Positive Futures: experiences of school and further education in out-of-home care (Fremantle, Rockingham & Kwinana Western Australia)

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Executive Summary

Background

Primary and secondary school students in out-of-home care (OOHC) (State legislated foster, family or residential care) do not perform as well as their peers. This gap widens over the period they spend in school e.g. in 2015, the Year 3 national achievement rate for children in OOHC was 74-82%, in year 9, it was 44-69%. (AIHW 2015).

Only one quarter to one third of young people in OOHC complete Year 12 compared with three quarters of their peers (Create 2009, ABS 2010). And it is estimated that only 1 in 100 care leavers will engage in further education compared with 1 in 5 of the general population (LaTrobe 2015, ABS 2016).

Care leavers are overrepresented amongst those facing unemployment, homelessness, mental health challenges and incarceration.

Positive Futures

In mid-2015, Ruah Community Services received a Community Development and Participation Grant from the Commonwealth Department of Social Services to engage service providers, young people with experience of OOHC and carers in a discussion about how the 4500+ young Western Australians in OOHC might be better supported to aspire to, and engage in further education.

The project Steering Group was composed of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support (DCPFS); Department of Education WA (DOE); Create Foundation; headspace (Fremantle & Rockingham); Curtin University (Ahead program) and the Telethon Kids Institute. Advice and support was also provided by the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

The area of study was Fremantle & Rockingham/Kwinana. Given the dramatic overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care (over 50% of current population in State care) we prioritized engagement with young Aboriginal people, carers and families.

Structured interviews were conducted with more than 100 agency staff in child protection, education and related agencies; 30 young people aged 15 years and over living in OOHC in Fremantle, Rockingham and Kwinana (23% Aboriginal interviewees); 19 young people who had left OOHC (47% Aboriginal interviewees) and 17 carers (47% Aboriginal interviewees).
Key Findings:

1. More than half of all young people interviewed said that they considered further education a goal whilst they were attending high school. After leaving high school, three quarters of young Aboriginal people identified employment as their primary goal, whereas three quarters of their non-Aboriginal peers were still considering or had attended further education.

The fact that in high school, more than half of the young people we interviewed were motivated to attend further education presents a bright target for secondary and tertiary education providers seeking to engage this group of young people.

This finding also highlights the power of employment related education programs and incentives to engage students in OOHC in high school and further education.

The striking shift in aspirations amongst Aboriginal care leavers was supported by anecdotal evidence from agency and carer interviews and warrants further investigation. Our research suggests this trend may be related to the fact that the young Aboriginal people in our study had experienced a greater number of care placements, attended more primary schools, disengaged from high school earlier and stayed in State care longer than their non-Aboriginal peers.

2. Better data keeping and sharing is required to inform interagency interventions for improved school and further education outcomes for students in OOHC.

There is currently no formalised reporting of education outcomes or destination data for children in State care. Centralised data systems are in operation at both DOE and DCPFS, but these data are collected and shared inconsistently. There is minimal interagency collaboration between DCPFS and DOE on the design and evaluation of interventions to improve engagement or outcomes in high school or further education for this cohort.

Our research identifies the need for early and ongoing assessment and tracking of education needs, outcomes and aspirations at intake and throughout the young person’s stay in OOHC, including at exit from State care.

Participants recommended that this data:
- include feedback from young people, carers and families;
- is maintained accurately and consistently across schools and placements;
- is shared between DOE and DCPFS and other relevant service providers; and
• is used to develop strong and consistent interagency processes to support better school outcomes and stronger pathways to further education.

3. Patterns of disengagement from high school and OOHC overlap, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and collaborative, interagency processes which engage students in OOHC commencing at the transition to high school.

DCPFS staff report that OOHC placements are at greatest risk of collapse when students are between the ages of 13 and 15. Large numbers of this age group avoid or reject contact with DCPFS to live with family, couch surf or to become street present. This process is described anecdotally as, “voting with their feet.”

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare statistics indicate that Year 9 (ages 14/15) is also the point at which NAPLAN results are poorest for this cohort. Schools and Participation and Engagement Teams (DOE) report great difficulty engaging these young people. Challenges in interagency data keeping and sharing further exacerbate this disconnection.

Our interviews suggested that in this difficult period, as for older children in OOHC, student engagement in education is generally driven by the motivation of individual staff, carers and family or by young people themselves rather than by targeted agency or interagency programs and processes. This is clearly a primary reason that the bulk of OOHC students are not completing high school or going on to further education.

Our research found the transition from primary school and the early high school period to be bright targets for interventions which engage this cohort in making school outcomes relevant and setting aspirations for further education. To this end, the 2013 DOE/DCPFS Memorandum of Understanding1 and all supporting processes require review with a focus on standardising collaborative practice and processes across the regions.

4. To improve engagement and outcomes in school and further education, students in OOHC require more targeted support for mental health and psycho-social wellbeing.

Two thirds of young people in care and nearly half of those who had left care said that they had struggled with relationships and with their perceived treatment in the school environment. Just under one third of all interviewees said that they wanted to be able to try harder for a better school experience and results.

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1 (20.5.17)
Two thirds of the young people who had attended further education said they had struggled with ‘anxiety’ which made it difficult to make new relationships and to cope with the adult learning environment.

Carers told us that more positive, supportive relationships at school and interventions to support better mental health and relationship building would improve school experiences and possibly, increase aspirations to further education amongst young people in care.

The fact that so much motivation for students in OOHC is clearly tied up in relationship building and mental health presents a powerful opportunity for service providers. This finding strongly suggests the need for accessible interpersonal support services to foster mental health and psycho-social wellbeing at school and into further education.

**Summary of recommendations by interviewees:**

1. Improved data and information sharing between relevant service providers.
2. Introduction of interagency processes, evaluation and monitoring tools aimed at improving and embedding the ambitions for education outcomes documented in the CPPFS/DOE Memoranda of Understanding (2013, op cit) and DCPFS Outcomes Framework².
3. Increased engagement of young people and carers – and particularly Aboriginal carers and community - in the development of psycho-social interventions for better school transitions, experiences and outcomes
4. Brokerage of school-based employer, training and further education programs and incentives targeting C students in year 7 and laying foundations for school completion and pathways to further education.
5. Introduction and promotion of financial, accommodation and mental health support services to help facilitate the take up of tertiary education (via DCPFS, tertiary institutions and other employment and education providers).
6. Review of tertiary education policies to ensure the identification of care leavers as an Equity Group.

