



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

# Education first

Submission to the Standing Committee on Legal  
and Social Issues of the Victorian Parliament  
Inquiry into Youth Justice Centres

Brotherhood of St Laurence

April 2017

## The Brotherhood of St Laurence and youth justice

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others.

The Brotherhood has a long history of working with children and young people (and their families and communities) who are ‘at risk’ of facing poor life outcomes—including those at risk of becoming or already involved in crime. Our current work includes:

- **School re-engagement initiatives**, including the RESET program for 10–14 year olds (based at Monterey Secondary College in Frankston); evaluation of Project REAL (for 9–12 year olds in Broadmeadows); and delivery of the Victorian Government–funded Navigator program in western Melbourne in partnership with Anglicare Victoria
- **High-support education and training programs** for vulnerable young people, including a specialist school in Frankston (the **David Scott School**)
- **Leaving Care Project**: a partnership with the Victorian Government and community agencies to drive cultural change and reform arrangements for young people as they leave care. A pilot commences in the Barwon region in June
- **Education First Youth Foyers**: delivered in partnership with Launch Housing, with Victorian Government funding. Foyer accommodation is located on TAFE sites (Holmesglen Glen Waverley, Kangan Broadmeadows, GO TAFE Shepparton) and supports young people who have experienced homelessness to secure the education and the opportunities needed to change their trajectory. The Brotherhood is supporting an **extension of the Education First approach** to other parts of the homelessness sector in collaboration with TAFEs and homelessness services
- **Developing Independence**: an accredited certificate qualification designed to enable service-connected young people to advance their aspirations, build their networks and move towards independence.

Brotherhood of St Laurence

67 Brunswick Street

Fitzroy Vic. 3065

[REDACTED]

Ph. (03) 9483 1183

[www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

**Rob Hudson**

Group General Manager Policy & Programs

Email: [REDACTED] Phone: [REDACTED]

**Sally James**

Principal Advisor, Youth Transitions

Email: [REDACTED] Phone: [REDACTED]

## Recommendations

Early offending and antisocial behaviour cannot be considered in isolation from broader life experiences. Our society has failed many of the young people who get caught up in our youth justice system. The overwhelming majority of these young people have left school early, have been known to child protection, have lived in out-of-home care and been homeless. Many have experienced neglect, trauma, poverty and marginalisation.

Accordingly our recommendations focus on prevention and early intervention, particularly through education and related measures to build the foundations for positive economic and social participation.

- 1 Invest in strengthening the capacity of vulnerable families to support their child's wellbeing and development in the earliest years of life.
- 2 Establish a systemic approach to rapidly identify those who disconnect from school and engage support for them to return to education.
- 3 Invest in tailored interventions to re-engage primary school and 'middle years' children displaying 'risky' behaviour into mainstream school and strengthen the capacity of their families.
- 4 Invest in high-support flexible learning options across Victoria to effectively support vulnerable and disengaged young people to continue their education.
- 5 Continue to pilot reforms in out-of-home care to increase participation in education, improve life outcomes and support those exiting care to build a positive future.
- 6 Extend support for young people in out-of-home care to age 21.
- 7 Reshape youth homelessness services by prioritising an Education First approach in future commissioning processes.
- 8 In locations of entrenched disadvantage, invest in place-based approaches that focus on supporting improved family functioning, early childhood development, school engagement and employment.

## Overview

Early offending and antisocial behaviour cannot be considered in isolation from broader life experiences. Our society has failed many of the young people who get caught up in our youth justice system. The overwhelming majority of these young people have left school early, have been known to child protection, have lived in out-of-home care and been homeless. Many have experienced neglect, trauma, poverty, marginalisation and alienation which can limit their capacity to build a positive future. Many have walking along the well-trodden path to criminal behaviour—yet as a society we have lacked the systemic interventions to divert them from this path. By investing in children and young people to develop a positive asset base of skills, resources and opportunities, and strengthening the capacity of their families to provide a source of positive support, we can enable young people to gain a sense of purpose and belonging, which is critical to both preventing and breaking cycles of offending.

The Brotherhood has a long history of working with children and young people (and their families and communities) who are ‘at risk’ of facing poor life outcomes—including those at risk of becoming or already involved in crime. This submission draws on the voices of young people, our research and our practical experience. We deliver school re-engagement, education and training programs to vulnerable children and young people. We are working closely with the out-of-home care sector to drive cultural change and reform arrangements for young people as they leave care. We are also heavily involved in supporting young people experiencing homelessness to secure the education and the opportunities needed to change their trajectory.

This submission does not focus on police practices, court processes, sentencing or the operation and culture of Youth Justice Centres—which are outside the Brotherhood’s areas of expertise. Rather it focuses on prevention and early intervention, particularly through education and related measures to build the foundations for positive economic and social participation. Key learnings relevant to the inquiry are:

- 1 **Education needs to be the primary focus** – Many children and young people known to the criminal justice system experience early disengagement from education, a history of school suspension and expulsion, and poor educational attainment. Conversely, engagement in education helps to prevent early offending and minimise the risk of further offending. The Brotherhood recommends an **Education First** approach, with other interventions and supports used to enable success to schooling or training.

One key to the educational response for children and young people with problematic behaviour is acknowledging and addressing the trauma they are experiencing in their lives (**a trauma-informed approach**). At the same time, we believe that **‘Advantaged Thinking’** which recognises, builds on and invests in a young person’s aspirations, talents and strengths ought to be adopted.

