people as they provide flexible, self-paced and applied vocational learning and there is no uniform. To remain engaged, these students require a lot of support and links to other services, as well as support dealing with the typical concerns faced by non-homeless students.

## Key points

The findings presented in this chapter broadly support Maslow’s theory that until young people’s basic needs are met, they will struggle to engage in higher-order tasks, and that survival takes precedence over learning. Additionally, the chapter describes various forms of social exclusion, and the multiple and complex barriers that need to be addressed so that young people can participate fully in education, the economy and society. Critical issues which may prevent participation or re-engagement in education and training include:

- lack of a stable and secure family environment, positive reinforcement and clear boundaries; and lack of acceptance of young people within the wider community
- limited access to resources and services as a consequence of place-based disadvantage and families’ low incomes and constrained networks

- unmet health needs of parents and young people (e.g. mental illness, drug and alcohol issues, undiagnosed learning disabilities)
- lack of access to decent and affordable housing, sometimes resulting in homelessness characterised by couch-surfing and sleeping on the beach.

Given the implications of these findings for educational attainment, it is hoped that government and particularly mainstream schooling (in partnership with other agencies) can respond to ensure that basic needs are addressed so that young people are able and ready to learn.

## 5 Systemic barriers to education for Peninsula youth

As shown in the previous chapter, the PYC data and interviews conducted with youth professionals highlighted multiple and complex issues affecting young people's educational participation. While some of their individual barriers do have underlying structural causes, barriers related to the education system itself were not included in the YATMIS database. This chapter describes the ways in which mainstream schooling can impede engagement and exclude students who do not fit within this structure, particularly students who experience multiple forms of disadvantage. Ongoing themes relate to the sometimes inflexible nature of mainstream schooling and the acquisition of negative identities by young people. However, the chapter also highlights that school wellbeing and careers professionals are concerned about these issues. This is explored in relation to their suggestions for change and how schools have responded with new programs and approaches.

### Culture shock: the different learning environments of primary and secondary school

The 'radically different cultures of schooling' and 'culture shock' students can experience during the transition from primary to secondary school (Howard & Johnson 2004; Nicholls & Gardner 1999) were described as barriers to participation by several interviewees. The difficult 'transition' to secondary school was cited as the cause of a number of students ceasing attendance once they reached Year 7. It is important to note that the notion of 'transition' is often understood as the relative success or failure of individuals in adapting to new circumstances; however, this focus on individuals obscures a systemic issue which is the disjuncture between two different learning environments.

A systemic cause of disengagement identified was the shift from one teacher to multiple teachers, with 'transient' students constantly moving between classrooms. One local secondary school sought to address this by providing in Years 7 and 8 some features of the primary model, such as enabling students to remain in the one work area, using team teaching and installing play equipment. A community professional believed that primary schools adopted a greater variety of teaching methods and offered more opportunities to 'learn by doing', while secondary schools focused more on talking and writing, which created an environment in which children with learning difficulties struggled. In his view team teaching would help schools to better address different learning styles. He also believed greater use of integration aides could be a means of mainstreaming and de-stigmatising both learning and wellbeing support. The dramatic change of school environment also acted as a barrier to parent engagement. A PYC staff member commented:

A lot of parents ... will say to me in primary school they were able to be involved and then they hit high school and they're shut out. You can't go in and help ... and it makes a big difference. All the studies show if you get parents involved in the school then the student does better.

Another systemic issue highlighted elsewhere in this report is the need for early intervention in the middle years of primary school to address the factors that might lead to disengagement.

### Conformity as a pre-requisite for learning

The authoritarian nature of the school system was a further barrier to learning, as also highlighted in (Myconos 2011). Interviewees did not argue that authority was inherently a problem, but that the rigidity of mainstream schooling through its many rules and requirements meant that conformity

was a pre-requisite to learn. As discussed in the previous chapter, lack of structure and boundaries at home made it difficult for some young people to fit into school structures. Likewise, cost barriers meant some young people lacked the uniform and supplies to comply with certain requirements. Ultimately, these students were singled out by teachers and were disciplined. The process of labelling such students as ‘troublemakers’ caused them to be poorly regarded and imposed negative learner identities and stigma on them at school.

Interviewees described uniform and body piercings as a major issue. One described how this contributed to the exclusion of students from learning on the basis of their appearance. She argued:

That’s saying that you don’t have a right to an education if you don’t look the way we would like you to look ... For example, I’ve dealt with a young person who looked at re-integrating back into school [but] had piercings and wasn’t prepared to take them out, and was pretty much told, ‘Look, it wouldn’t be an option for you to come here’.

In her view, discrimination against students based on their appearance was one indication of the systemic barriers to participation. These systemic barriers could be addressed through a policy mandating ‘education for all’.

This authoritarianism and emphasis on rules meant that some young people moved to the TAFE environment. The popularity of community-based CGEA and VCAL courses was attributed to the less rigid or more flexible environment. For example, one community professional described her program as based on respect rather than an extensive set of rules. It treated students as young adults and encouraged them to be responsible for their actions and choices. Comparing schools to alternative learning environments, she argued that:

Schools have rules too and [that] doesn’t always fit the students that come here. Like the piercings and things like that, that’s a school rule. And that student didn’t want to lose their identity or change their interests so they came to us.

We have the standard rules: no using your mobile in the class, respect for one another, language, no using the f-word. But as far as piercings, tattoos, no uniform—it’s not even an issue. We treat them as young adults, we expect that they treat each other with respect, but we don’t lock the door if they haven’t turned up on time to come into class. There’s no detention.

## Lack of system flexibility and inclusion of different needs

The extent to which the school system could be flexible and cater to the different needs of students also represented an issue for student retention. While some students were able to negotiate their hours, school days and subjects, it was evident that not all schools were able to cater to individual circumstances and interests. For example, because particular subjects fell outside of one school’s designated VET days, some students were unable to pursue vocational training in their areas of interest. This effectively meant that learning plans could not be tailored to the student. Likewise, there was some evidence that school inflexibility increased the demand for alternative learning. One community professional described the flexible, individual approach of the programs her organisation offered. Course contact hours were 10 am to 2.30 pm, Monday to Thursday, which enabled participants to undertake paid employment on Friday. Special contracts were also developed for students with caring responsibilities or particular employment hours, and to enable some students to study from home:

We find a lot of our students have become carers within the family unit, so they need the flexible environment to still do their schooling ... We have students that have teenage

pregnancies, they haven't always felt that school could support that ... We have one girl whose mother suffers quite badly from bipolar disorder and there is a strong drug issue within that family. She comes here because she then can help her mum when things arise. That's why she comes here, for the flexibility of it.

The provision of study supplies and the lack of a uniform also meant cost was not a barrier to participation.

## Insufficient wellbeing support

The lack of adequate wellbeing support for young people was a further systemic barrier to engagement. While progress was noted, many schools were observed by interviewees to be ill-equipped to meet the complex needs of young people. The chronic under-resourcing of wellbeing departments was a key factor.

The work of school wellbeing teams was affirmed by some interviewees. For example, a community-based worker noted their high level of referral to community agencies. In another instance, a particular school was described by several interviewees as having invested heavily in a large wellbeing team, increasing its ability to respond to student needs. Another wellbeing team had built capacity by bringing multiple careers and pathway programs into the school to support students at risk of disengaging. Through the Southern Youth Commitment (SYC)<sup>3</sup>, they also assigned a team member to assist the students most at risk of disengagement by providing personal support, referring them to specialist services and arranging other learning and work experience opportunities. However, most of this person's time was spent teaching, with only one hour per day allocated to student support. A further component of the SYC adopted by some schools was wellbeing team meetings which included education department and community agency staff. The meetings assigned at-risk students to school staff and or referred them to external agencies. This is a positive example of a more integrated approach being adopted toward student engagement.

Despite these positive examples, interviewees frequently observed that mainstream schools were unable to support young people facing multiple and chronic barriers. In addition to specialist services, these young people required far greater personal support (e.g. wellbeing / pastoral care) than currently available, to remain at school. Expressing these concerns, a school professional argued: 'I don't think mainstream school is really ever going to be that appropriate for the group of kids that are in such crisis'. The wellbeing support was regarded as inadequate also in TAFEs, whereas some interviewees believed that alternative learning providers had greater capacity to provide this support.

Inadequate investment in wellbeing support was reported as a key issue by interviewees, with school decision makers failing to allocate an adequate share of the global budget to this area. One PYC staff member reported some large schools with only a 0.6 EFT position dedicated to student wellbeing. Other interviewees commented on the part-time allocation to this role noting the impact this had on the qualification and skills of incumbents.

Wellbeing and careers staff often had significant teaching responsibilities as well. Not only did this limit the time they were able to spend with individual students but it meant that their specialisation was teaching. One PYC interviewee said some staff needed training in 'student welfare' because they were not qualified in this area. While some highly qualified specialists were appointed to these

<sup>3</sup> The SYC is a partnership including the Southern Metropolitan Regional Office of the DEECD and other key educational stakeholders that supports Year 12 retention and education and training pathways.

roles, it was believed that schools sometimes moved underperforming teachers into the wellbeing area. A further issue was that pay inequality between teaching and non-teaching staff also made it difficult to attract and retain the best people. One implication highlighted by a school professional was that high staff turnover could result in ‘haphazard’ wellbeing and re-engagement programs because ‘the wheel gets reinvented every single year’. To address these challenges, one interviewee called for the Education Department to regulate wellbeing expenditure because schools had too much discretion in the allocation of the global school budget and did not direct sufficient resources to wellbeing.

## Narrow definition of ‘engagement’ and lack of broader learning opportunities

Another shortcoming of the education system, and indeed youth policy and programs in Australia generally, relates to the often narrow definition of student participation and engagement, and of learning. As noted in the previous chapter, interviewees observed that young people from low-income households had few opportunities to participate in recreation and sports or pursue their interests through activities, yet these could often be a first step toward engagement in learning.

