

# Overcoming barriers to education

## Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation stage 1

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

### Key points

Interviews with school and community professionals showed that:

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

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

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

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

## Background

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

## The research

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

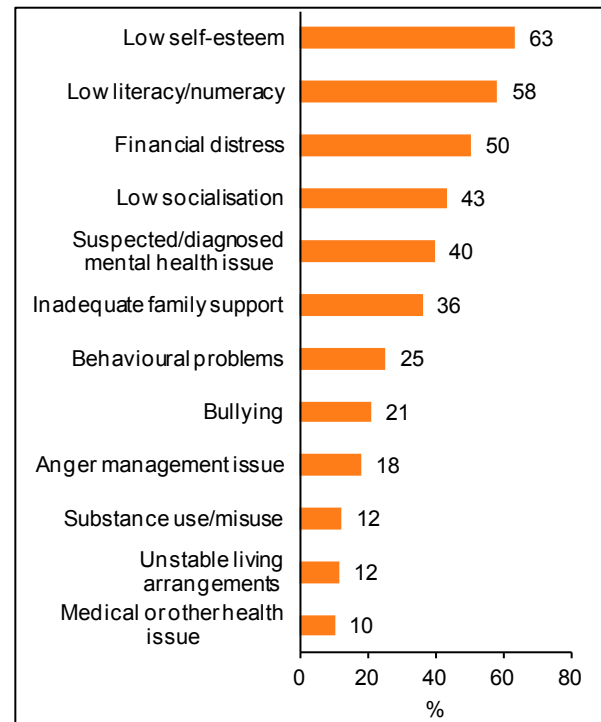
### Unmet needs act as barriers to young people's engagement in learning

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

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

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

**Figure 1 Peninsula Youth Connections clients' main barriers to engagement**



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

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

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

### Systemic barriers to participation in education

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

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

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

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

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

### **Developing the Youth Connections model**

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

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

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

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

### **Youth Connections and the broader system**

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

Recommendations include that:

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

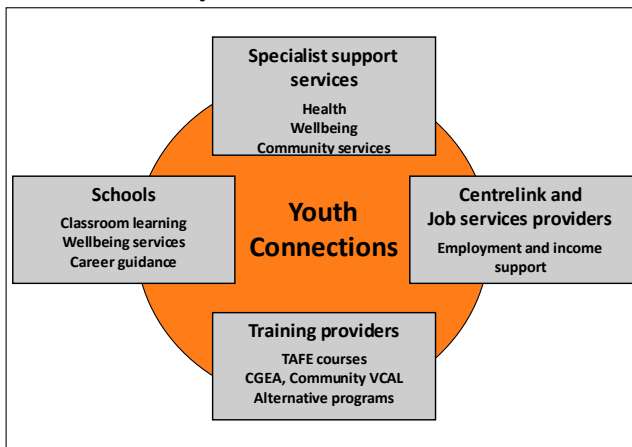
providers requires review to ensure young people receive appropriate and consistent support.

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

### Youth Connections as an intermediary between service systems

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

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



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

### Addressing systemic barriers to education

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

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

### For further information

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

For other relevant publications, see [www.bsl.org.au/publications.aspx](http://www.bsl.org.au/publications.aspx).

Summary published in 2011 by  
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