While this submission focuses on education *outside of* Youth Justice Centres (reflecting the Brotherhood’s experience) we are acutely aware that high quality education *in detention centres* is crucial to improve the rehabilitation prospects and life chances of detainees. We are supportive of the Parkville College model, and call for its continuation and expansion.

- 2 **Early intervention is needed for those at risk** – Early signs of problematic behaviour, including school disengagement, need to trigger support. In particular, first interactions with the justice system should prompt intensive and coordinated interventions (to address underpinning factors such as family dysfunction, substance abuse, housing, mental health, disengagement) that support diversion from future offending.
- 3 **Families need to be involved** – Young people who experience family dysfunction, abuse or a lack of positive family connections are more vulnerable to ongoing involvement with the criminal justice system.<sup>1</sup> Because families are highly influential, interventions that work with them, as well as the young person, to improve family functioning and strengthen the capacity of family and extended networks to provide positive support are game-changing.
- 4 **Connections with community life help** – Mainstream opportunities like sports, volunteering and employment build self-esteem, purpose and motivation to engage positively with the broader community. Young people with such opportunities are more likely to make successful transitions through school into adulthood.<sup>2</sup>
- 5 **Mentors provide critical support** – Mentors are particularly important for young people who have fewer resources and who lack positive family connections. They can help a young person to develop and work towards aspirations, and build their social capital through making connections to community life and employment.
- 6 **Place-based investment to tackle disadvantage in locations of high risk will pay off** – There is a strong case for systemic, place-based interventions in locations experiencing entrenched disadvantage, which typically also have higher offending rates. These should focus on local economic development, together with support for family functioning and support to advance the wellbeing, development and education of children and young people.

## Children involved in the criminal justice system are among the most marginalised in our community

In the words of the Chair of the Youth Parole Board, early offenders are ‘very often the product of, and still suffer from, a damaged and unprotected childhood’<sup>3</sup>. Statistics from the most recent report of Victoria’s Youth Parole Board (2016) reveal that of the young people in youth detention:

- 66% had a history of both alcohol and drug misuse

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<sup>1</sup> P Mendes, P Snow, P & S Baidawi, ‘The views of service providers on the challenges facing young people also involved in the youth justice system transitioning from out-of-home care’, *Journal of Policy Practice*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2014, pp. 239–57.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Families Housing Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, *A nationally consistent approach to leaving care planning*, FaHCSIA, Canberra, 2011, p.23.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Human Services, *Youth Parole Board and Youth Residential Board Victoria, Annual report 2009–10*, Melbourne, 2010.

- 64% had been subject to a current or previous child protection order (this dual order status increases the likelihood the young person will progress to the adult criminal justice system by 91%)
- 63% were victims of abuse, trauma or neglect
- 62% had previously been suspended or expelled from school
- 38% had a parent or sibling who had been imprisoned
- 30% presented with mental health issues
- 24% presented with poor intellectual functioning
- 12% were parents
- 11% were registered with Disability Services.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, 10% were homeless with no fixed address or residing in insecure housing prior to custody.<sup>5</sup>

Research by an international team based on New Zealand data indicates that these risk factors are apparent very early. A longitudinal study of 1000 people from birth to age 38 revealed that 22% of the cohort accounted for 81% of the group's criminal convictions, as well as other 'high social cost' outcomes such as higher rates of injury insurance claims, prescriptions, welfare benefits, obesity, smoking and hospitalisation. It was possible to predict the children who were most at risk of joining this segment from measures of their socioeconomic background, experience of maltreatment, IQ and self-control—many of which are reflected in a child's brain health, identifiable from as early as age 3.<sup>6</sup>

The Victorian data and the NZ analysis cry out for a preventive response that tackles the well-known precursors to offending.

For young early offenders, contact with the criminal justice system ought to provide a platform for positive interventions. Where possible, culturally appropriate diversionary approaches that support the young person to address underlying issues (such as the Barreng Moorop program for Aboriginal children and their families)<sup>7</sup>, support re-engagement in education and avoid the stigma of a criminal conviction that jeopardises employment prospects ought to be favoured. We also support developmentally appropriate restorative practices to enable lessons to be learned and repair to be made. The high use of remand is not working: 80 per cent of young people in detention have previously been on remand, the overwhelming majority of whom are ultimately released upon sentencing to community supervision (or nothing).<sup>8</sup> They experience all the

<sup>4</sup> Youth Parole Board, *Youth Parole Board Annual report 2015–2016*, Melbourne, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, *Where do they go? A review of the literature on the trajectories of community services clients report*, internal report, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Reported in *The Guardian*, 13 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/dec/12/high-social-cost-adults-can-be-identified-from-as-young-as-three-says-study>.

<sup>7</sup> Program for 10–14 year olds and their families, delivered by a partnership of Jesuit Social Services, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.

<sup>8</sup> Youth Parole Board, *Youth Parole Board Annual report 2015–2016*, Melbourne, 2016.

negative aspects of detention, while simultaneously having their access to positive interventions severely curtailed.