One community professional said given young people’s inclination for risk taking, positive activities providing an ‘adrenaline-pumping high’ were needed to connect with those who had dropped out of formal education. An example of this was the local football club for young men who were long-term disengaged. Established by local police with support from volunteer mentors and PYC, the club sought to build self-esteem, structure and respect for authority through positive relationships. After a period of participation, the young people were linked into ‘taster’ training at a local TAFE.

Another community professional similarly saw a link between access to sport and recreation and general health and the ability to learn. In his view physical health was an issue for young women who tended to stop playing sport in high school, as well as young people from low-income households who had limited chance to experience activities such as mountain biking, camping or sailing. Broader learning experiences could develop young people’s sense of self-worth and strengthen engagement or act as stepping stones towards re-engagement in education or training.

The value of such activities for young people with disabilities was also stressed:

Quite a lot of the time kids do much better with adventure-based therapy or something that’s active, that gives kids a chance to develop self-esteem in a practical way rather than through talking about it. That’s even more so the case for kids with an intellectual disability who can’t process things well enough to engage with counselling.

Some school-based interviewees also emphasised the importance of broader learning activities. One commented on a popular activities program operated by Frankston’s Gateway Church. Another referred disengaged students to Operation Newstart (an adventure and esteem-building program supported by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Victoria Police). However, they said that access to these programs was often limited. One school operated a special camps program (in addition to year-level camps) but it had a limited student intake.

[To prevent disengagement we] run a number of programs—camping, outdoor wilderness-type experiences for students from Year 7 level for boys and for girls—and there’s also

other outdoor education programs and camping programs at each year level which again build self-esteem, confidence, teamwork, try and engage students ... [It] would probably be a great experience for 150 Year 7 students, and we can only take 12 girls and 12 boys.

## Limited access to effective re-engagement and alternative programs

A further systemic issue related to re-engagement programs to which disengaged young people were referred. Many schools offered or referred students to short-term, applied re-engagement programs which often included a vocational or applied learning component. Examples mentioned by interviewees included Hands On Learning (school-based projects such as maintenance), Peninsula Training and Employment Program (PTEP) and the Brief Out of School Training (BOOST) program (one-term program in literacy, numeracy and woodwork), Handbrake Turn (Certificate 1 in Automotive), Sages Cottage, Myuna Farm, the Southern Teaching Unit and the BSL's former Furniture Works training centre.

Several interviewees noted a shortage of programs of this type. Demand meant that entry was selective and sometimes based on attendance or behaviour, which 'defeats the purpose'. The problem of stigma and negative learner identities was evident in comments of PYC staff about access to re-engagement programs. One person observed that once students 'got a bad name' it was hard to 'get a second chance' and the support they needed. It was also noted that as programs rarely had a 'rolling intake', if students had to wait a semester to get in, it could be too late. On the other hand, one school professional said that many disengagement problems would be eliminated if the learning philosophy adopted by some alternative programs could be adopted by the mainstream. However as this would require a very high staff-student ratio, it would be difficult to achieve on a larger scale.

In addition, short-term structured re-engagement programs and work experience for disengaging students were not always effective. When programs were located away from the school campus and did not maintain a connection between the young person and the school, they could actually further disengage students, particularly those under 15 years. A PYC case manager gave the example of a month-long work experience program for two disengaged boys, during which the school maintained little contact. When the work experience did not lead to employment, one boy left school. The other returned to school, but due to behaviour issues was told he 'wasn't welcome back'. Another interviewee described a term-long structured program from which students were intended to return, but they did not. For this reason, programs based at the school at least some of the time were preferable.

The big push over the last few years has been all these alternative education settings but they're all off campus and the kids they don't come back and it doesn't solve the problem. [In contrast to this approach] I've got a client that will not wear school uniform, will not go to class, will not behave but will go to Hands On Learning. So he thinks he's not at school but he goes to school twice a week.

The same interviewee described a re-engagement project of McClelland College where students continued to attend the school campus a few days a week, but were off-site at the Brotherhood and on excursions the rest of the time. Another school professional supported this type of approach but added that schools were reluctant to pay for extra programs:

There are areas with a real gap. [There needs to be] a one-day-a-week program so that the kids remain engaged in school for four days a week but there's one day a week that focuses on literacy, numeracy. I know that's the job of the school to teach them how to read and

write but the fact is schools do not teach kids how to read and write. They're lucky if they learn how to read and write. [The program should] focus on literacy, numeracy, resilience, anger management, those sort of things I think would be really good and a course like that I think needs to have a rolling intake. BSL as part of the Youth Connections and Youth Pathways has talked about it since inception but it just never came, never happened. I think personally a one-day-a-week program focusing on having that child look at and learn how to handle, control and identify their own barriers and [build] resilience would be invaluable. Schools really like the idea of getting the kids out one day a week for a breather.

Further issues relating to re-engagement programs included their proximity to the student's home, with students less able to attend if programs were not local. School-based interviewees noted that the programs were quite expensive and each referral entailed a considerable amount of paperwork.

In contrast to most other short-term programs, an alternative secondary school called Oakwood was mentioned favourably. Funded by the Education Department for severely disengaged students, Oakwood caters to 13–15 year olds, for whom there are few options other than mainstream schools. Young people attend a few hours per day, increasing their hours over time. However, at the time of the interviews, all places were filled and distance and transport issues acted as a barrier for students in the FMP region. One professional who valued Oakwood but worked in another school said:

I think Oakwood has got it right. They recognise that you have to offer something different for the kids. These kids don't want to be in ... a pretty standard school [such as the one that I work in, because of] the way it's structured.

She believed that the education department should introduce more creative initiatives of that type:

Set up a school [in my area] for these kids. Bring me another Myuna Farm. Give me another Southern Teaching Unit in the region, so that my kids don't have to go to Moorabbin. Bring me a Myuna Farm and slap it in Frankston, so my kids don't have to go so far .... How do I get them to Doveton? How do I get them to Moorabbin?

Interviewees questioned the efficacy of other alternatives to mainstream schooling, such as Community VCAL. Two said such referrals were a last resort. Some Peninsula programs were described as poor quality with low student attendance rates and poor outcomes. One view expressed was that stronger regulatory frameworks and outcomes assessment of alternative providers by the state education department were needed. Alternative programs tended to lack the schools' level of resources like equipment and careers staff, impacting the quality of the learning provided. Interviewees also raised concerns regarding the quality and efficacy of vocational options, and one noted that some alternative programs did not enable students to undertake substantive vocational training.

## Negative impact of school ranking systems, exit and transfer procedures

Procedures for exiting students from schools represented a further concern. For example, a PYC staff member believed that ranking schools had resulted in a more selfish system where pressure to perform made schools willing to exit students who lowered their scores. In this environment, students labelled low achievers or trouble makers were unwelcome elsewhere, making school transfers difficult.

Most of the schools are... a little bit more selfish once a student is falling a little below the line ... it ruins their score and they want to get them out of there. [In relation to particular students] a couple of schools didn't want them on their books. They just didn't want to



have anything to do with them ... They just get them off the system: 'We don't want them as a part of our school'. So it seems as if a lot of the schools, once the student falls behind or isn't giving the scores that they need to rank them among the top schools, then they don't want them there.

Although the Education Department established exit procedures, interviewees reported that these were not always followed. Several PYC staff members said that while schools were legally required to retain students until they turned 17, students were being exited at 13. In one case, a Year 8 student with behavioural problems had been suspended several times and then expelled. Due to this stigma, the worker was unable to find another school to take him, and because of his age he was ineligible to enrol in other programs. She said:

It's a fight with the schools. They don't want him there ... Once they get a label of being naughty in school, that's it and the schools just try and get rid of them. They don't try and work with them. They just try and get them out because it's about the school's reputation. Why would he want to go to a school where no-one wants him and no-one will support him, even though he did have quite a few issues? He was quite a naughty teenager, but in terms of dealing with the issue, they just try and get rid of them, try and palm them off somewhere else.

Another PYC staff member believed schools used unfair tactics and 'tricked' parents, who did not understand their rights, into signing exit forms without another place being arranged (see Don's story for an example of disengagement that might have been avoided (Box 5.1).

**Box 5.1 Avoidable disengagement: Don's story**

At 16, Don was referred to Peninsula Youth Connections by a community agency. After a period of illness and missing school, he had fallen behind in his work and the school had asked him to leave. Don's father signed the school's exit form and Don had disengaged from school when his father later decided to contact the Education Department.

After Don had been three months out of school, his case manager supported his enrolment in the CGEA program but by this stage he had 'fallen into bad habits' and his attendance was poor. Finally he decided to quit and got a job at a fast food outlet, saying he needed to work to help his dad financially and contribute to the rent. Don said that he would be happy to go to school when he was older and more mature. Concerned about Don's decision, his case manager kept in contact.

I don't see [the job] as long-term. I see it more of a learning curve for him. He's the type of kid that he thinks it's going to be better [and] greener on the other side and then after a while I think he'll come back to me and he'll say working at [the fast food chain] is not that much fun.

Now employed, Don was no longer classified as 'disengaged' and thus was ineligible for the program. However, without further study his career prospects were uncertain. Sometime later, the case manager reported that Don did return to complete Certificate II level training and was commencing a Certificate III.

Don's departure from mainstream schooling is regrettable because it could have been avoided. His PYC case manager said it occurred solely through illness and miscommunication with his parents. In the worker's experience some schools 'ask young people to leave, kind of tricking parents saying it's best if they leave and getting parents to sign them out'. Communication difficulties and not understanding the school's obligations and education department policy were critical in this regard.

A PYC colleague provided another example:

My opinion would be that schools are quite happy to let kids go if they don't fit in with what the school wants. It's really disappointing because I've had schools trying to exit a fourteen-year-old by saying: 'Here's the exit form, sign it and give it to your mum'. This is a fourteen-year-old that has no idea what an exit form is and what that means, when legally the school is meant to arrange an exit meeting [involving] a principal. They need to organise another place for that young person to go to because they are under the legal leaving [age].

