



24th September 2020

A new Student Behaviour Strategy: Lifting educational outcomes through early intervention and targeted support | Joint comment by Yfoundations and Youth Action.

Youth Action and Yfoundations are both peak bodies representing young people in NSW and the services that support them. While Youth Action advocates on behalf all 1.4 million people in NSW aged 12-25, Yfoundations specifically represents those at risk of or experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

This document provides a joint comment on NSW Government's draft Student Behaviour Strategy. Youth Action and Yfoundations welcome the opportunity to comment on the strategy. We believe there is a real opportunity to embed young people's voice in the decision-making process, and support further consultation and engagement with students and youth organisations regarding school policies.

We also welcome the new policy direction. Both Youth Action and Yfoundations have previously highlighted the role that punitive behavioural management strategies – particularly suspension and expulsion – play in perpetuating the cycle of school disengagement and intergenerational disadvantage.^[i] As such, we are happy to provide qualified endorsement of the four key strategies outlined in the Student Behaviour Strategy:

1. An integrated system of learning and wellbeing

Youth Action and Yfoundations support a shift away from harsh, exclusionary measures – such as suspensions and expulsions – and towards approaches that prevent the development of anti-social behaviours and reinforce positive behaviours. It is essential that such strategies commence in the early years, and engage vulnerable children, young people and their families. Research suggests that early intervention programs, such attachment-based interventions, positive parenting programs, supported playgroups and quality early childhood education, yield significant long-term benefits – including decreasing anti-social behaviour in school-aged children and young people. ^[ii]

2. Targeted support for vulnerable student cohorts

Youth Action and Yfoundations appreciate that the new Student Behaviour Policy will encourage school leaders to consider the circumstances of vulnerable students when deciding about suspension or expulsion. However, in addition to the vulnerable student cohorts mentioned in the policy – students with disability, Aboriginal students, students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, students in out-of-home care, and students in remote and regional areas – we would encourage the NSW Government to focus on the particular needs of school-aged young people experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

The number of children and young people (aged 10 -19) accessing Specialist Homelessness Services in NSW reached 27,220 in the 2018-19 period[iii], and countless more students are 'couch-surfing' or living in overcrowded dwellings. Research suggests that housing instability can have a detrimental impact on young peoples' school engagement and behaviour[iv]. As Yfoundations' Youth Homelessness Representation Council have highlighted, harsh disciplinary may exacerbate the issues these young people face:

"School should be a happy and safe place for students. However, one key driver for student disengagement is school disciplinary practices such as suspension. Young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness often present with challenging behaviours, and while it is increasingly understood that they are a symptom of their experience, suspension is still commonly used to manage such behaviours in a school environment.... In place of suspensions, schools should implement alternative disciplinary practices (e.g. supervision, behaviour support plans, or restitution within the school environment) that prioritise inclusion for students who are at-risk. Suspension should only ever be used as a last resort."[v]

3. Building capacity across the workforce through embedded and continuing professional learning

Young people in NSW should enjoy full access to affordable and quality education that meets their current needs and prepares them for the future. A key component of creating supportive educational environment, is the capacity of the workforce to adequately respond to individual students' needs and wellbeing.

The NSW Government initiative to provide every public high school with a Student Support Officer was a valuable step to increasing the capacity of the workforce to intervene early through reaching and engaging more vulnerable students. The continued rollout of the initiative could be fast-tracked to ensure equitable application of a whole-of-school approach to wellbeing across the state.

Youth Action and Yfoundations welcome the acknowledgment of the complexity of student behaviour and need for additional evidence-based professional learning, advice and guidance for the workforce. By utilising a rights based approach to teacher training, teachers will be better equipped to support all young people to participate in decisions that impact their experiences in education, regardless of individual need. We assume appropriate funding and support will be provided by the Government to ensure all staff in all schools will have the same access to capacity building. If not, there is concern many schools who are already over capacity and under-funded, will be pushed further behind.

4. Commissioning behaviour services to deliver improved outcomes

Yfoundations and Youth Action welcome the NSW Government's commitment to cross-sector partnerships to improve student outcomes, including commissioning opportunities with other government and non-government agencies. Evidence supporting the 'Community of Schools and Services' (COSS) approach shows the benefits of schools and local services – including mental health, housing and community services – working together to identify and support at-risk students.[vi] Given these young peoples' background often include experiences of abuse, neglect, discrimination and homelessness, it is essential that any behavioural services provided in schools are trauma informed.

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- [i] Youth Action. (December 2012) School Suspension: Youth Action Policy Paper, http://www.youthaction.org.au/school_suspension_2012;
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- [ii] Schindler, H., Kholoptseva, J., Oh Park, S. et al. (2015). Maximizing the Potential of Early Childhood Education to Prevent Externalizing Behaviour Problems: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of School Psychology*, 53(1), 243-263; Williams, K. and Berthelsen, D. (2017). The Development of Prosocial Behaviour in Early Childhood: Contributions of Early Parenting and Self-Regulation. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 49(1), 73-94; Mountain, G., Cahill, J. & Thorpe, H. (2017). Sensitivity and Attachment Interventions in Early Childhood: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Infant Behaviour and Development*, 49(1),14-32.
- [iii] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (December 18 2019) Specialist Homelessness Services Collection —state or territory data cube, Cat no. HOU 302: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/contents/specialist-homelessness-services-collection-shsc-data-cubes>
- [iv] Moore, T., & McArthur, M. (2009). 'Good for kids': Children who have been homeless talk about school. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(2), 147 – 160; Fehring, H, Shacklock, G & Crowhurst, M (23rd April 2008) How are youth homelessness, early school leaving and risk behaviours connected amongst 13-16 year olds? Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victorian, Disengagement of Young People Project, [http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/1925/1/RMIT_DEECD_Disengagement_Young_People_Project%20\(2\).pdf](http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/1925/1/RMIT_DEECD_Disengagement_Young_People_Project%20(2).pdf)
- [v] Brest, B., Coneybeare, E., Halligan, J. et al. (January 2019) Position Paper: Education and employment for at-risk and homeless young people in NSW. Yfoundations. <http://yfoundations.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/YHRC-Education-Employment-Position-Paper.pdf>
- [vi] Mental Health Commission of NSW (2019). Living Well Mid Term Review: Showcasing The Albury Project, accessed: <https://nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/living-well-agenda/living-well-mid-term-review-2019-2020/murrumbidgee/showcasing-the-albury-project>; MacKenzie D & Thielking M (2013). The Geelong Project: A community of schools and youth services model for early intervention, Swinburne Institute of Social Research.

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