We endorse the recent comments of former Victorian Attorney-General Rob Hulls (now Director, Centre for Innovative Justice, RMIT University) who pointed out that the behaviour of certain groups of marginalised youth within the community is a signal of disenfranchisement, disengagement and disenchantment:

... these kids have significant need, and it's this need that we must address. Equally, if disadvantage is the predominant precursor to committing crime, it is disadvantage that we must address. This is particularly so in the case of young offenders from marginalised or disenfranchised communities – kids who do not necessarily commit more crimes, but simply more visible to authorities and a suspicious public; kids from communities trapped in intergenerational unemployment; or whose members have endured horrific hardship and torture along the way.<sup>9</sup>

## The Victorian Government has some positive initiatives

The Brotherhood applauds the efforts of the Victorian Government to address some of the social and economic factors that can increase the risk of children and young people becoming involved in crime. These provide a platform for the further development of targeted responses. In particular we acknowledge:

- reforms to the child protection system that are being developed in response to the Roadmap to Reform process and pilots to reform the out-of-home care sector
- unprecedented investment in tackling family violence and the commitment to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence
- enhanced support for children with emerging vulnerabilities and disengaged young people as part of the 'Education State' initiatives, including the anticipated Early Years Framework. Lookout (to connect children in out-of-home care to school), Navigator (to support school re-engagement) and Reconnect (supporting young people to engage with vocational education and training) are all welcome.

We commend the Victorian Government's new target to halve the number of young people leaving school prematurely. To realise this target, comprehensive interventions are needed. To this end, the Review of School funding led by former Premier Steve Bracks made some important recommendations which are yet to be actioned.

These positive initiatives could be translated into the youth justice context, given the strong overlap of early offenders with the subjects of these interventions. While recognising the current challenges in Victoria's youth justice system, the Brotherhood is anxious about the recent transfer of responsibility for Youth Justice from the Department of Health and Human Services to the Department of Justice and Regulation, with Corrections Victoria assuming responsibility for youth justice facilities. We are concerned that this change will work against the child, youth, family and community-centred approach needed to minimise further offending. Rather than an overly

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<sup>9</sup> Address to Victorian Youth Justice Conference, 24 November 2016.

punitive approach, a focus on rehabilitation and development aimed at tackling the factors that drive offending is needed.

## Investment in early childhood development is a key preventive measure

### Recommendation 1

**Invest in strengthening the capacity of vulnerable families to support their child's wellbeing and development in the earliest years of life.**

The early years of life lay the critical foundations for a child's future. Investments of time and money in the early years have been shown to be far more cost-effective than investments made at any other time. The greatest change in life chances can be achieved by working with children, and their families, before they go to school.

Despite our strong universal early years platforms, too many of Victoria's youngest children are at risk of being left behind in their first few years of life. One in five starts school with developmental vulnerabilities. These children are more likely to fare poorly at school and experience poorer life outcomes. The costs to the individual child and the broader community are immense.

Victoria's early years system can play a big part in shifting this trajectory through preventive and early intervention measures. The developmental vulnerability of children is often a product of, and compounded by, the disadvantage experienced by their parents and the paucity of resources in the local community. Accordingly, services need to engage with the skills and capabilities of a child's family and the circumstances of their local community. Much more can be done to leverage universal platforms (kindergartens, maternal and child health services, Early Childhood Education and Care and playgroups) to support children with emerging vulnerabilities and their families.

While we acknowledge the reforms underway in Victoria's child protection system, greater investment in early intervention would help identify families and children who are most at risk and build their resilience so that they do not fall into the secondary and tertiary child protection system. To this end, we welcome the investment in enhanced maternal and child health, and the pilot of an Intensive In-Home Support Trial for highly vulnerable families, but note this is very small scale and restricted to a few locations. We also welcome the statewide roll-out of the Cradle to Kinder program, and the expansion of the Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder program to 10 locations.<sup>10</sup>

The Brotherhood is currently piloting some approaches to demonstrate how to effectively enable families experiencing disadvantage to nurture their young child's development. One of these is the 2Generation approach, which seeks to change the life course of the most marginalised children. Inspired by the work of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this intervention works with parents and children at the same time. Children are provided with the best quality early years

<sup>10</sup> J Mikakos (Victorian Minister for Children and Families), *Support for vulnerable families from cradle to kinder*, media release, 5 April 2017.

education and the parent(s) are supported to build parenting skills. Critically, parents are also supported to engage with education, training and work and to build their financial capability; this recognises the positive correlation between parental education and economic participation and their child's outcomes. The program is supported by philanthropic funding and the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood has a long-running involvement with the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), a two-year, home-based early childhood learning and parenting program targeted at families with children aged 4 and 5 years. Backed by Australian Government funding, HIPPY is running in 100 communities across Australia, including 50 with high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. In Victoria, around 1000 families are currently participating in HIPPY in 16 locations with high numbers of children with developmental vulnerabilities. An evaluation of 14 sites in 2011 showed that HIPPY significantly improves school readiness (97% of children graduating from HIPPY are school ready), children's socio-emotional functioning, improves parenting skills and parent-child relationships and lifts parental engagement in their child's education—all critical protective factors.<sup>11</sup>

## School engagement decreases the risk of offending

Engagement in full-time education is one of the key protective factors against early offending. Schooling builds capacity to engage successfully in further studies and work, fosters positive wellbeing and supports good social outcomes, including peer networks and socialisation.<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, early disengagement from education has been identified as one of the primary drivers of offending. There are strong links between unsuccessful school performance, truancy and crime:

- A survey of the NSW prison population revealed that 60 per cent of inmates were not functionally literate or numerate, and 60 per cent did not complete Year 10.<sup>13</sup>
- Around two-thirds of young people in Victoria's Youth Justice Centres have been suspended or expelled from school.
- Australian and UK studies have found that between 60 and 70 per cent of students skipping school through truancy have been found to be involved in criminal activity.<sup>14</sup>