While the particular school stopped this practice and now refers exiting students to the worker, this means the responsibility for disengaged students has been transferred to PYC with some support from the regional office of the education department.

The exit procedures themselves were problematic for students under 15 years because outside mainstream schools there were virtually no alternative learning programs to transfer them into. One PYC staff member believed that options were lacking in part because education funding for those under 15 was not attached to the student as it was for those aged over 15. Voicing concerns shared by other interviewees, a community professional said:

They're getting younger and younger, that's the concern. Twelve-year-olds not going to school, what do you do with them? The only option for twelve-year-olds or up to 15 is to go to school. Other than that, there is no alternative, there's nothing else.

The lack of options for this group had long-term implications: once disengaged, it could be years before young people were ready to re-engage. A community-based worker gave the example of a group of thirteen and fourteen-year-olds who had been suspended and had then disengaged from the local secondary school several years earlier. For a period, he said, they 'ran amok', getting into trouble with the police for crimes including drug-taking, violence, arson and burglary. It was only when a number of them turned 17 that they sought his help, saying: 'I've done nothing. What am I going to do? Can you help me write a résumé? You know what you were talking to me about a couple of years ago, let's do that now'. These observations were confirmed by a PYC staff member who said the long-term disengaged were more ready to re-engage than those who had recently left school. Likewise, a school professional called for PYC to follow up those students who at first declined to participate at a later date when they would be more ready to re-engage.

## Lack of a learner-centred approach and bias toward academic pathways

A further structural issue is the extent to which schools provide learner-centred teaching and a flexible and relevant education for all young people. Interviewee comments were often directed at the level of the individual—e.g. personal and family situations, 'immaturity' and students' perception that schools did not provide a relevant learning experience. However in these comments were clear implications for the way schools work, as the community professional below demonstrates.

My children's friends [have] said to me many times: 'We don't get anything out of school because it doesn't relate to what we want to do, it's just a process, we're just on this conveyor-belt process' ... They feel that they're not being prepared for work, they're just going through a process, just following a curriculum.

That school was 'absolutely boring' and teaching out of step with student learning was often repeated. One interviewee believed a lot of students in years 8–10 were not engaged and needed a different curriculum. In conjunction with alternative learning programs, interviewees highlighted

the need for other programs (e.g. recreation) to engage young people in positive activities that built skills and self-esteem, rather than allowing them to disengage from the traditional curriculum.

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 [either] stop coming to school or 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 ... or even halfway through Year 10 and they've failed everything, but the system tends to keep pushing them through.

Related to this is the systemic bias toward academic pathways. This was highlighted by one school professional who described a 'top-down' system with a focus on university entrance, VCE results and traditional academic subjects. In his view this focus dominated the whole of secondary school.

It starts from Year 7 because the pressure is always there that at the end of six years these kids have to come out the other end as good citizens and ready for university or tertiary education. Now two-thirds of kids aren't going to go that way but they're still stuck in that model, that's the overriding experience that they have in the classroom. We don't give enough time and resources to teachers who can offer these other experiences.

... The sausage-machine model of putting kids in at Year 7 and getting brilliant kids passed at Year 12 with a VCE. That's a constant pressure for the curriculum to just process kids through an educational experience shaped to the time constraints and the energy constraints that the teachers have.

This focus on academic learning over more applied vocational alternatives excluded students with learning disabilities and those who were behind. These students required alternative ways of learning and experiencing success. Another school professional said:

A lot of the kids who are disengaged with school are disengaged because their IQ is quite low and they're quite behind the expected standards. They respond with enthusiasm to hands-on stuff because there's no academic pressure on them ... You're not going to get anywhere if you sit them down to academic work for fifteen weeks.

For other students like Sophie (see Box 5.2), a problem was inadequate support at school to overcome gaps in literacy and numeracy skills which would be needed to pursue their career aspirations.

**Box 5.2 Gaining appropriate learning support: Sophie's story**

Sophie received A grades in art and drama. Encouraged by her school to develop her talent, she participated in their theatre productions, and aspired to continue this study at university. However she faced a major obstacle to this goal: at Year 11, she struggled to read or write.

When Sophie was referred to Youth Connections, her case manager supported her to address several barriers which impacted her learning. For example, the case manager worked with Sophie to help her to improve the relationship with her parents. She supported Sophie to transfer into a TAFE-based Certificate in General Education for Adults, to improve her literacy and numeracy. As her family struggled financially, PYC also covered the course fees. The worker explained:

[The school] couldn't provide the facilities there that she needed to actually get up to that level, even though they've put her up every year to Year 11... Even though the teachers in her other classes would see that she was struggling, they just don't have the resources to support her all the time.

A benefit of the CGEA program was that the small classes of 10 to 12 students meant Sophie received more support from her teacher. At school, the class sizes were much larger and it was difficult to obtain extra support.

Sophie's long-term goal is to complete her CGEA and return to her school to complete Year 11 and further her study of the arts. This case study illustrates the problems associated with advancing students to the next grade when they have not passed the previous one, and the need for in-school supports for students to catch up on their literacy and numeracy so they are equipped with the basic skills to progress through their schooling.

## Limited access to vocational pathways

The value of applied learning and vocational pathways was emphasised by most interviewees, but systemic challenges in relation to access and quality emerged. Unfortunately, vocational and applied study pathways are limited to the later years of secondary school (e.g. VET subjects). This does not assist the retention of younger secondary students who struggle with the mainstream curriculum.

Two school professionals described the lesser status accorded to 'trades education'. In their view, increasing the school leaving age to 17 in the absence of trade schools was 'ridiculous' and vocational pathways should be promoted as a legitimate choice rather than an option for 'the naughty kids'.

While most schools offered on and off-site VET training, one interviewee said some schools did not promote VET subjects because their high cost would cause budget deficits. The interviewee said that schools incurred a cost of \$800–\$1500 per student doing a Certificate III subject, and were not fully funded to cover these costs. VET outside school was a less costly option, with subjects costing the student \$500, and less if they held a Health Care Card.

Some interviewees stressed the importance of VET subjects in school. They described how in addition to classroom learning, students worked in restaurants, hair salons, woodwork and automotive workshops, obtaining accredited training which would help them gain employment. In accordance with the Southern Youth Commitment one school professional said both VCAL and VET students were encouraged to obtain 'as many certificates as they can' to broaden their employment skills and options.

To support VET training, a number of the school professionals described the career pathway and transition support offered. One school provided one class per week in Years 10 to 12 focused on career and personal development. Most schools provided career support, and some interviewees said their school provided mentoring to identify personal goals and career pathways. The majority of interviewees described the options available to young people in a positive or neutral manner but a couple perceived the current system negatively as it provided too many choices. The latter group believed that pathways education should take a 'tough' approach, addressing 'unrealistic expectations' about employment opportunities and the work undertaken by juniors. They also believed the Parents as Career and Transition Supports (PACTS) program should be offered earlier in high school to support young people and their parents.

Outside schools, concerns were raised about access to vocational training and the outcomes for young people. One interviewee believed the Compact and Youth Training Guarantee introduced by the Australian Government had led to some dubious practices by registered training organisations

(RTOs) because of the sheer amount of funding available for young people. Examples included Certificate II courses being offered in two weeks and the extreme case of an RTO providing a three-certificate program in three months that would net \$8000 per student.

Interviewees also observed that the National Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions deemed Certificate II as an equivalent to Year 12 despite its much shorter duration and its content which might not include literacy and numeracy components. Thus a short hospitality course could be treated as equivalent to Year 12, with misleading implications for the skills and long-term employability of young people. Of particular concern for Youth Connections, the eligibility criteria excluded Certificate II holders, so once a young person had obtained such a qualification they were ineligible for further support.

A community professional gave the example of a client whose school asked him to leave and referred him to a pre-vocational program because while school ‘didn’t fit the bill’ he ‘wanted to learn’. However the young man quit after four weeks because the school had sent all the ‘bad boys’ there and they created an impossible learning environment.

Physical access to training was a further issue. Several interviewees observed that some programs had been moved from the local TAFE to Dandenong and Berwick. While a trade training centre was planned for Frankston, this did not help young people in the present. Thus unlike those in urban locales where there were more course choices and competing TAFEs, young people had to travel long distances to access training. This effectively excluded some, and particularly those facing other barriers to their participation. A community professional commented:

Our kids can’t travel to Berwick, that’s almost impossible—like it’s 6000 buses and it’s crazy, it’s not something that we would expect them to do. They’d have to be so dedicated and the problem is these are the kids that aren’t dedicated. These are the kids who can’t get up in the morning. These are the kids who’ve got other issues.

## Key points

In this chapter, the systemic barriers that impede and exclude young people from participating in mainstream education and training are described. Central issues relate to the inflexibility of mainstream schooling and the emphasis on academic pathways which have a negative impact on the participation of learners who cannot fit within the system. Thus, rather than providing education for all, the system prevented some young people from learning. The barriers included:

- culture shock, for some students in Year 7 and 8, caused by the vastly different environments of primary and secondary education and their impact on child and parent engagement
- conformity as a prerequisite for the opportunity to learn, in what was regarded as an authoritarian school system
- lack of systemic flexibility to provide for students with different needs and responsibilities
- insufficient wellbeing and holistic support for young people in schools, partly due to inadequate allocation of resources in school budgets
- lack of broader learning opportunities to build esteem, social and other skills as a platform for engagement with learning

- limited access to effective re-engagement programs and to alternative education with good student outcomes
- the negative impact of ranking systems on student retention and transfers, non-adherence to school exit procedures, and the lack of alternative options for those aged under 15
- the lack of a learner-centred approach and a bias toward academic pathways, which reduces the relevance of school to those who are not suited by this framework
- limited access to meaningful vocational pathways required to produce job-ready young people.

## 6 Peninsula Youth Connections in operation

This chapter documents the Peninsula Youth Connections program. Basic aspects are described in Figure 6.1 and the program logic is mapped in Appendix A. The main objective is to analyse PYC as an applied case of the federal Youth Connections program, to reflect on the model's advantages, constraints and opportunities for development.