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² (20.5.17)
Out-of-home care and education outcomes Australia

Australian children and young people with experience of OOHC (State legislated foster, family or residential care) have poorer life outcomes than their peers. Often from lower socio-economic backgrounds and with experience of trauma and/or neglect, they are likely to experience multiple care placements, changes of school and friendship groups. Contact with family members is often intermittent and complex. As a result of this disrupted life experience, young people in OOHC often struggle to make the key educational transitions which help lay the foundation for a secure future. As adults, they are disproportionately represented amongst the homeless, the unemployed, those who have mental health problems and who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

The National Standards for Out Of Home Care Consultation Paper (2010) noted that “nowhere is the disadvantage experienced by children in out-of-home care more apparent than in education.” The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW 2015) reported that Australian children in out-of-home care “had lower national minimum standard (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy or NAPLAN) scores than all students in Australia (13-39 percentage points lower across assessment domains and year levels).” And disturbingly, the evidence is that students’ results get poorer over the period they spend in school:

Achievement rates varied across the 5 assessment domains (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy). Rate ranges were 74-82% for Year 3 students, 67-83% for Year 5, 56-75% for Year 7, and 44-69% for Year 9.

The cumulative nature of this disengagement at school is evidenced by extremely low high school completion rates. Create Foundation (2009) found that around one third of Australian students with experience of OOHC had completed year 12 compared with 84% of students in the general population.

As a result of this cumulative disengagement from mainstream education, care leavers are much less likely than their peers to commence or complete further education. While around one third of young Australians (aged 20-25) are engaged in tertiary education it is estimated that only 1 in 100 Australian care leavers will participate in tertiary studies.

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LaTrobe University research (2015) found that care leavers continue to be “largely excluded from the level of education that brings the highest wage premiums and lifetime rewards.” Likewise, we are poorer for the loss of these young people as potential leaders who might influence and inform our community.

Project overview

Ruah Community Services has a longstanding commitment to supporting those experiencing disadvantage, with a particular focus on mental health and wellbeing across the lifespan and working alongside the Aboriginal community in WA.

Previous research (e.g. Harvey et al (2015) and Create Foundation) has identified many barriers to successful higher education outcomes faced by young people with experience of out-of-home care. To date, however, there has been limited engagement of those with lived experience of OOHC systems about their personal views of this journey.

In 2015 Ruah received a Community Development and Participation Grant from the Commonwealth Department of Social Services to bring together agency staff, young people, carers and families with lived experience of OOHC to ask what it would take to build stronger pathways through secondary school and into further education for young people in State care.

This research provides a localised evidence base (the study area was confined to Fremantle, Rockingham and Kwinana) for understanding the challenges faced by young people in OOHC through secondary and tertiary education. We present the views of staff, carers and young people in the form of recommendations to agencies for systemic and program changes to improve education outcomes and experiences.

Methodology:

1 Desk top research: relevant Australian and international research was reviewed, with examples of innovative responses to improving participation and completion rates by care leavers in secondary and tertiary education highlighted. An environmental scan was undertaken of the relevant policy and program environment in Western Australia.

2 Consultation

Structured interviews were developed in conjunction with specialist Aboriginal consultancy Transcend Initiatives, for use with agency staff, carers and young people (see Appendix 2).

We consulted young people about their experiences, aspirations, challenges faced and the resources they had accessed along their journey through school and further education. Two groups of young people were consulted:

- those aged 15 and over and currently in out-of-home care in Fremantle, Rockingham and Kwinana; and
- those aged 15 and over with past experience of out-of-home care.

We also consulted with:

- carers, families and elders to hear firsthand about their experiences and needs around supporting school completion by young people in their care; and
- agency staff in key roles in this process, including: DCPFS, Department for Education, TAFE, Universities and carer related services.

3 Participant review: research and consultation data was collated and shared with participants and more broadly with other interested parties. Discussions were held to highlight successes and challenges in the local environment and to further develop suggestions around ways to strengthen pathways from secondary school to tertiary education for care leavers in WA.

4 Project Report: outlining the research process, findings and participant recommendations.

Study Population

Group 1: Young people aged 15 years and over currently in care in Fremantle, Rockingham and Kwinana (data provided by DCPFS 30 April 2016)

At the time of the study there were 84 young people aged 15 to 18 years (26 of whom are Aboriginal) in care of the DCPFS in the Fremantle, Rockingham and Kwinana districts:

- 43 of the 84 were engaged in education (38 enrolled in secondary school) or training (five enrolled in a Registered Training Organisation/TAFE). Information was unavailable on the central DCPFS database for the remaining 41 young people;
- 30 of the 84 had an up to date current Education Plan (Education Plans are mandated to occur annually in consultation with case workers, schools, carers/family and young people and outline academic achievements, challenges and goals including aspirations to further education). Note: DOE estimate that
number of young people in care with up to date Education Plans is over 90%\textsuperscript{11}, while DCPFS estimate this number at closer to 50%;

- 54 of the 84 had a up to date Leaving Care Plans (DCPFS Leaving Care Plans are mandated to commence at age 15 years in consultation with case workers, carers/family, young people and incorporate practical, social and educational needs and goals for independence from OOHC at age 18 years);
- 29 had between 1-3 OOHC placements; 28 had 4-6 placements; 18 had 7-10 placements and 9 had 10 or more placements;
- 11 had a formally diagnosed mental health condition although DCPFS advised that all of these young people had experienced trauma.

Group 2: Young people aged 15 years and over who had left out-of-home care. This group was identified via DCPFS, Foyer Oxford, Crossroads and via community networks.

Group 3: Family and Foster Carers and staff who had worked in group homes. This group was identified by DCPFS, agency staff and via community networks.

Group 4: Staff and management in education, child protection, tertiary and training services and community agencies supporting children in OOHC, carers, families and care leavers. This group was identified via Steering Group members, desktop research, self-referral and participant recommendations.

\textsuperscript{11} DOE 2015/16 Annual Report
Background: Out-of-home care WA

Children and young people in care

In Western Australia, children and young people with a substantiated risk of harm may be placed in out-of-home care under the guardianship of the WA Department of Child Protection and Family Support (DCPFS) under the Children and Community Services Act 2004.

The majority of these children and young people are housed with relatives (44%), foster carers (36%) or in residential care facilities (10%). At June 2015, there were 4,503 children in the care of DCPFS. This number is increasing, with children entering younger and staying in care longer. Nationally, Aboriginal children and young people are 10 times more likely to be in care than the general population. In WA, Aboriginal children represent just over 50% of the current population in care (aged 0-18) while forming only 5% of the population aged 0-17 years. The number of young Aboriginal people entering OOHC is also increasing at a greater rate than that of the general population.12

Over-representation of Aboriginal children in OOHC

The 2,14413 Aboriginal children and young people currently in OOHC in WA are additionally impacted by an intergenerational history of forced removal from family and community. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal Islander Child Care (SNAICC) advises that “the damage caused by forced removal has created a cycle, which contributes to higher and higher rates of child removal.”14

The factors in this cycle include socio-economic disadvantage, cultural and familial dislocation and imprisonment. The challenges faced by Aboriginal families in Western Australia cannot be underestimated. The impact of these challenges is evidenced by the fact that Aboriginal children are 10 times more likely to be in OOHC, and Aboriginal adults are 18 times more likely to be jailed than the general population. (WA has the highest age standardised imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment rate

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14 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (2013), Value and Respect Culture – Connection to Family Supporting Carers: To Care for Our Children
at (3,663.5 prisoners per 100,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult population)\textsuperscript{15} compared to 166.6 prisoners per 100,000 adult non-indigenous population)\textsuperscript{16}.