Poor educational outcomes are strongly associated with poorer life outcomes in terms of income, housing, mental health, physical health, alcohol and substance use, involvement with crime,

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<sup>11</sup> M Liddell, T Barnett, F Diallo Roost & J McEachran, *Investing in our future: an evaluation of the national rollout of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) final report*, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> R McLachlan, G Gilfillan & J Gordon, *Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia*, Productivity Commission, Canberra, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Corrective Services data reported in NSW Legislative Council, *Select Committee on the Increase in Prisoner Population final report*, November 2001, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> See various research studies cited in Jesuit Social Services *Submission to the Inquiry into Youth Justice Centres*, Richmond, Vic., 2017.

poverty and the receipt of disability-related benefits or welfare. Early school leavers experience social exclusion at three times the rate of those who have completed Year 12.<sup>15</sup>

Our analysis has identified three broad categories of young people who are disengaged or disengaging from school<sup>16</sup>:

Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
<p>Experience anxiety in a school setting, and are commonly identified as 'school refusers'.</p> <p>This cohort may be intellectually capable of class work, but experience attachment issues and are unwilling or unable to leave home to attend school due to bouts of anxiety or attachment to a key caregiver at home.</p> <p>Some 'school refusers' are partly enabled by family members.</p>	<p>Have a low-level intellectual disability or learning difficulty, but have an IQ above the requirements for a special school.</p> <p>These children and young people often find school work very challenging, and may act up in class to distract teachers and peers from their inability to complete standard school work.</p> <p>In some cases, parents have difficulty finding an appropriate learning setting for this cohort, as they require high levels of learning support.</p>	<p>Present with antisocial behaviours including aggression, violence and oppositional defiance disorder, associated with developmental trauma.</p> <p>These children and young people have often experienced significant childhood trauma and stress, and as a result are easily triggered, find concentrating on school tasks difficult and have issues trusting teachers and/or peers.</p>

Cohorts 2 and 3 are considered at most risk of early offending by program and school leaders we have consulted. These experiential insights mirror statistical data from the Youth Parole Board concerning the rates of incarcerated young people who have experienced developmental trauma, and/or who have an intellectual or learning challenges.

In our experience, most vulnerable young people have been 'pushed out' of school by negative factors that discourage their continuation.<sup>17</sup> Common issues include learning disorders, underdeveloped literacy and numeracy skills, bullying, low self-esteem and a combination of low expectations and limited adult support. Difficulties at home often cause or compound these issues.<sup>18</sup>

The Brotherhood acknowledges that many schools work hard to engage and retain more difficult students, but are ill-equipped to offer the intensive support needed because:

- large school sizes and institutional structures can militate against a flexible, individualised response

<sup>15</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence & Melbourne Institute, *Social exclusion monitor*, 2016, <https://www.bsl.org.au/knowledge/social-exclusion-monitor/who-experiences-social-exclusion/education/>.

<sup>16</sup> Identified in consultations by Jo Buick and George Myconos for their Middle Years Disengagement Literature Review (unpublished, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> L Menzies & S Baars, *The alternative should not be inferior: What now for 'pushed out' learners?*, Inclusion Trust [London], 2015.

<sup>18</sup> A Barrett, *Building relationships for better outcomes: Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation stage 2 report*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., 2012.

- the pressure to be a high achieving school, stricter uniform and student behaviour policies, and the league table approach to reporting school outcomes may discourage schools from actively seeking to retain students who are struggling—or may even encourage them to move students on
- many teachers and school counsellors lack the training to identify and effectively support the learning of vulnerable students. A small Brotherhood study of the structure of teacher training courses found significant gaps that leave teachers inadequately prepared to respond to those most in need<sup>19</sup>
- school funding is not sufficiently weighted to support early intervention and discrete funding to address disengagement is not systemically available.

While the Brotherhood acknowledges existing measures that support engagement of vulnerable students<sup>20</sup>, these measures lack the scale or coordination required for a comprehensive approach that averts disengagement.

## A statewide response to identify and reach out to young people who have dropped out of school prematurely is needed

### **Recommendation 2**

**Establish a systemic approach to rapidly identify those who disconnect from school and engage support for them to return to education.**

Victoria lacks a systematic approach to identify children and young people who are at risk of disengaging, or support those who have already completely disengaged from school. Each year, at least 10,000 Years 9–11 students who leave Victorian state schools do not go on to further education or training.<sup>21</sup> In addition, 6,000 young Victorians of compulsory school age drop out of the VET system. An unknown number of other students attend only sporadically or disappear from the schooling system and are largely overlooked.

While a **Disengaged Students Register** was announced in September 2015, details of its design and roll-out have not been forthcoming. The Brotherhood has recommended that such a register be supported with unambiguous requirements for schools and training providers to make rapid notification when a student disengages, and for regional DET offices, Local Learning and Employment Networks and local agencies to identify young people in their catchments who ought to be on the register. If carefully designed and implemented, the register could illuminate where students are exiting from, why they are exiting and, critically, whether support for re-engagement has been activated.

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<sup>19</sup> J Hanson-Peterson, *Do training programs equip teachers with skills to teach disengaged students? A preliminary scan*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Such as Managed Individual Pathways, mental health support (including the Headspace school partnership), Koorie Education Support, Student Support Service Officers, the School Focused Youth Service, Lookout and the Local Learning and Employment Networks.