### Figure 6.1 Peninsula Youth Connections: in brief

Peninsula Youth Connections is delivered by staff employed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce at BSL's High Street Centre in Frankston. This centre also provides a range of youth-focused and other services including a Community VCAL program, employment support and financial inclusion programs.

PYC has six case managers who provide intensive, individual case management to 13–19 year olds at risk of disengagement or already disengaged from education. Clients are also referred to specialist services (e.g. mental health, housing) as required. PYC's purpose is to improve the wellbeing of the young people and address the barriers to their engagement. Case management is place-based, with workers assigned to specific sub-regions of the FMP region to ensure that young people in all areas can access the service and to develop stronger connections with schools and agencies in each locale. A central triage system is operated by case managers to manage client referral into the program, eligibility and prioritisation. Clients can participate in the program for up to two years. While the total client intake is at the discretion of PYC, DEEWR criteria and a service agreement determine eligibility, with clients classified according to service type:

- Type 1: most at risk of school disengagement (20% of intake)
- Type 2a: disengaging/short-term disengaged (30% of intake)
- Type 2b: disengaged for more than three months (50% of intake).

In addition to the case managers, PYC has a dedicated Re-engagement Coordinator who runs activities in partnership with other agencies to recruit and strengthen the engagement of clients. An additional focus of PYC is building regional youth service capacity through hosting and participating in local events, disseminating information and findings (for example through this evaluation) and serving on committees.

#### Key statistics

- Staff: case managers (5 full-time and 1 part-time) plus a Re-engagement Coordinator (i.e. outreach and activities). Other program staff include the Program Coordinator, Administrative Assistant and a part-time Researcher. Program oversight is provided by BSL's High Street Centre Senior Manager, with support provided by TaskForce.
- Clients: 248 from 1 January to 26 August 2011.
- Contractual outcome requirements: a minimum of 201 to a maximum of 249 client outcomes (i.e. indicators of strengthened connections or re-engagement) per year, with a distribution by client type as follows: Type 1, 40 outcomes; Type 2a, 60 outcomes; and Type 2b, 101 outcomes.
- Young people who achieved a final or progressive outcome January–June 2011: 117.

## The value of the intensive case management and referral

Intensive case management was a core element of the Youth Connections model and regarded as one of its strengths. For example, a school professional said that while they had a rapport with students, their efforts were focused on vocational support while Youth Connections workers could support students with a broader range of issues (e.g. bullying, home life and relationships with parents, and mental health). The story of Zoe (see Box 6.1) shows how PYC staff and the school chaplain worked together to help her overcome her anxiety about bullying and re-engage gradually with school.

### **Box 6.1 Successful re-engagement through intensive support: Zoe's story**

Zoe stopped attending school in Year 7 and after one term was identified as a 'school refuser' and referred to Peninsula Youth Connections. Bullying was one of the main issues underlying her anxiety about school attendance. Her mother made several attempts to contact the school to arrange an interview but messages were not passed on to the appropriate person.

The PYC case manager visited Zoe at her home where they completed self-esteem building exercises and discussed strategies to address bullying. After several visits, the case manager set up a meeting with Zoe's mum and the school. The case manager described the school as 'really supportive' and 'flexible'.

Fortunately the school had a chaplain, who was able to visit Zoe at her home. They discussed Zoe changing to another class to be with friends and changing her learning plan with a reduced timetable so that she could reconnect with school gradually.

This case study suggests that terms such as 'school refuser' can disguise a range of individual (student-based) and systemic (school-based) issues in relation to school participation. In this case re-engagement was achieved through intensive work with Zoe by both the case manager and the chaplain, as well flexibility in relation to school structures.

Unlike in the earlier Youth Pathways, the frequency and duration of meetings with clients was not prescribed for Youth Connections, so these could be tailored to the situation of the client. Likewise activity programs could be developed to meet emerging needs. For example, when a number of girls were on the Youth Connections waiting list, a short program was arranged to link them with PYC until they could be case managed. Also the program allowed case managers to work with the families; and one case manager commented how integral her work with parents was.

Client referral represented a further component of the program. Case managers said specialist assistance was required to address housing, mental health and substance abuse. One community professional described PYC as a 'one-stop referral' whereas in the past school staff had to investigate a wide array of programs without knowing if they were suitable for a young person. Thus, feedback from some interviewees endorsed the value of Youth Connections intensive case management and referral model.

## Lowering the age range and the need for earlier intervention

Interviewees observed that while the PYC age range (13–19 years) largely accorded with the years spent in secondary school, students were sometimes aged 12 in Year 7. Lowering the age



range to 12 was suggested. One of the most common observations was that young people began to disengage from school at an earlier age, often in the middle years of primary school, and by the time they reached secondary school it was too late. It is worth noting that two primary schools in the FMP region were commencing engagement programs unconnected with Youth Connections; and PYC staff said Mission Australia was also starting a program for young offenders aged 8–13. Other states such as Tasmania did not share Victoria's age restrictions and included primary school students.

While calling for earlier intervention, PYC staff did not suggest Youth Connections itself be available to primary school students. Case managers in the current framework are not child but youth specialists, so adaptation would have implications for staff qualifications and skills. Moreover, given that Youth Connections is an intensive case management model for those most at risk, a broader approach would be required for early intervention.

## Redefining equivalent attainment

Young people with Year 12 or its currently recognised equivalent (Certificate II completion) are ineligible to participate in Youth Connections as the program addresses the federal Youth Compact goal of 90 per cent Year 12 or equivalent completion by 2015. Most PYC staff saw the equivalence of Certificate II as problematic on the basis of the duration, content, quality and long-term outcomes of Certificate II courses. One gave the example of a young person who completed Certificate II in Hospitality in six weeks, while another had heard of a Certificate II level course being completed in 14 days. This was regarded as inadequate compared with the 12 months of study required for Year 12. Likewise the content of Certificate II courses differs substantially from Year 12 and does not necessarily include a literacy or numeracy component. This can lead to young people entering the workforce with limited basic skills. Recent Australian research suggests that in terms of the volume of learning, Certificate II should not be regarded as an equivalent to Year 12, and that for females, Certificate III and not Certificate II is an equivalent in the prospects it affords for full-time employment or full-time study (Lim & Karmel 2011). Moreover, obtaining decent, long-term employment seems less likely for the early school leaver with only a Certificate II.

Added to the concern that Certificate II was not equivalent to Year 12 was the fact that holding a Certificate II excluded young people from participation in Youth Connections. Thus for teenagers who completed a Certificate II in child care or hospitality and were unable to obtain employment or changed their mind, no support was available. One worker said: 'We can do exceptions and waivers but really they're not eligible and a lot of young people we turn away because of that'.

Interviewees recommended that government policy be changed to treat Certificate III (rather than Certificate II) as equivalent to Year 12 attainment. Moreover to provide the essential life and job skills, requiring a literacy and numeracy component in these courses seems logical.

## Youth Connections' distinction between education and employment

The primary objective of Youth Connections is re-engagement in education, while young people seeking work are referred to a Job Services Australia provider. However education and employment are not mutually exclusive. Many young people study while working a part-time job. Several interviewees commented on this issue, one school professional saying it had not been possible to refer 'school refusers' to the program because they worked 15 hours per week in a takeaway food shop. Other young people participate in employment as part of their schooling, for example through school-based apprenticeships. Several staff believed young people were deemed

ineligible for PYC because of the way they articulated their goals, for example, saying they wanted to work and not saying they were willing to undertake training as well. A further example of the eligibility restrictions was that because some pre-apprenticeship training was equivalent to Certificate II, young people who completed it and were searching for apprenticeships could not be assisted by Youth Connections staff. These examples suggest the program criteria create an artificial boundary between educational and employment engagement that does not match reality.

### The intersection between Youth Connections and Job Services Australia providers

The research explored the relationship between Youth Connections and Job Services Australia (JSA) providers as perceived by youth professionals. Key differences between Youth Connections and JSA services relate to their eligibility criteria and objectives. Youth Connections assists 13–19 year olds seeking to re-engage in education, while JSA supports those aged over 15 seeking employment but also provides assistance with training. For this reason JSA providers were a source of support for young people who had a Certificate II and were ineligible for Youth Connections. Likewise Youth Connections clients who wanted apprenticeships or traineeships were sometimes referred to JSAs because they would have greater access to jobs.

One similarity was that both Youth Connections and JSAs referred young people to specialist agencies to address the barriers to their participation, and identified training courses for clients. However, unlike Youth Connections, JSA providers did not maintain contact with clients during their training. On the other hand, JSA providers had greater resources to fund training, so PYC case managers sometimes linked their clients with JSA providers to access funding to cover their training costs.

Availability of places at Youth Connections and JSAs was a further issue. One school professional had stopped referring young people to Youth Connections due to limited places, and was instead referring them to JSA providers. The interviewee said JSAs were willing to partner with schools and were permitted seek both education and employment outcomes due to the clients' 'vulnerable youth' classification. With other students referred to a Disability Employment Network on the same basis, the school was able to refer almost all of their at-risk students to these two services. The interviewee said:

Because there's so little, schools are just grabbing anything they possibly can that could help them, as opposed to the days when Jobs Pathway Program<sup>4</sup> providers [were] on the Peninsula and there were 1000 positions [for clients] and now it's very different. It was not unusual for schools to be able to refer 60 to 80 of their kids to an external provider like the Jobs Pathway Program ten years ago but [now] there's not that support. The government's putting the emphasis on schools doing more, which I agree they should be, but the reality is that it's not necessarily the case [that schools are doing more in this area].

Client intake also differed. While Youth Connections delivered the program to capped proportions of Type 1, 2a and 2b clients, JSA clients were placed in Streams 1–4 on the basis of the length of time they had been unemployed and the barriers they faced, and the intake into each stream was not capped.