Data on students with experience of OOHC in secondary and tertiary education

As noted by Harvey et al (2015) the lack of available data on education outcomes for young people with experience of OOHC contributes to the perpetuation of negative life outcomes for this group. Without accurate assessment, attainment and destination data, agencies are unable to design appropriate interventions to improve education outcomes or to develop successful pathways into and through further education for this cohort.

In the course of our research to date, we have identified that in Western Australia:

1. DCPFS and DOE do not have robust interagency processes for tracking, intervening in or improving the school experiences or outcomes of students in OOHC.
2. NAPLAN results are poorest for these students at age 14, the same age at which OOHC placements are most likely to break down. Department of Education and DCPFS staff report that large numbers of this age group disengage from both OOHC and from regular school attendance. This pattern is not being addressed jointly by DOE and DCPFS.
3. Universities and TAFE (the two biggest providers of further education in WA) do not actively engage students in OOHC whilst at school. Universities do not treat care leavers as an equity group, neither do they monitor or report on the participation or completion rates of the small number of care leavers who commence tertiary studies.

These barriers will be further unpacked by our research. Opportunities for improved data collection and sharing by agencies will be highlighted as a fundamental factor in improving the transition from school to further education and for successful higher education outcomes by students with experience of OOHC.

The working environment – reform and activity currently underway

Department for Child Protection and Family Support (DCPFS)

The DCPFS reports that an increasing number of children and young people in care have “complex, intense and trauma-related needs”. There is also “increasing difficulty in

\textsuperscript{15} (4.1.2016)
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4517.0~2014~Main%20Features~Aboriginal%20&%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20prisoner%20characteristics~10007

\textsuperscript{16} http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4517.0~2014~Main%20Features~Western%20Australia~10019
attracting and retaining enough suitable foster carers to provide quality placements, and in particular long-term placements”. The Department’s view is that:

_Ultimately, these trends detract from the quality of life outcomes and opportunities for children in out-of-home care._17

This view reflects Australian research evidence to date that children and younger people living in this over-stretched system are more likely to experience social, economic, and personal disadvantage including homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, physical and sexual abuse and mental health issues18.

In order to address the complex pressures building in the OOHC system, the WA Government is implementing a reform strategy focussing on improving the stability and effectiveness of current systems and improving outcomes for these most vulnerable children and young people. The core goals of this reform are to:

1. Realign system to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and families;
2. Increase certainty and stability for children, carers and families (permanency planning); and
   - where safe, prevent children entering out-of-home care;
   - where safe, reunify children with parents in a timely manner; and
   - when it is not safe to reunify, assertively pursue stable, quality and permanent out-of-home care arrangements.
3. More equitably allocate finite resources.

Educational achievement is one of six areas identified in the new DCPFS ‘Outcomes in OOHC Framework’, in acknowledgement that education is both a right of children in care and a measure of the success of the OOHC system itself.19 One of the reporting measures is “the proportion of young people who complete Year 12 or equivalent VET”. In addition, a longitudinal study has been commissioned to investigate and report on the outcomes for care leavers aged 25 years in order to assess the Department’s long term performance.20

The DCPFS has also recommended key legislative amendments requiring all government agencies to prioritise services such as housing, education and health to children in care,

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18 Senate Community Affairs References Committee – Out of Home Care (August 2015).
or who have left care. This approach will build on existing Memoranda of Understanding and informal interagency processes and activities occurring at a regional level.

In April 2017, the WA State Government announced that DCPFS will be restructured and amalgamated into a single Department of Communities along with the Departments of Housing, Local Government and Communities and the Disability Services Commission. It is currently unknown how this will impact the DCPFS reform agenda or working environment.

WA Department of Education

In 2016, the WA Department of Education identified “challenging family circumstances; severely disrupted education; placements in multiple care homes; and the impact of significant trauma” as contributing factors to school disengagement.

It announced that it would reform its approach to students “requiring intensive engagement and behaviour support.” The three key components of the new approach include:

- A new high school has been established specifically designed to meet the learning needs of up to 20 severely disengaged secondary students. Learning is based on a separate curriculum (to that of mainstream high school) which is designed to strengthen literacy and numeracy skills and have a strong individual focus. Family and community resources are also utilised to support student goals;
- Twelve Behaviour Centres have been replaced with 13 engagement centres delivering school-based behavioural education and support for teachers and other staff, with limited provision for short-term, centre-based learning where required; and
- The combination of student engagement and behaviour services into a single State wide service.

The 2015 DOE Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework sets expected standards for all staff when working with Aboriginal students, their parents and families, and communities. The Framework supports staff to reflect on their behaviours, attitudes and practices with a view to “progressing from cultural awareness to cultural responsiveness so learning outcomes for Aboriginal students can be maximised”.

A new DOE Student Attendance Toolkit is designed to assist leadership teams in schools to build student attendance into strategic, operational and classroom planning; to target the causes of absence in the classroom; and can be used in conjunction with families and the community.

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23 ibid
Technical and Further Education (TAFE)

The State Government’s Training Sector Reform Project, commenced in April 2016 and will see the previous 11 colleges of TAFE collapsed into 5 to oversee the network of 70 campus locations across WA. These reforms are aimed at streamlining TAFE performance and promoting increased flexibility and relevance in the training sector.

In the study region, South Metropolitan TAFE has had an intermittent, informal arrangement with DCPFS staff to waive standard course fees for young people (aged under 25 years) in OOHC. There has been lobbying for some years to reinstate a formal commitment by Department of Training to extend the TAFE fee waiver to all students with experience of OOHC. The waiver at South Metropolitan TAFE is provided at the request of DCPFS staff and upon enrolment.

Outside the contact via DCPFS, there is no formal procedure or identification process to pick up students with experience of OOHC at admission to TAFE. Neither is there any TAFE data available on completion rates for this cohort.

The fee-waiver is credited with increasing the number of enrolments by students with experience of State care, however, South Metropolitan TAFE estimates that there is an attrition rate of more than 50% amongst this population. This is despite OOHC students being referred to Student Services for assistance with study skills and other support upon enrolment as a result of their referral via DCPFS. Student Services estimated that despite their repeated attempts to offer support, up to 80% of OOHC students refuse contact and/or support.

Universities

HEPP

Reform in the tertiary sector is underway at a number of levels, perhaps the most relevant being the review of student equity groups and the review of the Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP) funding.

HEPP funding was introduced in 2010 to increase the participation of students of lower socio-economic status (SES) in university education. Funding to the program was cut by 40% in 2016 and tenders for a formal review of the program are underway. The HEPP reforms together with Demand Driven System of university funding have been credited with the increase in enrolments by students with low socio-economic status (SES). We know that care leavers are over-represented in the low SES population and that any reduction of HEPP may adversely impact this group of potential students.
Equity Status

The Australian Government Department of Education and Training has recently commissioned a project to review the six identified higher education equity groups. This will include consideration of ‘other potential equity groups such as refugees and migrants, care leavers, first in family, mature age students’.