<sup>21</sup> Education Department data reported by H Cook, '10,000 children dropping out of school', *The Age*, 12 May 2014.

The Bracks Review made important recommendations, yet to be specifically responded to, about strengthening local area reporting and collaboration around student engagement and re-integration. In particular, Recommendation 69 called for schools to report on their disengagement strategies, funding and performance; for local areas to monitor, estimate and report on the numbers and location of students who are disengaged from schooling and those who have already left school; and for local strategies to strengthen student engagement and re-integrate students who have left school in collaboration with service providers.

The closure of the nationally funded Youth Connections service at the end of 2014 left a major gap in interventions to assist young people to re-engage with education, training or employment. Youth Connections worked with around 4,000 young Victorians each year (although providers report these were the tip of a much bigger iceberg of disengaged young people). The Victorian Government subsequently established the **Navigator pilot** to support the educational re-engagement of 12–17 year olds. While a welcome development, Navigator has very limited reach: it is funded at around 20 per cent the level of Youth Connections, operates only in selected locations and only works with secondary students who are not attending school (defined as attendance of less than one-third of the previous term). The short timeframe (mid 2016 to end of 2017) will constrain effective demonstration of outcomes from this pilot.

In partnership with Anglicare Victoria, the Brotherhood, is delivering the Navigator pilot in western Melbourne, with promising early results. Our observations to date include:

- The service quickly reached capacity, and there is limited scope to keep those on the waiting list actively engaged.
- Significant numbers of young participants have learning disabilities (in particular Autism Spectrum Disorder) that are undiagnosed or untreated.
- Many participants are experiencing poor mental health.
- Reaching young people who are severely disengaged and require intensive support is challenging.
- There is a need for re-engagement support for younger children. Primary school principals are asking to make referrals. The absence of re-engagement support for primary school students was similarly identified as a shortcoming of the (Victorian) reach of Youth Connections.<sup>22</sup>

We commend Victoria's Education Justice Initiative, which supports young people appearing before the courts on criminal matters to re-engage with schooling.

To support prevention of youth offending, a statewide approach to identify and rapidly re-engage young people who drop out of school prematurely is needed. It should build on the evidence of what works, using evaluations from the Navigator pilot (forthcoming), Youth Connections and successful international models (e.g. in Denmark, Norway, Finland).

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<sup>22</sup> S Bond, *Overcoming barriers to education: Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation Stage 1 report*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., 2011.

## Interventions in primary and middle years are needed for 'at risk' children

### Recommendation 3

**Invest in tailored interventions to re-engage primary school and 'middle years' at risk children into mainstream school.**

School disengagement can start very young. The Brotherhood is currently involved in two initiatives targeted at primary and middle years students with problem behaviours. Both aim to re-integrate children into mainstream schooling and strengthen the capacity of schools to better support and hold these children.

### RESET

In response to a request from the Victoria Police, the Brotherhood has partnered with Monterey Secondary College in Frankston to develop the RESET program, targeted at children aged 11–14 who have largely stopped attending school. Most participants have a history of ongoing trauma; some are involved in antisocial behaviour and early offending.

RESET brings together a range of child and family interventions to support school re-engagement. Parents are assisted to put supportive structures in place and address chaotic home environments. Children are supported to establish school-friendly rhythms. The program is delivered in a small group setting in a purpose-designed building at Monterey College, to retain connection with and enable a gradual transition back into mainstream schooling.

Now in its second year, RESET has resulted in early learnings including the following:

- Families are highly influential. Our model has been adapted to include support for both the young person and their family, with home visits a feature. This has been more effective than a clinical approach that primarily focuses on the child.
- The readiness of children and their families to change is an important success factor. Some children with considerable trauma would benefit from a preparatory therapeutic program, but there is little on offer.
- A balanced group of young participants is needed. If too many are involved in criminal behaviour, there is a risk of reinforcing negative peer associations and problematic behaviours, and compromising group safety.

### Project REAL (Re-engagement in Education And Learning)

The Brotherhood is evaluating Project REAL, a new community initiative in Broadmeadows aimed at 9–12 year olds who demonstrate challenging behaviour (e.g. violence, aggression, extreme risk taking, theft, vandalism, substance abuse) and persistent absenteeism. Delivery partners are Banksia Gardens Community Services (where the students will be educated before being re-engaged in schools), the Gateway School, Dianella Community Health, Outer Urban Projects and local primary schools.

There are many common threads between the RESET and REAL initiatives, including:

- a therapeutic framework, steeped in a **trauma-informed, positive education approach**, to build self-esteem, support improved relational experiences, repair neurological damage

caused by traumatic experiences, improve connections with schools and encourage positive friendship circles, support constructive hobbies and interests

- a multidisciplinary team
- reliance on **philanthropic funding**, community sector investment and short-term government grants which do not guarantee ongoing sustainability
- an aim of building the evidence base and improve collective capacity (including the capacity of schools) to work effectively with severely disengaged young people.

The above programs are very small in scale and among the isolated, community-driven initiatives across the state targeted at supporting children who have been lost to the school system and are at risk of a justice-connected future. There is a need to conduct a meta-evaluation and learn from the pilots in this space to help consolidate good practice intervention design and replicate effective approaches.