It was noted that support provided to Youth Connections clients was longer and more intensive than what was offered by JSA. Youth Connections stronger case management was facilitated

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<sup>4</sup> The Jobs Pathway Program preceded Youth Pathways, which in turn was one of the predecessors to Youth Connections.

through the lower caseloads of workers. For example, the maximum caseload set for workers by PYC in the second year of the program was approximately 30 clients. By contrast, the JSA caseloads are typically higher and depend on the classification of clients. At one JSA provider the caseload was up to 55 Stream 4 clients or up to 200 Stream 1 clients. One PYC staff member said JSA providers needed scope to spend more 'one-on-one time with kids'. Another observed that these constraints make it difficult for JSA providers to address complex, multiple barriers, so some young people were referred to Youth Connections.

The difference in breadth of program objectives and outcomes was also noted. Several PYC staff members observed that the rigid, narrowly defined outcomes for JSA limited the support available and at the worst extreme, led to an attitude of: 'Here's a job, you need to turn up, otherwise you're not getting your dole'. The interviewee believed the outcomes focus of the JSA environment meant that young people were directed toward factory work with few prospects for advancement. Thus in planning the next round of JSA, he argued the focus for youth services should be the provision of education and training that provides a genuine pathway to decent and long-term employment.

Youth Connections, of course, provides a youth-focused service. In the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region, Skills Plus and AMES have partnered to provide an 'at risk' youth specialist JSA with branches at Frankston and Rosebud. However, specialist JSAs such as this are also obliged to accept older clients. One interviewee emphasised the need for JSAs to provide youth-only services run by specialists that address youth-specific needs. The need for greater support for young people accessing job services was also highlighted by a PYC case manager:

Lots of young people don't even know what a Job Network is or that it exists or what it's there for, or are even too afraid to go in and approach them themselves, even pick up the phone and make an appointment. A lot of people, young kids, won't do that so they just need the support for someone else to do it with them because they just don't have that confidence and don't have that know-how of how the system works or what they can actually get from different areas.

Overall the lack of demarcation between education and employment suggests the need to reconsider how services to engage young people in education and employment are delivered. Critical elements include youth specialists; intensive, holistic case management; and the resources to ensure access to relevant training opportunities.

## Managing regional demand

Several of the interviewees regarded PYC favourably, one describing the purpose of the program as 'excellent'. However, demand for the program in the Frankston area was described as 'huge'; this was also emphasised by PYC staff, one saying that the program could be filled twice over by Frankston referrals alone. Several said that additional staff were required in this region. By contrast, the number of referrals was much lower in the southern parts of the Peninsula.

Coping with unmet demand was a challenge for some PYC staff. At one point during the first year, one case manager at struggled with a caseload of 55 clients while receiving continual referrals. On evaluation, due to the high level of client needs, case loads were reduced from approximately 40 to 30 clients at any one time for a full-time worker during the second year of the program. However, to meet outcome requirements, this has meant working with clients for a shorter period.

Another community professional believed most PYC referrals came through Centrelink, saying in relation to PYC: 'They're just so full and they can't take any more. There's just not enough places'.

She said that her own program had over 500 clients, of whom only three were in Youth Connections (and thus suspended from her program). Other community professionals said they had no difficulty getting referrals to PYC accepted. Nonetheless the most commonly suggested program improvement was increasing staffing to meet the demand.

These findings suggest the need for PYC to revisit the distribution of case managers (currently one per geographic subregion) and consider assigning more staff to the Frankston area. However, this would conflict with the aim of providing convenient access across the region.

## Client targeting

While DEEWR is a federal program, the states and territories stipulate extra requirements for program delivery. In Victoria, 'schools carry the principal responsibility for maintaining engagement of their students' (DEEWR 2010b, p.84). However, interviewees felt that the advertisement of PYC's allocation of places in the ratio of 20:30:50 to clients of Types 1, 2a and 2b respectively, and recognition of the program's focus on non-school attenders, had reduced the number of referrals PYC received from schools. A consequence is that the true need for re-engagement support is hidden.

PYC staff supported the focus on the long-term disengaged, observing that in the FMP region the program could be more than filled by this group alone. Several expressed the preference to serve this client group alone on the basis of their greater need. For example, one PYC staff member described the difficult decision whether to take a young person who is in school but playing up (Type 1) or a person who has left school and 'hasn't got a home, has a substance abuse problem and is a victim of domestic violence' (Type 2b). Another believed that the program should include the most disengaged by focusing some of its efforts on street-based work to recruit those hardest to reach.

Interviewees suggested the need to revisit the clients targeted by PYC and consider increasing the allocation of places to the long-term disengaged. However, in the absence of stronger school-based engagement programs, a risk is that students with some connection with the school (Types 1 and 2a) would be overlooked until they became long-term disengaged and the responsibility of Youth Connections. Such an outcome would be the opposite of the Victorian Government's intention, given its emphasis on schools' responsibility to maintain engagement. However, as Chapter 5 suggests, there remain many systemic barriers to young people's engagement and retention in mainstream schools.

Feedback from interviewees indicates that Youth Connections cannot track unmet demand due to under-reporting. This suggests the need for a research instrument to monitor the perceived demand for re-engagement services both in schools and the community, that is not tied to the referral process and is thus less onerous than completing multiple pages per student.

## Limited understanding of the program

Despite information disseminated by program staff, interviews conducted 16–18 months after the commencement of PYC indicated that community and school professionals did not fully understand the objectives of Youth Connections, the services available or its difference from the programs that preceded it.

There were some misconceptions about the role of Youth Connections. One community professional had until recently thought the program was only for students who did *not* attend school. Another asked whether the program only worked with government schools and was unclear what it could offer young people. Another interviewee working for a community organisation said she had no contact with the workers and little information about the program. Yet another said they would like information on eligibility to guide their referrals either to PYC or elsewhere. One person whose organisation had been co-located with one of the programs preceding Youth Connections felt she lacked information and was disconnected from the service.

While PYC staff invested considerable time in explaining the program to the staff of local community organisations and schools, these comments suggest the need for further refined information. For example, while the current brochure for Youth Connections provides a good overview, a publication for referring professionals outlining the purpose of the program, the target group and what to expect upon making a referral might be beneficial.

Among school professionals, there had been some misunderstanding of this new program compared with Youth Pathways. A PYC staff member said it was not always understood that they could work with a young person for up to two years, compared with the six hours allocated in Youth Pathways.

A further issue was that schools were not referring all Type 1 students because they expected only a few would be accepted. On this basis it would be 'frustrating to fill out paper work for forty-five people who are not going to be placed'. One school professional said they had been told by the worker they could 'have four or five referrals at a time' but she could have referred twenty students. Another said this put them in the position of having to choose between referring the 'worst' kids or the 'redeemable ones'. Another school professional described the uncertain process this way:

We were encouraged to really be careful of who we referred so we always tended to keep some up our sleeve. When you get to the end of the year, that's when they all come through [i.e. students disengage and require referral] and you never wanted to get to the stage where there wasn't enough. Having said that, there was no [advice from PYC staff, such as]: 'This is how many kids you've got'. If there were other schools that were hungrier ... then you could get to September and [PYC could] just go: 'Sorry' ... We were told: 'There's no more referrals for you, we'll work with your existing clients'. That's where we started clamouring for who else can help these kids.

More recently this interviewee had been told PYC would not be taking referrals from schools anymore, as referrals would come from Centrelink instead. In the absence of strengthened school-based re-engagement programs, a potential implication is that students are left until they become Type 2b clients.

Another referral problem was that school exit forms generated by the education department asked staff to identify the steps undertaken to transfer students to another program. One option on the form was referral to Youth Connections. PYC staff believed the effect of this was that schools could abdicate their responsibility to transfer students by ticking this box. Moreover, referral to Youth Connections did not guarantee a young person entry to the program. Subsequently the education department's form was re-phrased to avoid the perception of automatic entry.

Referral and demand were also seasonal. PYC staff observed that at the start of the year, absences were not immediately noticed; but there was an influx of referrals at the end of Term 1. The end of

Term 3 was also a busy referral period, as schools and students considered courses and plans for the following year.

## Improving feedback to agencies and schools

Some interviewees indicated that feedback from PYC to referring professionals was insufficient. For example, a community professional referred a student but was unclear whether she would be accepted in the program and was concerned because the period she was permitted to work with the client was coming to an end. In the past she had referred clients and not heard back; after calling, she was told the program was full and she would need to re-refer clients the next year. Her colleagues had similar experiences and were frustrated that they had not yet had a client accepted.

Several school professionals commented that they received no feedback from the case manager on the progress of the students whom they referred and who were accepted in PYC. One attributed this to the shift to client sessions occurring outside the school:

When [previous programs] were based in the school you had that feedback all the time. If a student was away [you] would utilise the service and go get some more [students] from another class and make the time valuable that this person was here. Now ... [the worker] has her appointments down the street in the afternoon ... I know there's confidentiality [issues with the worker reporting back] but it's hard now, it's a bit disengaged ... We don't know what's going on.

This was not always the case: another teacher said that she and the worker communicate regularly to ensure that students receive consistent information.

These comments suggest the need for improved communications with referring professionals to ensure feedback at strategic points (e.g. initial referral, client intake, progressive outcomes and exit outcomes), while respecting ethical requirements of confidentiality.

## Building the relationship between Youth Connections and schools

The research indicated some schools were reluctant to engage with Youth Connections; and there existed a lack of clarity around respective responsibilities to address disengagement, as well as misunderstandings of Youth Connections case management. One PYC staff member observed that there had been a 'real misunderstanding' about the role and practical operation of Youth Connections relative to the former Youth Pathways program and that this had been challenging.

### Schools' reluctance to engage with Youth Connections

Some schools were observed to be reluctant to engage with Youth Connections either because they felt they generally did not require the service, because of sensitivity between school and community agencies, or because of the limited time workers could allocate to students still attending school.

The services sought by schools varied considerably. A PYC staff member said some schools believed they could handle everything in house, whereas other schools said: 'We want you to do everything you can for us'. For example, one person said their school referred students to Youth Connections as 'a last resort' because they had a large wellbeing team and preferred to address issues first themselves, drawing on their staff and the other programs they participated in. The PYC case manager assigned to this region (who did not know the school staff member had been

interviewed, for reasons of confidentiality) said she was told in a ‘roundabout way’ that ‘We’ve got a quite a good welfare team, we can handle it ourselves’.