The exclusion of care leavers as an identified Equity Group was identified by Harvey et al (2015) as one of the major barriers to improving university access and participation rates for this group.

Equity status would offer care leavers access to university based outreach services, targeted support at admission and throughout the completion of their studies. It would also establish better data collection and monitoring and facilitate improved policy and program support across the sector. It may also lead to the development of partnerships between universities, schools and the agencies responsible for care leavers to improve higher education pathways for this group.

Sidney Myer Fund Grant ($724,000) “Improving education outcomes for young people in out of home care”

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW), La Trobe University and Federation University Australia are joint recipients of a Sidney Myer Fund grant to improve education for young Victorians in OOHC. The project aims to raise transition rates to tertiary education and to improve educational achievement. The project includes training for foster carers and social workers; education resources for people in care; and new university programs for care leavers. Project participants will include Anglicare and Mackillop. The project is collaborative, systemic, and State-wide, and will include care leavers serving on the advisory board.

La Trobe will employ a Care Coordinator to raise educational awareness and aspirations among young people living in OOHC. The Coordinator will manage outreach programs including campus visits, guest lectures and master classes. The programs will include new resources to demystify university and provide a taste of campus life.

Under the project, the Centre for Excellence will develop certified training packages for carers, teachers and case workers. A resource and information exchange will also be developed for young people in care. These resources will assist prospective students to explore their tertiary education options.

Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) - National Priorities Pool, $127,000, Attracting and supporting care leavers from low socio-economic status backgrounds.

This project is led by La Trobe together with Federation University Australia, Western Sydney University and Queensland University of Technology. The project will develop
resources to help universities attract and support care leavers - people who have spent time in foster care, kinship care, and other types of OOHC. Original evidence will be collected through interviews with care leaver students at the four institutions, and in consultation with community sector organisations. The project will develop: agreed methods to collect and monitor care leaver data across the four institutions; a university handbook for care leaver students; and guidelines for university staff to deliver more effective outreach and support to care leavers.

**Other activity underway to address care leavers in further education:**

- Newcastle University is altering its enrolment form to add a ‘care leaver’ box to improve identification and targeting of this cohort;
- Newcastle University has received an NPP HEPP grant for the “Live, Learn Grow Out of Home Care Project”, a combination of: practical assistance through the provision of subsidised supported housing, guaranteed on campus employment, specialised campus orientation and early intervention with young people, carers, birth families, case workers and educators;
- The Victorian Government has changed its Special Entry Access Scheme application form so that there will be a specific ‘care leavers’ question on the 2017 form (this question has been on the scholarship application form since 2015);
- Curtin University AHEAD program has developed plans for a pilot project to attract and support potential secondary students (and their carers) from out-of-home care, but resources are yet to be identified to implement the program;
- A similar project (Lodestar) has been successfully established and evaluated at Western Sydney University;
- A pilot project targeting OOHC students is being undertaken by Create and University of NSW;
- Federation University Australia have introduced scholarships specific to care leavers;
- La Trobe has introduced bursaries, specifically for commencing care leavers;
- Also of note is ‘The Home Stretch’ initiative, led by Anglicare Victoria, which is garnering support to extend out-of-home care to the age of 21 years in Victoria and other States as a way of preventing homelessness and other negative life outcomes for care leavers.
Summary of agency consultations

Consultations with front line staff and agency management confirmed a high level of commitment to improving school outcomes and to increasing care leaver participation in further education.

At the same time, our research also identified a dearth of formalised, integrated, evidence-based processes and programs to support this aim.

Discussions focussed on ways to build upon current practices by improving the timing, flexibility, relevance, consistency and accountability of programs and processes to support care leavers into and through further education.

The key themes which emerged from over 60 consultations with more than 100 agency representatives (see Appendix 1) are as follows:

1 Data collection and Sharing

- Improvements are required in the collection, sharing and utilisation of performance and outcome data to inform the development of appropriate interventions towards improved engagement and completion rates in secondary and higher education. At the current time:
  - Data is not reported on the education outcomes of young people with experience of OOH in WA. (*Year 12 and Vocational Education and Training (VET) completion rates have been identified in the DCPFS Outcomes Framework for Children in OOH*26, *but there is currently no data to support reporting on this measure.*)
  - Data is not reported on engagement or completion rates of this cohort at TAFE or university. No tertiary provider in WA specifically targets young people in OOH via outreach or student support services.
  - Care leavers are not identified as Equity Group under the Australian National Equity Framework. (*A review of Equity Groups has been announced by DET and numerous activities are underway interstate to improve tertiary access and outcomes for this cohort*)

2 Interagency collaboration and flexibility

- Increased interagency collaboration and flexibility is needed towards earlier intervention and the brokerage of portable, wrap-around services able to provide personal, social, cultural and education support, particularly at transition points (eg Year 6-7, Year 10-11), but also throughout school into further education.

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26 (21.5.17)
• Agencies need to simplify processes, and work beyond school and casework boundaries, for example: review current practices and utility of Cultural Plans, Education and Care Leaver Plans; draw on services such as AIME, The Smith Family, SMYL, accommodation and employment providers etc to provide relevant planning and timely support across the intersection of OOHC and education.

• It would be beneficial to review the differences in resourcing, programs and processes operating in DCPFS and DOE regional offices which may impact on the higher education aspirations of young people in care (including school attendance and engagement, carer participation and support, interagency partnerships) in order that successful approaches might be implemented and generalized around the State;

3 Cultural safety

• To have a positive experience of education, Aboriginal students require the educational environment to reflect a culturally relevant sense of connection to place, family and community.

• School and community based programs which embed this sense of belonging and connection need to be embedded at all levels of schooling and foster aspirations for positive futures.

• School curricula needs to reflect and value Aboriginality and staff and student resources must be made available to encourage cultural awareness and respect.

• Family and carers of Aboriginal students require appropriate resourcing, support and training to maintain young people’s connections to country, culture and community whilst making school a success and a success of school.

4 Care leaver support for further study

• There is a need for increased budget transparency around care leaver funding by DCPFS (a range of financial and other resources are available to care leavers via DCPFS until they reach the age of 25 years).

• It would be helpful to promote client and interagency awareness of the resources available to care leavers through DCPFS and to simplify access to these resources.

• Service agencies would do well to utilise overseas, interstate and local examples to encourage the development of further education scholarships, subsidised student accommodation, mentoring and tutoring to facilitate increased tertiary entry and completion rates.

5 Engagement with university and TAFE

• Care Leavers must be included as a Higher Education Equity Group. This would establish the development of a data set to inform policy and programs to improve University accessibility and outcomes for this group.