We are also aware of the **Families and Schools Together (FAST) program** that was developed in the United States almost 30 years ago and is now delivered internationally (including in Australia since 1994). This family-strengthening program has been shown to improve family cohesion, reduce family stress and conflict, build social capital and community connections, increase a young person's school engagement, build prosocial behaviours and reduce conduct problems.<sup>23</sup> As an early intervention program, it attempts to divert parents and children from harmful pathways. FAST is on the Australian Institute of Family Studies evidence-based program list, so it can attract Communities for Children funding. It is running in 40 locations across Australia, often with philanthropic support. There are three streams of FAST based on child ages: Baby FAST for 0–3 year olds with young parents; Kids FAST for primary school children and their families; and Teen FAST, which is designed to enhance adolescents' resistance against school failure, juvenile delinquency and substance abuse. Families take part in an intensive eight-week program which involves a meal shared as a family unit; family bonding activities; an adult-to-adult group, a youth peer-to-peer group; and one-to-one quality interaction. Following this, families attend monthly follow-up FASTWORKS meetings for two years. Parent-partners (often graduates of FAST) help recruit for and facilitate the program.

The Bracks Review recommended establishment of a Student Engagement Fund to support evidence-informed initiatives delivered by school and community provider partnerships aimed at preventing early school leaving and facilitating re-integration into mainstream schooling. The Brotherhood would like to see action by the Victorian Government to implement this Recommendation 66.

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<sup>23</sup> L McDonald & M Frank, *Evaluation report for Brophy Family Services: participating school Warrnambool College*, Families & Schools Together Inc. USA, Madison, Wisconsin, 2010; S Coote, Paper on FAST presented at the Conference on Reducing Criminality: Partnerships and Best Practice, Perth, 31 July – 1 August 2000.

## Victoria needs more quality high-support flexible learning options to enable vulnerable young people to finish their schooling

### Recommendation 4

**Invest in high-support flexible learning options across Victoria to effectively support highly vulnerable and disengaged young people to continue their education**

For those older young people (aged 15 plus) for whom a traditional school environment is no longer viable, there are few high-support flexible learning options where they can complete their secondary education. Apart from a handful of promising programs embedded in Victorian state schools, there are also education programs for vulnerable young people delivered outside the school gate by community providers and training organisations (accredited and unaccredited training, re-engagement programs and school-linked programs like Community VCAL). However, these tend to be chronically underfunded (e.g. Community VCAL students attract just 57 per cent of the per-student funding provided to state secondary schools) and are of varying quality and are often marginalised from the mainstream education system. Many providers have closed. Getting access to a high-support flexible learning place has been described as a lottery.<sup>24</sup>

In response to this chronic underfunding, a few community organisations, including the Brotherhood and Melbourne City Mission, have recently established specialist schools (which attract higher levels of federal funding) to ensure sustainability of their previous community-based education programs.

The Brotherhood's **David Scott School, which** opened in Frankston in 2017, is enabling some of Victoria's most vulnerable young people to complete their secondary schooling. The School has been designed for young people (currently 15–19 year olds) who have been lost from and are not welcome back at local schools. All of the students face a number of complex challenges. At least 30 per cent are known to the police. The school starts with the approach that:

... kids with behavioral challenges are not attention-seeking, manipulative, coercive or unmotivated. But they do lack the skills to behave appropriately. Adults can help by recognizing what causes their difficult behaviors and teaching kids the skills they need.<sup>25</sup>

Like the RESET and REAL programs for younger children, the David Scott School uses a trauma-informed, positive education approach. There is a strong focus on supporting mental health recovery and addressing challenges that get in the way of a young person's learning, such as family violence, homeless and substance abuse. The model features intensive on-site wellbeing support and the curriculum is intentionally designed to support social and emotional development. Students attend small classes in an environment that promotes physical, psychological and cultural safety. The individualised approach includes tailored support to address educational gaps and bring each student's learning up to standard. Next steps, including preparing for further studies and employment, are also a priority. There is also strong engagement with families.

<sup>24</sup> K te Riele, *Putting the jigsaw together: flexible learning programs in Australia – final report*, The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, Melbourne, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Presentation by the Acting Principal, David Scott School, March 2017, quoting R Greene, *Lost at school*.

Local police support the school's operation, with officers available to collect students who have not arrived from home and to participate regularly in school life to encourage positive relations. School staff support and liaise with services and advocates when students are involved in criminal proceedings, and advise courts about orders that would support a therapeutic response—such as mandating drug and alcohol treatment. There is also a focus on supporting students to break out of unhelpful associations and develop alternative networks of friends.

Prior to the opening of the David Scott School, the Brotherhood's Community VCAL program (2010–16) on which the school is modelled produced impressive outcomes, with 72 per cent of students successfully graduating with a Year 12 qualification, and thus a strong foundation for further study or work. Importantly, program evaluations have consistently show that students have developed better social and emotional management skills, which are critical resources for life.<sup>26</sup>

Recent Australian research measuring the value of keeping 'at risk' young people engaged in education concluded that every \$1 invested in flexible learning options generates \$25 of socioeconomic returns. These returns include better health and wellbeing, increased participation in employment, and reduced involvement with the criminal justice system and related welfare services.<sup>27</sup>

The Bracks Review found that the needs of students that have already left school are complex and resource-intensive, demanding additional support including outreach, wrap-around services, distinctive pedagogy, high quality pathways planning and case management. The review recommended additional resources for re-integration and called for increased funds to alternative settings, subject to DET having better visibility over students accessing external providers and their outcomes. This Recommendation 67 is yet to be acted on.