Other schools were observed to not engage with PYC and other services due to sensitivity about the number of their students who had disengaged, which could cast the school in an unfavourable light. One community-based worker contacted a school seeking the referral of students whose engagement was being addressed neither by the school nor Youth Connections, and was told they could provide a list of 50 kids. The school had previously been reluctant to disclose this information. In the worker’s view, schools found the referral of students ‘confronting’ and a reminder of their obligations to students whom they perceived as a problem. He believed that some school staff preferred that particular students did not attend (e.g. ‘troublemakers’) while keeping them on the school roll to satisfy the education department. A PYC staff member reflected on the time it took for schools to refer some students:

I get referrals for young people saying the young person hasn’t been here for 127 days [and I think] What have you been doing for those 127 days? Have you not tried to see what’s wrong? ... Just be on top of it a little bit more.

Adding to issues of assigning responsibility, one school professional identified an ‘us and them’ attitude when some alternative learning providers contacted schools to say one of their students wanted to enrol: ‘You sort of feel like [the alternative provider’s attitude is] “we’re picking up your pieces”’. While sympathetic, she said this attitude and the lack of a ‘collaborative relationship’ did not help the situation. This suggests the need for community organisations, alternative learning providers and schools to work to develop trusting partnerships.

A further issue highlighted by a school professional was the limited time that the PYC worker could spend in schools. While this was due to Youth Connections’ focus on students already disengaged from school, it limited workers’ ability to become a part of the school (i.e. be recognised, accessible and build relationships with the students) in the way that other wellbeing team members could. For this reason the interviewee currently referred students who were already disengaged from the school and favoured a one-stop-shop model of onsite school services with a Youth Connections worker based half-time in the school:

I think a one-stop-shop model only works if there’s a high-profile presence. People know that you can go to this part of the school ... when the student is ready for it, when the student wants it. It’s on demand almost, you’ll be able to get someone who can help with mental health issues or relationship issues or Centrelink issues or family issues or friendship issues or bullying issues or whatever.

Another school professional reported that because Youth Connections was not based in the school and had limited places, they now accessed other services. While schools did not do home visits as Youth Connections did (e.g. in the case of ‘school refusers’), the interviewee did not believe the school had benefitted from Youth Connections. This person’s view was that external workers duplicated the counselling of school staff (who had greater rapport with students) and that it was better to fund more alternative learning programs. However, this was not a common perspective. Other school professionals valued the intensive support and referral that Youth Connections provided and wished they could refer more students.

### Clarifying responsibilities for engagement

PYC staff believed that, as emphasised by the Victorian Government, schools were ultimately responsible for the engagement and retention of their students, but observed that some schools were instead relying on programs like Youth Connections. One interviewee, while supporting the shift of responsibilities to schools, believed the motivation for this decision was economic rather than the needs of young people. In her view, government members had discussed the cost of youth programs and perceived a duplication of youth services across state and federal levels, with Youth Connections introduced to reduce spending.

One PYC staff member observed that in the FMP region Youth Transitional Workers had previously been employed by some local schools (and mentored by BSL) to case manage students. As these workers were ‘a part of schools’, schools were ‘taking responsibility for their own kids with some support from outside agencies’. She preferred this model as it provided more-integrated student welfare support. Later Youth Pathways was introduced, with external workers providing support to schools, leading to the perception that schools no longer had to do this work. The staff member believed that with the implementation of Youth Connections, schools felt as though a service had been withdrawn. Supporting this, a community-based worker said disappointment about this had been voiced at a regional schools’ meeting in late 2010.

Similarly, a school professional commented that the Youth Pathways program meant schools had to pass the responsibility for following up disengagement on to others. This school had been well attuned to engagement issues and had implemented many careers and training-focused programs to address early school leaving.

This study indicates, however, that increasing schools’ responsibility for disengaged students would need to be accompanied by the resources to address disengagement.

### Clarifying the case management approach

A welcome feature of PYC was the scope to tailor case management to suit the needs of clients. Several school professionals appreciated the PYC case managers’ ability to meet in clients’ homes. However, while this was regarded positively by staff, it posed some occupational health and safety challenges for management.

A common observation by PYC case managers was that school-based work was often ineffective because young people did not attend appointments, one saying ‘you could sit for half a day and not see a student’. They found that young people who were disengaging or disengaged from schools were more likely to attend meetings in a cafe or at their home. Other venues included parks, community centres and other agencies. As a consequence, some PYC staff believed that this unseen external work led to some schools’ perception that they were not fulfilling their role. Indeed, two school professionals believed that Youth Connections workers should have a visible presence in the school and were annoyed that the worker left when students did not attend appointments, rather than searching for the student in class or providing something more for the school.

Another concern expressed by a school professional related to the school’s legal ‘duty of care’ when PYC workers case met students at local cafes. This also raised other difficulties for the school with the public perception that students should not be ‘hanging around’ the shops during school hours.



Because most case management sessions tended to occur off campus, PYC workers attended the school mainly for formal meetings. For example, PYC staff attended the wellbeing meetings of schools participating in the Southern Youth Commitment to provide more strategic support and referral recommendations for students classified as at risk.

These findings suggest the need for effective communication to school staff of the Youth Connections case management approach and of the ways that the program is able to work with schools.

Reflecting on the differences between Youth Connections and the former Youth Pathways program, PYC staff and school professionals said Youth Pathways had not been ‘based’ in schools or, indeed, closely linked with all the schools in the region. Youth Pathways workers had attended participating schools a maximum of one day per week. One PYC staff member said she felt better connected with schools under Youth Connections than Youth Pathways because of its more intensive case management model.

The comments in the last few subsections suggest the need for the Victorian education department to clarify the responsibilities of schools in relation to student engagement, and distinguish this from the role of Youth Connections. The comments also suggest the need for better communication of policies around case management and the locations where this could occur.

## Recognition of different outcomes and their weight<sup>5</sup>

PYC staff noted that a positive aspect of Youth Connections was the flexibility of outcomes that were recognised, compared with the previous Youth Pathways program and other DEEWR services such as those provided by Job Services Australia. For example, Youth Pathways was quite prescriptive, limiting case managers to six one-hourly sessions with clients, with the main outcome payments provided only if clients attended the sixth session. Comparing the JSA and Youth Connections systems, a PYC staff member observed:

In JSA you’ll get your guidelines that are probably twice as big and you’ll get another 20 or 30 documents on how to do things. That doesn’t exist in Youth Connections, it’s just the guidelines and that’s it. There’s a lot more flexibility around the funding—we get a global funding amount—and also there’s less bureaucracy in the IT system. So they’re the structural things and there’s more flexibility in holistically working with young people now as opposed to previously [when] it was all paid per hour, per session, per event. So it’s gone from one extreme to another good extreme.

Interviewees valued the fact that Youth Connections recognised both the progressive and final outcomes achieved by young people. Program staff can work towards any of 26 progressive wide-ranging outcomes which relate to participation barriers that have been addressed or minimised. Examples include improvements in anger management, medical or health issues, school behaviour, a disability, financial distress. There are seven final outcomes ranging from re-engagement in education, improved educational attendance or behaviour, to longer term outcomes such as 13-weeks engagement in education or employment.

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<sup>5</sup> Analysis of the outcomes achieved by Peninsula Youth Connections is not a focus of Stage 1 of the evaluation. This will be a focus of Stage 2.

However, a criticism of the final outcomes was the equal weight accorded to quite different achievements. For example, a young person re-engaged in education might only attend for one day before quitting, whereas a re-engagement lasting 13 weeks was also counted as one final outcome.

## The value of re-engagement activities for outreach and strengthening client engagement

A further valued component of Youth Connections was the Type 3 re-engagement / outreach activities. Noted advantages of PYC's approach were its employment of a dedicated Re-engagement Coordinator, the provision of programs lasting a term, and (initially) the inclusion of existing clients to strengthen their engagement.

Programs offered by PYC (often in partnership with other agencies) included fitness and sports programs, art and craft, holiday activities, camps, a homework program, self-esteem courses, employment preparation and a hospitality taster course. PYC staff also helped plan programs or to run them and provided financial support for the activities of other agencies.

PYC employed a full-time Re-engagement Coordinator. This role was widely regarded an asset by staff as it enabled a greater focus on the development of the youth activities needed in the area, and on building partnerships with other agencies to deliver activities. One of the community professionals commented on these activities and the positive nature of the relationship built with PYC, describing it as 'trusting' and 'sincere'. The term-long activities programs PYC offered were also regarded as a strength, as other Youth Connections providers offered shorter programs. Initially, PYC was the only program known to adopt this approach.

Other PYC case managers periodically attended activities, for example when they had a client in the group. One observed the value of such activities in building rapport with existing clients:

One of my clients I struggled to engage with her and ... [in the first session of] the boot camp she just told me everything.

Another staff member illustrated the value of the activities program with a case study. In 2010 he had run a street art program at which he met a highly disengaged and isolated young person who had been 'depressed' and spent a lot of time sleeping. He added 'he had virtually no motivation for life'. However, through the program the staff member was able to build a positive mentoring relationship with the client who was also receiving case management from another worker. After a while this led to the young person's return to school.

Other interviewees described the success of a Rosebud Swans football program, indicating the gradual process of re-engagement through recreational activities. This program brought together a group of long-term disengaged young men, providing a positive experience of structure and discipline, and (through the involvement of local police) a positive experience of authority. A community professional said:

It's really good to have adult mentors on the field when they're playing because a lot of them don't really harness their anger very well ... [The mentors] have a good understanding of young people at risk, the importance of football and what football can do. [It] can give to a lot of the young people in terms of that self-discipline, in terms of working as a team, in terms of challenges and just a whole range of stuff.