• School based university outreach programs need to be more targeted towards and inclusive of the OOHC population.
TAFE fee waiver to be formalised and promoted together with better alignment and resourcing of student support services to maintain engagement and increase VET/VETIS completion rates.
Interview data: young people in OOHC

Approach

Survey instruments were developed by the lead researcher and specialist Aboriginal consultancy Transcend Initiatives.

DCPFS Case Managers and Education Officers obtained informed consent to interview 30 young people (14 male, 16 female) aged 15-18 years (7 ATSI, 22 non-ATSI) living in departmental placements in Fremantle, Rockingham and Kwinana. Our interviewees represented 36% of those aged 15-18 in OOHC and 27% of the young Aboriginal people in this age group in the study area.

Participants received modest shopping vouchers in acknowledgement of their participation.

Characteristics

Period and placements in OOHC

The 30 young people interviewed had been in DCPFS care for between 1-18 years (8 between 1-5 years; 8 between 5-10 years; 7 between 10-15 years; one between 15-18 years) with the average time in care being 8.4 years. The ATSI interviewees had spent, on average, one year longer in care (9.2 years) than the non ATSI group (8.1 years).

The young people had experienced a variety of placement types, the majority being in relative care or foster care and six having lived in residential care. Thirteen had lived in 1-2 placements; 10 had lived in 3-5 placements; two had lived in 5-9 placements and five had lived in 10 or more placements. On average, non ATSI interviewees had a greater number of placements (4.5) than their ATSI peers (2.8). There was a weak positive correlation between time in care and number of placements for the non-ATSI group (.06) and a stronger positive correlation between placement number and time in care for the ATSI group (.66).

Table 1 summarises characteristics for this group.
Table 1: Characteristics of young people in OOHC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>ATSI student in OOHC</th>
<th>Non ATSI student in OOHC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number Primary Schools attended*</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number High Schools attended*</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average time in OOHC</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of placements in OOHC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Current work/study status*

At the time interviews were conducted (late 2016) 23 of the interviewees were attending high school. Of the remainder: one was working full time; one had graduated year 12 and was doing nursing training; one was in Year 10 but had not attended school for 9 months and was awaiting TAFE enrolment; two were in Year 9 but had not attended for 12 months – one was doing a PCYC course and the other was awaiting TAFE enrolment; and one interviewee was in detention and unsure of what year high school he/she was in. One did not provide a response to the question about what he/she was currently doing.
Results

Primary and high school experiences

On average, interviewees had attended 3 Primary Schools and 1.5 high schools. The greatest number of primary schools attended by one child was seven. Three children had attended four high schools.

Non ATSI and ATSI interviewees had attended a similar number of primary schools (3.1 on average in the non ATSI group and 2.4 on average in the ATSI group).

Seventy per cent of the group said that changes of school were due to changes of OOHC placement or residence.

When asked to rate how they felt about their school experiences, 4 felt ‘positive’; 8 ‘mostly positive’; 13 felt school was ‘ok’, 3 said their experience of school ‘wasn’t great’ and 1 ‘hated it’. Respondents were also asked what they most enjoyed about school, with the most popular responses being friends (17 interviewees), sport (12 interviewees) and learning (9 interviewees).
When asked about what wasn’t so good about their high school experience, responses were strongly focused around difficulties in the school environment and feeling that school was irrelevant or uninteresting: 11 said they didn’t like how they were treated at school; 9 said they didn’t like or had problems in the school environment and difficulties in relationships with teachers or peers; 7 said school wasn’t interesting; 6 said school was not relevant to their interests; 5 said the school work was too hard; 4 said they didn’t get enough help at school; and 2 said that the culture in group homes, where, they said, most young people do not attend school, made them lose motivation and stop trying and/or attending. One said that she had noticed that after kids return to family many parents were reluctant to force the issue so a lot of students stop attending school that way.

Interviewees were asked what they would change about their school experience if they could: 8 said they would try harder to achieve better results at school; 7 said they would have more understanding and helpful teachers; 6 said they would improve or change their relationships with other students; 3 of these saying specifically that they would do something to stop bullying.

Post-school plans

When asked about their post-school plans and whether they would attend further education after high school almost equal numbers of the group said yes (16) and either no (2) or undecided (11) (one interviewee gave no response and two were already working or training). A higher number (12) said they would like to attend TAFE than university (4). These numbers were similarly split amongst ATSI and non ATSI interviewees, however, there was a much stronger positive correlation between knowing someone who had attended further education and planning to attend in the ATSI group (.41) than the non ATSI group (.23). All of the four young people who planned to attend university identified a relative or friend who had done so.
Of the two interviewees who had decided not to attend further education, one said this was because he/she did not like school and the other because he/she felt too young to make the decision.

Interviewees said that they had received help in making post-school plans from: case workers (17); carers (14); parents or family (11); teachers (9); friends (2); Education Officer (1); career counsellor (1); Follow the Dream (1); Foyer Oxford (1). Four interviewees said that they had not had help in making post-school plans. The majority (24) said that they received help with deciding options and/or advice on how to achieve their plans. One said they had received help in the form of financial assistance.

Further education

When asked about what might help them consider further education an option, 9 interviewees said they would need more contact with TAFE or Uni; 7 said they would need more information or advice; 7 said more family or carer support; 6 said financial support; 5 said access to transport; 5 said knowing people who had done further education; 2 said accommodation; and 2 said an assurance of getting an apprenticeship or work following completion of studies.

There were two interviewees who had commenced TAFE studies whilst in OOHC. When asked about the challenges they faced in the tertiary environment, one student said social anxiety and financial stress. The second student said: not knowing what he/she wanted from study and the work being too hard. Both students had received tutoring support from the institution they attended. Both students had also initially received and benefited from off campus tutoring and were trying to have DCPFS reinstate funding for
this service. Both students said that they needed more help with tutoring, IT and computing resources, financial support, and mental health counselling for anxiety.

Of those who were considering but had not yet attended further education, when asked what they thought they would need to make a successful transition: four said that they needed help with deciding and accessing possible options; four needed financial support, four didn’t know what help they might need as they weren’t there yet; two wanted help with academic work, two wanted counselling for anxiety; two wanted assistance with obtaining a driver’s licence; one wanted a mentor and one wanted better grades at school.

**Positive futures?**

When interviewees were asked to reflect on what would make school a more positive experience for young people in OOHC, the most common responses were: more support with study, counselling for better mental health, more interventions by schools to improve relationships and stop bullying and help with “being able to understand better”.

A strong theme was the need for teachers and school staff that to be more accepting and encouraging of student differences and cultural needs, and providing relevant information about work and further study. One student said “school is not the most important thing but having access to help with making positive choices [about post school work and study] improves motivation and [may] encourage more kids in State Care to finish high school.”

Another who had completed initial training and was on track for a professional role, said “kids in care need to see the importance [of school and further education] for themselves - I used to be for everyone else, now I’m just for me.”