The Brotherhood recommends that quality, high-support, flexible learning programs should be an intrinsic part of Victoria's 'Education Offer', so that the state system is geared up to cater for different learning styles and student needs, and support vulnerable young people to build a positive future.

## Reforming out-of-home care would assist young people to build a positive future

### Recommendation 5

**Continue to pilot reforms in out-of-home care to increase participation in education, improve life outcomes and support those exiting care to build a positive future.**

### Recommendation 6

**Extend support for young people in out-of-home care to age 21.**

<sup>26</sup> G Myconos, *Lessons from a flexible learning program: the Brotherhood of St Laurence Community VCAL education program for young people 2010–2013*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., 2014.

<sup>27</sup> G Myconos, *Demonstrating value in flexible education in Australia: the social return on investment*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, forthcoming.

High proportions of young people known to the criminal justice system have been in out-of-home care. Those living in or transitioning from out-of-home care are among the most vulnerable in our society.<sup>28</sup> They are typically highly service-connected and heavily dependent on state support. They are often ill-equipped to successfully transition to an independent young adulthood.<sup>29</sup>

Young people exhibit very low rates of engagement in education while in care. Many leave school early, often with little career pathways planning and support.<sup>30</sup> We acknowledge that the new Lookout initiative is seeking to address this deficit. Once they exit OOHC at the age of 18, the young people also experience high rates of unemployment, homelessness, disengagement and early parenthood. This can condemn them to a lifetime of service dependence, acute poverty and social exclusion.

The outcomes for those in residential care are particularly grim. According to Victoria's largest OOHC provider, Anglicare Victoria, 'Study after study will indicate that 50% of those who leave care will find themselves homeless, in prison, unemployed and or a parent within 12 months of leaving care'.<sup>31</sup> In recent years, the systemic failures of the residential care system have been highlighted by Victoria's Auditor-General in 2014 and the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People in 2015.<sup>32</sup>

Recognising the particular barriers that service-connected young people often face (absence of positive adult mentors; poor foundational skills; unstable housing; limited social and professional networks), the Brotherhood, in conjunction with Launch Housing, TAFEs and other community agencies has created a tailored training program, **Developing Independence**. This Certificate I accredited qualification supports the young people to develop core life management skills (such as goal setting, planning and dealing with conflict), explore different areas of vocation and aspiration, and build an external support network.

While initially devised for young people in Education First Youth Foyers, Developing Independence has since been extended to residential care and youth refuge settings. It is currently being piloted (with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services) with a number of out-of-home care (residential care) providers and TAFE partners, with the aims of:

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<sup>28</sup> P Mendes, P Snow & S Baidawi, 'The views of service providers on the challenges facing young people also involved in the youth justice system transitioning from out-of-home care', *Journal of Policy Practice*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2014, pp. 239–257.

<sup>29</sup> G Johnson, K Natalier, N Bailey, N Kunnen, M Liddiard, P Mendes & A Hollows, *Improving housing outcomes for young people leaving state out of home care*, Positioning paper no. 117, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> K Mendis, F Gardner & J Lehmann, 'The education of children in out-of-home care', *Australian Social Work*, vol.68, 2015, pp. 483–496

<sup>31</sup> Anglicare Victoria, *Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care: submission*, Anglicare Victoria, Collingwood, Vic., 2015, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Victorian Auditor-General, *Residential care services for children*, Victorian Government Printer, Melbourne; Commission for Children and Young People, "... as a good parent would ..." *Inquiry into the adequacy of the provision of residential care services to Victorian children and young people who have been subject to sexual abuse or sexual exploitation whilst residing in residential care*, CCYP, Melbourne, 2015.

- developing young people’s capabilities to engage with mainstream education, and achieve economic independence and social inclusion
- promoting a new way of working with young people that moves away from a welfare-based approach to one that recognises and builds young people’s skills, talents and aspirations, and allows them to independently manage their own futures (Advantaged Thinking)
- improving housing, education and employment options for young people leaving care.<sup>33</sup>

As an extension of this work, the Brotherhood is now partnering with the Department of Health and Human Services to co-design the new **Leaving Care service model and practice framework**, to be piloted over two years (2017–18) in the Barwon region.

The Leaving Care pilot recognises that transition from state-dependence to independence is particularly difficult. Whereas many young people remain in their family home well into their 20s, care leavers typically experience an accelerated transition to independence at the age of 18<sup>34</sup>, or even younger. The Brotherhood is one of the many organisations supporting Home Stretch, the campaign led by Anglicare Victoria to extend support to young people in out-of-home care until at least age 21, and their carers.

The Leaving Care pilot seeks to develop and nurture aspirations; match these with opportunities; and foster a more graduated and sustainable transition to adulthood. It redirects existing resources towards an integrated ‘independence plan’ for each care leaver based on offers in the following six domains: education (using an Education First approach); employment; health & wellbeing; social connections; housing & living skills; and civic participation.

## The trajectory of young people experiencing homelessness can be changed

### Recommendation 7

**Reshape youth homelessness services by prioritising an Education First approach in future commissioning processes.**

Many young people who have been in care or are not living in their family home go on to experience homelessness. These young people are significantly more likely to experience low rates of engagement in education and employment, poorer physical and mental health and greater reliance on government services. They are at high risk of cycling through homelessness and the criminal justice system.