Successes of the program included one young man who was quite overweight and had low self-esteem. Since joining the team he had come regularly to training, lost many kilos and improved considerably. Likewise another young man who was in trouble with the law attended the program. While the football team coordinators initially struggled to engage him, after setting some clear boundaries, they observed a marked improvement in his behaviour. A further success of the football program was that after a period of participation, some of the young people commenced a pre-vocational TAFE course.

However, while Type 3 activities were a means of outreach and recruitment of young people into the program, high rates of referral from other professionals take up much of the PYC case management capacity. Since there was no difficulty in filling the PYC places, for the first 18 months existing clients were encouraged to take part in the re-engagement activities and the benefits of their participation were noted by case managers. More recently this practice has been modified due to the DEEWR requirement that 30 per cent of new clients be recruited through the re-engagement activities. However, the already-high demand for PYC and the number of referrals means that recruitment of new clients is not an issue. This suggests the need for greater flexibility in eligibility for activities, especially given their value in strengthening the engagement of existing clients.

## Improving program stability and sustainability

A challenge identified for both Youth Connections and youth engagement programs more broadly was the impermanence of programs as a result of workers' employment conditions, political change and re-tendering processes. This was perceived to have an impact on the community sector workforce, professional knowledge, regional services and vulnerable young people.

During the first 18 months of PYC there had been considerable staff turnover, with changes in program coordinator and two of the case managers. One staff member believed stress and the low remuneration of community-based youth workers was a factor. Another believed it had been a consequence of staff moving or a natural career progression; however, it had taken considerable time to recruit replacements, with relatively few applicants. In her view, the low pay meant that while workers were highly skilled, they were often more recent graduates.

While PYC staff believed Youth Connections was a well-designed program, the initial contract period of only two years posed a major challenge. Staff worked hard to build sustainable and enduring partnerships with schools and community agencies, but contractual uncertainty threatened this. The uncertainty had an impact on staffing: attendees at the April 2011 Victorian Youth Connections Providers Meeting said that staff were leaving in favour of positions with longer contracts. One PYC staff member said that staff leave because 'they can't stand the uncertainty'. Demonstrating this, few of BSL's Youth Pathways staff had remained to work in Youth Connections. Late notice of the Youth Connections contracts also posed practical difficulties as successful tenderers said they received notice late in December 2009 with the expectation that their programs would commence on 1 January the following year.

There was also evidence that instability and past program turnover had a negative impact on the youth sector overall. Community professionals described a constant state of flux in which providers gained and lost contracts, staff and knowledge. This process was viewed as inefficient, especially when high-performing programs had to re-tender. As one interviewee noted:

While things should be evaluated I think constantly changing programs and giving them a new branding and a new spin is actually really damaging. So I think that's the message that I'd send to the government. If something is working, let it keep working, but evaluate as you go along, so that you are not completely changing things, you're actually just tweaking things and making them into something that's more sustainable.

These comments suggest the need for government to address program sustainability. A system of continuous improvement or gradual change is better than constant flux, as this would enable programs to build momentum and enhance regional capacity.

Constant changes also made it difficult for school and community professionals to keep track of available services and understand differences between old and new programs. This affected the working relationships between PYC staff and other professionals: 'With the constant change of programs the schools get annoyed and it takes a whole year to then get them back on side'. One interviewee reflected:

Constantly programs are re-invented. It's difficult for people to refer. They're really confused about the program and schools are so busy that it can take them two years to get their head around a program.

Interviews also highlighted the negative impact of competitive tendering on regional partnerships and collaboration. It must be noted, however, that in Victoria the introduction of mandatory partnerships in the Youth Connections tendering process was aimed at addressing this.

## Building regional capacity

A further objective of Youth Connections is the development of regional youth service capacity through Type 4 activities. During the first 18 months of operation these included hosting and participating in teacher professional development days, presenting or representing Youth Connections at key community events, and membership of regional youth committees with strategic (e.g. local and state government initiatives) or service (e.g. mental health, learning and employment) aims.

Detailed study of these initiatives was outside the scope of this evaluation; but in the interviews, professionals were asked about regional youth services. Specifically, they were asked about the availability of information about services and how they kept up to date, the strengths of local services and areas for further development.

This research evaluation is itself considered as Type 4 activity, given its aims of gathering information about regional youth needs and building service capacity.

## Ensuring easy access to information

Some interviewees said they stayed informed about available youth services by attending various network meetings. Local networks established by the FMPLLEN included the School Wellbeing Coordinators Network, the Peninsula Pathways Association, the PVET Association and the Peninsula VCAL Association. The Peninsula Careers Education Association was also supported by the FMPLLEN. Other networks included the Youth Workers Network and the Service Providers Network.

One interviewee said she attended so many networks that there was information overload and overlap. Another school-based interviewee said she was 'flooded with emails and I don't know

where to look or what to open'. Two interviewees felt they learned about other services most effectively through both informal and formal personal contact such as networking and presentations. Despite this, people had difficulty keeping up to date with local services:

Sometimes I just don't know that things are out there. Then when I find out about them, I think I wish I'd known about that six months ago. Sometimes, I would like to know more about short-term things we can offer our kids.

PYC staff members believed schools required more information about external agencies to help them refer students. One PYC staff member said school staff sometimes listed referral options including programs that had closed years ago and this reduced the support available to students. She also believed that few young people who still attended mainstream schools were accessing drug and alcohol services.

These comments suggest the need to improve the information that is available to schools, ensuring that it is relevant and up-to-date. One suggestion was the publication of a youth service directory that is updated annually. Other suggestions were that staff regularly attend Youth Workers Network Meetings or teacher professional development to obtain information of this sort. However it seems likely that school resource constraints would prevent this.

### Service collaboration and planning

Interviewees observed that many services were located in Frankston, with less support available in other parts of FMP. For example, a school professional said: 'Everything's down the line, we're a little bit isolated'. Frankston, according to another interviewee, was 'one of the best serviced areas'. Nonetheless, even where services existed, a frequent observation was that demand exceeded supply and it was difficult to get young people the help they needed. Two school workers expressed frustration at the lack of mediation and legal support available locally, and many were concerned about youth homelessness and the lack of housing.

Some interviewees believed that better collaboration and coordination were needed between the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula councils to reduce duplication. However, a larger theme was the need for councils to take a leadership role in the coordination of regional youth services. Community agencies were observed to be 'territorially possessive' due to the competitive environment, while schools needed help identifying effective engagement programs that did not duplicate other services. Local government was regarded as having the expertise to develop regional strategic plans and provide a clearinghouse for information. Rather than delivering all services, one interviewee emphasised council's role in supporting agencies and schools to make informed choices.

### The value of multi-service sites

The direction in which services were moving, and indeed the preference of some interviewees, was towards multi-service sites. One community professional said of her organisation

One of the reasons young people like coming here is that it can be a one-stop-shop. They can see their doctor here, they see a counsellor here, they see a drug and alcohol worker, we have a Centrelink person that comes in sometimes to see them. So I think the one-stop-shop concept is actually quite useful for young people, they get used to going to one place and they don't like going from one to another.

The major multi-service sites in the region included Local Connections to Work (a Centrelink initiative) and Headspace in Frankston. Many smaller agencies had a staff presence at these centres for short periods of time to increase access to their services. Reported advantages of co-located services were that staff talked about issues in the corridor and knew the quality of different programs. Young people could be referred to all the required services, reducing the need for multiple service visits. Ideally, 'warm handovers' and inter-agency sharing meant that clients told their story only once. Likewise one worker was assigned to each person to address their broader needs and ensure they did not 'surf between agencies' without having their problems resolved. However, one of the challenges noted for individual agencies was that workers sometimes spent time at multi-service sites without receiving referrals or seeing clients.

Larger agencies sought to move towards a multi-service model. For example the Brotherhood located a variety of youth-focused services at the High Street Centre and PYC staff work at other community sites across the FMP area. One interviewee said this was not about agencies owning a building in every region but rather having 'a presence'. Frankston Council youth services had similarly sought to re-vitalise local youth and community centres by having a variety of workers and agencies spend time there.

Other interviewees spoke of developing schools into community hubs. One school professional favoured locating services (for example, mental health, support with income payments, relationship support and recreation) at the school site so they were available when the young people were ready to seek them. He had linked students to community agencies and made appointments for them but there was no guarantee that they would go there after leaving his office.

Thus the interviews highlighted both the trend toward, and value of, multi-service sites while highlighting some of their challenges.

## Key points

Analysis of PYC as a case study in the context of the larger Youth Connections program and policy environment highlighted aspects of the program that are valued and some which require further development, as well as producing recommendations for change. These key points have implications for the providers of PYC, the state education department and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

### Basics

- The strengths of Youth Connections include its intensive, sustained case management and the range of outcomes that are recognised.
- The current Youth Connections commencement age in Victoria is 13 and does not accord with the age of Year 7 students.
- Early intervention programs would be beneficial to address disengagement in primary school.
- Certificate II is not regarded as a Year 12 equivalent by interviewees, and renders holders ineligible for Youth Connections support.
- The current intersection and division between Youth Connections and Job Services Australia environments requires review given the often blurred line in young people's lives between study and employment.
- General information and feedback mechanisms for referring professionals could be improved.

- An instrument that measures the numbers of disengaged young people in each locality would benefit those planning services.
- The desire to provide services that are accessible to young people in all parts of the region needs to be balanced with the need to locate more staff where more potential clients live.
- The respective responsibilities of schools and Youth Connections in addressing disengagement require further explanation, as do key aspects of the program (e.g. how it works, what schools can expect).
- The final client outcomes measured by DEEWR are not currently equivalent in their weight or benefit for young people.

### Client group

- Further consideration of whether the primary focus of Youth Connections should be delivering a service across several risk categories or (given the role of schools) focusing on long-term disengaged young people would be of benefit.
- Given the value of re-engagement activities for existing clients, restricting these activities to new clients needs to be reviewed in cases where professional referral is a major means of recruitment.