An older interviewee who had left school in year 11 and, after a number of tries, was doing well in further education felt that a lack of consistent support by caseworkers early on had inhibited her having positive school experiences and also delayed her [now improving] self-confidence and social engagement skills. She felt that caseworkers “should [now] support [her] to do more and not stand in my way like with delays purchasing uniforms for training.”

Another interviewee reflected that “lots of [DCPFS] kids get stuck in the past, don’t believe they can have a good life. They [referring specifically to young people in residential care] get locked into a mindset about keeping to themselves, avoiding school, resorting to violence and drugs and feel like they have nothing going for them. Now I want to avoid being with those kids - 90% are a bad influence on me and I don’t want to get involved again.”

When asked what they thought might encourage more young people in OOHC to consider further education, the most common responses were: provide more relevant information at school and help for students find a job or study options before leaving.
care. One interviewee recommended to other young people in who might be care considering further education: “stay confident in yourself - don’t give up! Do what makes you happy and explore,” and another said, “don’t attend school!” (he/she considered school a negative experience and therefore a deterrent to further study.)

**Voices of Young People in OOHC: what were the challenges you faced in school?**

- “When your home is breaking down and you’re moving around so much, it is so hard to concentrate on school - your emotions are all over the joint and you just start to rebel.”
- “If you feel like you get on with your teacher and you feel your teacher understands you, you want to put more in.”
- “I was optimistic about finishing [school] but I hated yr 10 and 11. I had no support, there was bullying and I just felt misunderstood. After I turned 18 [and had left care] I was assessed with Autism and PTSD.”
- “I didn't pay attention. I felt persecuted by some staff and there was a lot of peer group pressure. I regret not trying more. I had a lot of potential and understand now what they were trying to teach in school [because I have] grown up and matured.”
- “I was always motivated to do well at school - it was something I had that was consistent. It was personal - not about teachers or DCPFS.”
Interview data: young people with past experience of OOHC

Approach

Young people aged 17-25 with past experience of OOHC were identified via DCPFS, Foyer Oxford, Crossroads West and through community networks. This group were interviewed utilising the same survey instrument as children in care, but were asked additional questions about their current work/study status and future plans (see Appendix 2).

Face to face interviews were conducted by the lead researcher and specialist Aboriginal consultant. All participants provided informed consent and received a modest voucher in acknowledgement of their participation.

Characteristics

We interviewed 19 young people aged between 17 and 22 years, ten male and nine female. Nine of the group (47%) identified as being Aboriginal.

Of the 19, seven had left school at the end of Year 12, five in Year 11, one in Year 9 and one in Year 8. The average school leaver year was Year 11, however, the ATSI group left school on average one year prior (10.6) to the non ATSI group (11.6).

Period and placements in OOHC

Interviewees had spent between six months and 18 years in OOHC. Nearly half (nine) of the group spent 5-10 years in OOHC; five spent 11-15 years in OOHC; two spent 16-18 years in OOHC and three were in OOHC for under four years. The average time spent in OOHC amongst the 19 interviewees was 9.5 years. The average time in care was higher for the ATSI group (11 years) than the non ATSI group (8 years).

The group had experienced a variety of placement types: 10 had been in family care; 16 in foster care; six in residential care; and one had spent time in two different secure mental health facilities. Seven interviewees had one placement type and 11 had two or more placement types. The average was two placement types across both the ATSI and non ATSI groups.

In terms of the number of placements young people had been in, the range was between one to 20 or more, with the average being six. ATSI interviewees had a higher average number of placements (7.1) compared with non ATSI interviewees (5.3). Seven in the group had between 1 and 5 placements, five in the group had 10 or more placements, and four had between 5 and 10 placements. Only one young person had remained in a single OOHC placement for the period in State care.

Table 2 summarises characteristics of this group.
Table 2: Characteristics of young people who had left OOHC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>ATSI care leaver</th>
<th>Non ATSI care leaver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number Primary Schools attended*</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number High Schools attended*</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average school leaver year</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average time in OOHC</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of placements in OOHC</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Work/study status

When asked about what they were currently doing, five young people in this group were studying at TAFE; five were unemployed; four were high school age (three at school and one at a Registered Training Organisation) four were employed and one was at university (graduate degree). Only one of the ATSI interviewees had attended further education.

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Results

Primary and High School experiences

Interviewees had attended between one and 10 or more primary schools, with the largest group (seven) having attended between five and 10 primary schools and the second largest group (six) having attended 10 or more primary schools. The average number of primary schools attended across the group was six. The average amongst the ATSI interviewees was seven, and the average amongst non ATSI interviewees was five.
Interviewees had attended between one and four high schools, with the greatest number (11) having attended only one high school, followed by six who had attended two high schools. The average number of high schools attended was 1.6 (1.5 ATSI and 1.6 non ATSI).

Ninety per cent of the group said that the number of school changes were due to changes in OOHC placement or residence.

When asked how they felt about their schooling, seven said they felt ‘mostly positive’; five ‘ok’; three ‘not great; three ‘hated it’, and one gave no response.

Interviewees were asked to describe what was good about their school experience: 13 said friends; 11 said sports; nine said arts or music; seven said learning; five said being out of home and two said manual arts.

When asked about what was not so good about their school experiences, 11 didn’t like how they were treated by staff or other students in the school; 10 felt that the work was too hard for them; and seven said they didn’t get the help they needed (to study, engage at school or manage anxiety).

Interviewees were asked what they would change about school if they could: seven said they would try harder to make more of school and get better results; six said they would get more individualised help with study; six said they’d make school and home more stable; six said they would improve relationships with teachers and friends (including reducing bullying and having teachers be more understanding); five said they needed help with mental health (anxiety, stress, focus); three referred specifically to the need to improve cultural recognition and respect for Aboriginal students to feel and do better at school and two would go to a school where their interests could be better met.

**Plans when leaving school**

When asked what their plans had been when they had finished school (note that four were still attending), ten of the young people said that they had wanted to work in a specific field; six had planned to go to TAFE; four didn’t know what their plans were; and three had plans to study at university.

The young people said that they had received help with these plans from: DCPFS Case Workers (7); teachers (6); carers (4); parents or other adult relatives (3); DCPFS Education Officers (3); friends (3), leaving care services (2); TAFE officers (2); Foyer Oxford (2); Career Counsellor (1); Follow the Dream (1); or siblings (1).

When asked about the type of help they had received, 7 said they received information and advice on options and how to achieve plans; 5 said they had received financial support of some kind; and 4 had received practical support with enrolling and living independently.
Current plans

Half of the group planned to work and half to study sometime in the near future. One interviewee didn’t yet know. In the ATSI group, six planned to work and two to study. In the non-ATSI group, three planned to work and seven to study.

When asked if they knew anyone who had completed further education of any kind: 8 didn’t know anyone; 6 had relatives and 5 had friends who had completed further education.

At the time of interview, 10 of the group (52%) had decided they might study at TAFE and three at university. Only one ATSI interviewee planned to try further education.

