$724K grant to boost tertiary study for abused youth

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With their short but appalling personal histories of abuse and neglect, it’s no surprise young people from foster and out-of-home care also have poor educational attainment records. It’s epitomised by the fact only one in 100 enrol in tertiary education.

But a huge $724,000 grant from the Sidney Myer Foundation will go a long way towards addressing educational outcomes and could see a substantial shift in numbers in just a few short years.

Deb Tsorbaris, head of peak group the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, said carers and schools too often were focusing on the psychological and emotional health of foster students to put effort into their educational success as well.

“Having just 1 per cent go into tertiary education is a shocking figure,” Ms Tsorbaris said. “We know that there are very smart kids who are streamed off into work and vocation but who could easily go to university.”

She said they also “suffered the soft bigotry of low expectations”.

The Myer Foundation grant was made to a consortium from the education and welfare sectors and includes Federation and La Trobe universities, Anglicare and Mackillop Family Services and Victorian TAFEs.

“This sort of money makes big ideas possible,” Ms Tsorbaris said. “Students growing up in care have experienced trauma and disruption which often lead to serious learning problems, leaving them behind their peers and much more likely to drop out of school early.”

Ms Tsorbaris said while the initial work would focus on Victoria’s 7000 students in out-of-home care, the vision was to involve all universities nationally.

A report by Andrew Harvey, Patricia McNamara, Lisa Andrewartha and Michael Luckman of La Trobe University published in March found that because people who leave the foster care system, known as care leavers, are not recognised as an equity group, little data is collected and less support is provided to create access to higher education.