### Sustainability

- Staff issues such as poor remuneration and short-term contracts undermine program effectiveness.
- Regional youth service capacity could be safeguarded by moving toward a system of continuous but gradual improvement rather than frequently changing programs.
- An up-to-date information resource listing regional youth services could build schools' capacity for appropriate referral.
- Multi-service sites are being used in the FMP region with the aim of increasing access to youth-friendly services.
- Interviewees suggested that the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula councils could provide planning expertise to community agencies and guide strategic youth service provision.

## 7 Conclusion

The evaluation of Peninsula Youth Connections approached the issue of young people's educational engagement in three ways: examining young people's unmet needs and barriers; exploring systemic barriers; and, using PYC as a case study, considering the effectiveness of the Youth Connections model in addressing disengagement.

### Unmet needs

The evaluation found that young people in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region often face multiple and complex barriers to engaging with education as a consequence of key unmet needs including:

- lack of a stable and secure family environment, positive reinforcement and clear boundaries; and lack of acceptance of young people within the wider community
- limited access to resources and services as a consequence of place-based disadvantage and families' low incomes and constrained networks
- unmet health needs of parents and young people (e.g. mental illness, drug and alcohol issues, undiagnosed learning disabilities)
- lack of access to decent and affordable housing, sometimes resulting in homelessness characterised by couch-surfing and sleeping on the beach.

These unmet basic needs made participation in learning and higher-order tasks difficult, and acted as barriers to the social inclusion of some of the young people in the region.

### Systemic barriers

The evaluation also identified systemic barriers in education, and particularly mainstream schooling, which impeded the participation of young people. These included:

- culture shock, for some students in Year 7 and 8, caused by the vastly different environments of primary and secondary education and their impact on child and parent engagement
- conformity as a prerequisite for the opportunity to learn, in what was regarded as an authoritarian school system
- lack of systemic flexibility to provide for students with different needs and responsibilities
- insufficient wellbeing and holistic support for young people in schools, partly due to inadequate allocation of resources in school budgets
- lack of broader learning opportunities to build esteem, social and other skills as a platform for engagement with learning
- limited access to effective re-engagement programs and to alternative education with good student outcomes
- the negative impact of ranking systems on student retention and transfers, non-adherence to school exit procedures, and the lack of alternative options for those aged under 15



- the lack of a learner-centred approach and the bias toward academic pathways which reduces the relevance of school to those who are not suited by this framework
- limited access to the meaningful vocational pathways required to produce job-ready young people.

## Youth Connections as a response: strengths and recommendations

The federal Youth Connections program was set up to address student disengagement and lift educational attainment. While this report presents one case study of Youth Connections and may not be representative of the national situation, it is likely that the experience of PYC will have implications for the development of Youth Connections overall. Based on the Peninsula case study, the Youth Connections program is regarded as a promising model. An observed strength is its focus on intensive and individually tailored case management as contrasted to that available through former DEEWR programs such as Youth Pathways and by Job Services Australia providers. The case studies of clients throughout this report indicate that intensive support and persistent follow-up led these young people to take steps to re-engage with learning. A second key strength is the flexibility of the model to address a broad set of barriers, and recognition of these in the ‘progressive outcomes’. Likewise the model’s adaptability enables staff to address regional needs and service gaps, such as through re-engagement activities, and provide additional support for parents to assist the engagement of their child.

However, the evaluation also indicated some aspects of the Youth Connections model that could be adapted or strengthened and where specific recommendations may be made. It also identified areas that warrant further consideration.

### The program

Recommendations to DEEWR for the improvement of Youth Connections relate to basic program elements, sustainability issues and the target client group.

#### Basic elements

It is recommended that DEEWR should:

- 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)
- together with PYC, other program providers and the state education department, develop further information and communications policies for referring youth professionals to clarify aspects of the program and standardise feedback mechanisms.

#### Sustainability

To enhance the sustainability and long-term impact of the program, it is recommended that DEEWR should:

- address staff turnover issues such as poor remuneration and short-term contracts which undermine program effectiveness
- strengthen regional youth service capacity by moving to a system of continuous but gradual improvement rather than frequently replacing the youth programs on offer.

### Target client group

To optimise the program targeting it is recommended that DEEWR should:

- consider whether the Youth Connections focus should be shifted even further towards the long-term disengaged, given the level of demand for support from this group and the responsibility of schools for student retention
- 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.

### The broader service environment

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.

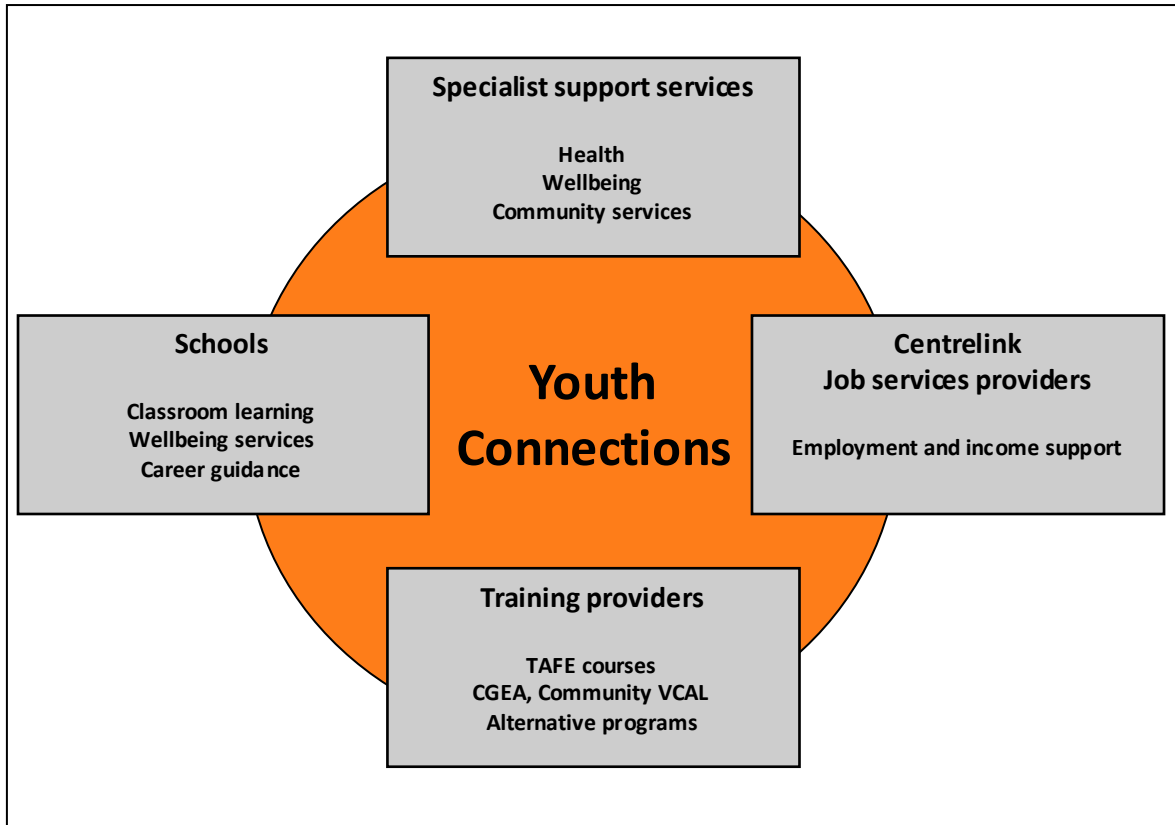
Recommendations include that:

- 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 be reviewed 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 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 7.1). 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 7.1 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.

## Appendix: Peninsula Youth Connections program logic

Inputs	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Medium-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Administrative staff	Triage – Reception/intake of referrals (calls, emails, personal visits) Manage referral database	Inform prospective clients of services Support workers with intake Support evaluation data collection	Well-administered, organised program	<p>Clients have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a stable living situation</li> <li>- health needs managed</li> <li>- a support network of family/friends</li> <li>- progressed in their education or training, or</li> <li>- secure employment</li> </ul> <p>PYC is highly regarded as a timely and effective regional service</p> <p>PYC takes a lead role in community capacity building (addresses gaps, develops systems to coordinate/integrate services)</p> <p>PYC used as a case study to inform policy and regional youth service development</p> <p>Identification of medium to long-term outcomes for young people Assessment of whether participation in PYC has led to meaningful inclusion</p>
Youth workers	Undertake outreach activities to recruit eligible clients Establish referral relationship with schools in subregion Triage – Undertake eligibility, assessment & prioritisation of clients Enter clients into YATMIS database Develop client re-engagement plans Refer clients to internal and external services	Recruit eligible clients through Type 3 outreach and school activities (20% Type 1; 30% Type 2a; 50% Type 2b) Establish a relationship and referral agreement with schools and agencies in each subregion Provide a timely and individual-tailored service to clients	Provide a service that is well-regarded by schools, youth services & the broader community Clients have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- had primary needs (e.g. housing, health) addressed</li> <li>- been reconnected to social/family supports</li> <li>- re-engaged in education, training or work</li> </ul>	
PYC Coordinator	Manage staff Develop triage at High Street Centre Progress and develop the PYC model Participate in regional capacity building activities Coordinate regional activities/events	Meet contractual obligations Deliver timely and efficient triage Good relationships built with key service agencies	Develop an effective model Provide program that is well-regarded by schools, youth services and the broader community Achieve re-engagement outcomes for at least 201 clients per year	
Partnerships	BSL and Taskforce Community Agency Partnership PYC relationship with local youth service agencies (e.g. LLEN, Hanover, Centrelink)	Pool resources to deliver PYC Collaborate on regional youth needs and service delivery (Type 4 activities)	-	
Researchers	Obtain ethics approval and gather research data Present research findings at key events Publish report of Stage 1 report in October 2011 and Stage 2 in October 2012, as well as journal and other articles	Identify needs of disengaging young people as from existing research and regional workers	Examine PYC's operationalisation of the program, and inform future development Build regional knowledge about the service needs of local young people	

Note: Material resources include DEEWR funding, use of the Frankston High Street Centre and its resources, and time, with the program to operate January 2010–December 2013.

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