Of those who had no plans for further study at the time of interview, two said this was because they felt themselves unprepared academically and/or personally; two were undecided but might consider it later; one wanted to obtain employment as a priority; one was uninterested in further study and one had tried several previous enrolments and had to withdraw each time severe anxiety. He/she had found this experience so difficult that he/she was reluctant to return to further study.
When asked what might encourage them to take up further education at some point: 10 said they would need financial support; 9 said more one on one support from someone who had done it, a mentor or counsellor; 8 said more information and advice from further education providers; 7 said accommodation; 3 said access to transport; 3 said support from parents or carers; 2 said case worker support; 2 said support with academic skills; 2 said guaranteed work incentives or pathways. One young person recommended that students from OOHC are granted equity pathways for university entry and graduate programs in acknowledgement of the disadvantage most care leavers have experienced.

Experiences of further education

There were nine young people in the group (1 of whom is Aboriginal) with experience of further education (VETIS/TAFE (7) and University (2)): five were still studying, two had withdrawn and two had completed). We asked about the challenges they faced when commencing their studies: six said anxiety made it difficult to make new relationships and cope with adult learning environment; six said they needed more one on one support with study skills and with understanding subject matter; four felt they were under supported by staff and student services and four said that they needed more help adjusting to campus life.

When asked to describe the challenges they faced in continuing their study programs, the most common answers included: financial stress; the need for stable accommodation; increased anxiety, frustration and insecurity around dealing with administrative requirements (on campus and with DCPFS and DOE) and timelines; maintaining self-confidence and motivation. In some cases, literacy and numeracy were also a concern. Transport and getting to class on time was an issue for those not living
close to campus. There was a strong sense amongst the group of a perceived lack of one-to-one support to help address these challenges.

There was a very low take up of on-campus support amongst the group: one had tutoring, one had a mentor and one had student housing and a part scholarship. There was slightly more take up of off-campus support, though this was still low overall: five had Centrelink support; five had DCPFS support; five had Foyer Oxford support; two had the support of disability services; two had scholarships; one had the support of Follow the Dream and a cultural mentor; one had support from Bridges; and one had travel costs, student housing and fees subsidized by DCPFS. Those who had utilised one form of off-campus assistance were more likely to access similar services.

The two young people who had withdrawn from further study said they did so because of the complexity and ‘red tape’ involved in enrolling and getting support with study, a lack of motivation, personal anxiety and family stress.

When asked to recommend what might help make further education more positive for them: six said more financial support; four said more one-on-one support with administration, study and adjusting to the tertiary/training environment; three said it would be easier if workers and staff were more understanding about the challenges the students were facing; three said more help with mental health/wellbeing; and one said incentives around employment and placements.

All participants were asked what they thought might encourage care leavers to consider and take up further education. The strongest response, by 13 of the 19 young people (64%) was to talk directly with students about what’s important to them and how further study is relevant and can help them achieve their goals. Four interviewees recommended that relevant information and advice be provided to students; four said the introduction of incentives around positive longer term outcomes; two said positive role models and two said stable accommodation.

Voices of young people who had left OOHC: what were the challenges you faced in further education?

• “Meeting a new class and teachers, getting [funding for] correct course materials.”
• “Motivation, stress and anxiety, feeling like a failure”
• “I did quite well academically as had help with tutoring but I had a problem with drugs and anxiety - got kicked out for bad behaviour”
• “Literacy and numeracy - behind due to school experiences and dyslexia –late diagnosis and response”
• “Heavy load of work and just getting something done. It was also hard to concentrate. [I had a] sense of limbo about my future. Too many people and agencies involved in my life!”
• “Being organised, self-motivated, working out the campus. Lack of one on one support.”
• “I wasn't ready – my anxiety was too bad. Now I'm getting ready [at 20 years of age] to reapply.”
• “Financial stress and [unstable] living arrangements made it really hard. [I was] stopping and starting science based courses due to difficulties with maths. I felt stupid so I didn't accept tutoring. Eventually, I switched [from science] to business [courses] because I was able to manage better and completed that course.”
• “The financial stress was hard. Although I had a scholarship for college accommodation there were many [other] costs, but because the University didn't recognise my disadvantage I was unable to access additional funding or support. DCPFS assisted to make up the gap in college costs. I felt really disadvantaged by the lack of acknowledgement of my background [nine placements in care from 2-18 years of age] and the lack of support I had around me. It was really disappointing after all the work I had done to get in.”

**Interview data: carers of young people in OOHC**

**Approach**

Carers were identified through departmental and non-government service providers, community networks and via DCPFS.

Interviews were conducted with 17 carers, being either face to face (13) or completed independently by the interviewee (4).

Interviewees granted informed consent and received modest vouchers in acknowledgement of their participation.

**Characteristics**

Seventeen interviews were conducted in total with care providers aged between 38 and 72 years. Eight of the carer's interviewed are Aboriginal.

In sum, carers estimated that they had looked after more than 650 young people in either foster care or residential care arrangements. Six of the carers had young people in high school at the time of interview.

When asked about their own high school education, three carers had completed school in year 10; four in year 11 and six in year 12. The eleven carers that provided information on number of schools attended had been to 41 different schools (an average of 4 schools each), with the greatest number being at primary level. This is something they have in common with the young people in their care.

Due to sample selection, there was a very high rate of participation in further education amongst the group, with ten of the carers interviewed having completed post school study: two had TAFE Certificates; three had diplomas and five had bachelor or higher
degrees. Of the remainder, five carers did not provide a response to this question and two said that they had never attempted further studies.

Results

In sum, carers estimated that only seven of the OOHC students they had cared had graduated or were currently completing Year 12 high school.

Carers also estimated that only five of the 650+ OOHC students they had cared for had attempted further education: two students had completed their courses (one a short Bridging Course at UWA and the other a TAFE Certificate) and three had withdrawn before their program was complete and were no longer attending.

Carers were asked to rate a range of factors relating to student’s school attendance, performance, interests, socialisation and future goals. They were also asked to rate and describe the amount and type of school and DCPFS support received whilst students in their care were at high school, and to suggest any other help which may have been useful to them, or to students in their care. Table 3 summarises these results.
Table 3: Carer ratings of student school experiences and agency support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good or Excellent</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Attendance</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Performance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement in extra school activities</td>
<td>56.25%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>31.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships at school</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s future goals and plans</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from school</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support from DCPFS</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support provided to students

More than half of the carers felt that the students in their care had received good levels of support at school, including: tutoring, counselling, access to specialist programs (Follow the Dream) mentoring, homework classes, and in-class support (Education Assistants, Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) and teachers). Other support (from schools and DCPFS staff) which carers said student’s had found helpful included transport (to and from school) and assistance with enrolment (including identifying options around alternative schools).

In general, carers felt that school staff and caseworkers varied widely in their levels of understanding and engagement with students in their care. About half of the carers experienced school and DCPFS staff as willing and responsive when required. This group of carers also described themselves as being motivated to engage with staff and to pursue resources and support on behalf of the student.
The experience of the other half of the carers was that the young people in their care had started school behind, and stayed that way, because the education and child protection systems weren’t able or willing to respond in the ways needed to support these young people to succeed.

Support provided to carers

All of the carers felt that they had taken the major role in driving school attendance and outcomes and that this included – and required – their working with agency staff.

When asked about the help they had received towards making school a positive experience and supporting further education goals for students in their care, about half of the carers, particularly those in residential care, felt that they had received minimal or no support. Residential care workers also felt they had been restricted in their roles by overly rigid and time consuming policy and processes (especially around regular family contact), and they saw this as leading to stress and high staff turnover which had a negative impact on students in those facilities.

The carers who felt they had received little or no support felt that they themselves, along with the children in their care, were unsupported or even hindered by, the education and child protection systems.

Those carers who said they had accessed good support from DCPFS or school also said that they had actively sought it out. This included coordinating family access and support and assistance with managing difficult behaviours and school refusal. These carers also saw the relationships between all adults involved in the care of the child as being directly related to the child's wellbeing and progress at school.

Carer's recommendations for improving school experiences

Carers were asked what could be improved to increase school engagement amongst students in OOHC. Responses favoured: mental health assessments and counselling; school based homework classes and tutoring; improved cultural awareness amongst agency staff; trauma informed teaching; and more flexibility in DCPFS and DOE policies and processes to permit students to maintain both school engagement (including better transitions between schools and re-entering school after absences) and connections with family, friends and previous carers.

Residential carers reiterated the need for smoother pathways and speedier processes around parental contact and maintaining cultural connections as key elements of overall wellbeing and self confidence amongst students in care.

Some carers felt that young people in OOHC would respond better at school if teachers and classes focussed on rewarding the positive behaviours and achievements of those who were trying rather than those who may have already succeeded. It was generally
suggested that schooling needed to be more relevant and positive early on, so that students in OOHC could feel positive about education and their futures.

There was also a strong theme in carer interviews around the need for better relationships/networks between carers and other services important to the education and developmental needs of young people in OOHC.

Most carers viewed placement stability and loving, supportive relationships as the key to young people’s wellbeing and success at school.

**Voices of carers: what would it take for more young people in OOHC to have positive experiences of school?**

- “If you work with the school they will work with you. Relationship building is all important - need to break down those barriers - equal effort to communicate and support the best interests and potential of the child. I think we all need to work together for the best interest of the child. We want this child to have the best education not only as carers. I don’t think that I could do it without the school and I don’t think the school could do it without the carers. The Department is the legal guardian so there is that too. We also need to have the child’s voice involved. We need to see what’s going on with this child and why this child is doing good and what he or she is not doing good.”

- “There were problems in enrolments, where no information was provided by the DCPFS to the school while at the same time the child was really struggling with school and anger management issues. These kids’ behavioural and violence behaviours are masking the trauma. [Students] in my care could only last a couple of hours each day at school. Most times the school was responsive and contacted me as needed.”

- “Teachers didn’t understand about acting out behaviours being caused by trauma – I regularly had to educate them about what the kid was going through. They didn’t understand Aboriginal culture, poverty and so on. Most of the kids were at year 2 level - the aim was to get them to year 5 level. It’s all about stable and consistent routines. With homework I had to translate what the teacher was saying in a way the child could relate and understand. It was important [in the group home] to have an open door policy where the kid can run - this lets them manage their emotions - and return. Education is not a priority [for young people in OOHC] in the myriad of issues, but it is so important for life.”
Carer’s recommendations for improving aspirations for further education

Carers felt that the vast majority of young people in OOHC had not attempted further studies because their school engagement and experiences, multiple disconnections (from family/placements/culture), on top of any primary trauma they had experienced, had severely inhibited them from doing so.

It was generally agreed that education was not a priority for these young people because it could not be, given where they were coming from and the limitations of the systems around them.

Carers suggested that these children were not ready to graduate high school or to launch into further education at the same rate as their peers, because they had not had the preparation (one on one, relationship based support to develop study routines, skills and self-confidence) or “developed the world view” (having had limited or no exposure to the personal benefits of tertiary study) that might enable them to do so.

In order to improve this cycle of exclusion from further education, carers said there was a need for a stronger focus on wellbeing, cultural connections and better interagency processes and relationships between the service providers around the children.

Carers suggested that, as in a well functioning family, different service providers should share responsibilities according to their capacities and the children’s needs, coming together to provide a stable and responsive support base for school and further education. It was indicated that this needed to begin at the commencement of OOHC and for the long term, not just when young people were leaving care. This approach would also help young people as having linked-up support around them would show them that seeking assistance and support could be a positive rather than negative thing.

Voices of Carers: what would it take for more young people in OOHC to take up further education?

- “Know that it [tertiary studies] exists, is achievable and how to get there; more grassroots role models; more choices and possibilities - expanded world view; spirituality and culture- something greater than yourself; knowing yourself, what you stand for; good relationships: knowing someone cared.”
- “Having school based programs that help students, carers and parents support the child towards further education. Also what would help is when a child turns 18 they are not necessarily chucked from the Department. They should have some sort of program to support this young person if that’s what they choose to do - go to Uni.”
- “Young people need access to acceptable role models; broader world view; exposure to other cultural experiences; all of this is strengthening identity. Let them know that it
[further education] is attainable but it is a matter of getting assistance to sort out life issues. The key stage is when the leave care.”

- “Tutoring, mentoring, having everyone on same page and a mutual plan [which provides] support and training for the kids to become more organised, disciplined and independent. Counselling support to deal with trauma. Better preparation for the uni environment. A base of security and stability is the key. Also dealing with the transition [from out-of-home care] to independence better and over a longer period so kids are strong to leave home. Be present on their journey, build relationships and have open communication channels to make this happen. Develop trust.”

In summary, carers saw the following factors as key to success at school and further education for students in OOHC:

1. consistent and individualised support which is culturally appropriate and relevant to the individual interests and needs of the child;
2. increased inter-agency openness, flexibility and responsiveness; and
3. stronger relationships between carers and multiple service providers towards educational engagement and attainment.

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that young people in OOHC are motivated to make a success of school and further education, but that they face significant challenges engaging with the school and tertiary education environments.

These challenges are essentially the result of disruptions to mental health and wellbeing caused by trauma experienced in family relationships and by separation from family members, together with multiple changes of care placements and schools whilst in OOHC.

There is a clear pattern whereby this experience leads young people between the ages of 13-15 in OOHC to disengage from secondary education and from State Care. This pattern is known to service providers. Generations of these young people have been and continue to be at risk of poor life outcomes.

Our study strongly suggests that poor life outcomes will persist for this cohort unless the education and child protection sectors unite to prioritise this growing group of young people to support their motivation and advancement through school and into further education and employment. Improved outcomes will also rely upon these sectors engaging with young people, families and carers and the brokerage of appropriate services from the mental health, education and employment sectors.