There is an urgent need to recast the way we tackle youth homelessness. Homelessness services typically focus on crisis management, attending to a young person’s immediate needs, rather than

<sup>33</sup> A Hart, J Borlagdan & S Mallett, *Paying attention to the future: Piloting Certificate I in Developing Independence in out-of-home care settings*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., 2017.

<sup>34</sup> P Mendes, P Snow & S Baidawi, ‘The views of service providers on the challenges facing young people also involved in the youth justice system transitioning from out-of-home care’, *Journal of Policy Practice*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2014, pp. 239-257.

on longer term investments to change their trajectory. We need to intensify the focus on education, training and employment: this can be a game-changer.

**Education First Youth Foyers** (developed by the Brotherhood and Launch Housing) have a core focus on education and training as a means of breaking the cycle of homelessness and disadvantage. Foyer students live in student accommodation located on TAFE College campuses for up to two years. This continuous, extended support is improving education outcomes and providing young people with opportunities to develop career aspirations, gain experience of work and build their networks. Detailed work has been done on the practice framework guiding the operation of these Foyers, and a comprehensive evaluation is taking place. This model is demonstrating a more efficient and effective way of investing in the future of young people experiencing homelessness.

Youth Justice has been actively referring young people to the Foyers; and specific protocols have been developed to prepare them for a supported transition into Foyer accommodation.

The Foyer model is underpinned by **Advantaged Thinking**. While disadvantaged thinking defines people by their problems and subsequently builds services based on managing them, Advantaged Thinking focuses on investing in the young person's innate skills and talents.<sup>35</sup> It values the potential contribution of each young person to our social and economic life and matches their aspirations with opportunities. This is buttressed by the concept of **'the Deal'**, in which young people practice reciprocity—to get something you give something. This reinforces the concepts of rights, responsibilities and a person's commitments to themselves and the wider community. The approach builds a sense of belonging, personal agency and capacity to make decisions. It also supports the local community to be more inclusive.

The Brotherhood is supporting extension of the Education First approach to other parts of the homelessness sector in collaboration with TAFEs and homelessness services.

## Place-based interventions in areas of entrenched disadvantage should reduce offending

### Recommendation 8

**In locations of entrenched disadvantage, invest in place-based approaches that focus on supporting improved family functioning, early childhood development, school engagement and employment.**

There is a strong case for targeting investment in areas of entrenched disadvantage as a means to reduce crime. The *Dropping off the edge* 2015 report reveals that particular Victorian postcodes have high levels of entrenched disadvantage. The authors explain that:

High levels of unemployment, low levels of income and education, housing stress, high incidence of family violence and criminal offending are consistently present in these communities. These factors coalesce to form a web of disadvantage severely limiting life

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<sup>35</sup> S Mallett, S James, N McTiernan & J Buick, *Education First Youth Foyer practice framework*, Hanover Welfare Services and Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne, 2014.

opportunities over generations and accruing significant social and economic costs to the broader community.<sup>36</sup>

Related research by Jesuit Social Services reveals that:

- 25% of children on youth justice orders come from just 2.6% of Victorian postcodes<sup>37</sup>
- children who encounter the criminal justice system when aged 14 years or under are more likely to come from areas with higher rates of developmentally vulnerable children on the Australian Early Development Index<sup>38</sup>
- residents in the most disadvantaged 3% of Victoria's postcodes are twice as likely to have criminal convictions (as well as three times more likely to experience long term unemployment and 2.6 times more likely to experience family violence).<sup>39</sup>

We acknowledge existing initiatives, such as Victoria's Youth Crime Prevention Grants, which are funding early intervention initiatives to reduce and divert criminal activity. In Doveton and Frankston, for example, diversionary training and employment programs have been established, including one designed for Aboriginal, Maori and Pacific Islander youth. There is considerable opportunity to take a more comprehensive approach to justice reinvestment as a way of tackling high offending rates in locations of entrenched disadvantage, looking to current examples in NSW (Bourke) and the United Kingdom for inspiration. These focus on addressing disadvantage through investment to improve family functioning, early childhood development outcomes, school engagement and economic participation. Victorian postcodes with entrenched disadvantage ought to be priority areas for investment.

The Brotherhood has previously recommended that government develop a policy framework to enable place-based approaches to tackle disadvantage.<sup>40</sup> While interventions would vary from place to place reflecting local community aspirations, assets and needs, key assistance that the Victorian Government could provide includes:

- investing in local economic development
- supporting coordination of local efforts (by funding an organisation to provide backbone or anchor support) and fostering local collaborative governance that brings together community, business and different levels of government

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<sup>36</sup>T Vinson & M Rawsthorne, *Dropping off the edge 2015: persistent communal disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services, Richmond, Vic., 2015.

<sup>37</sup>M Ericson & T Vinson, *Young people on remand in Victoria: balancing individual and community interests*, Jesuit Social Services, Richmond, Vic., 2010.

<sup>38</sup>Jesuit Social Services, *Thinking outside: alternatives to remand for children*, research report, Richmond, Vic., 2013.

<sup>39</sup>T Vinson & M Rawsthorne, *Dropping off the edge 2015: persistent communal disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services, Richmond, Vic., 2015.

<sup>40</sup>Brotherhood of St Laurence, *What next for place-based initiatives to tackle disadvantage? A practical look at recent lessons for Australian public policy*, Fitzroy, Vic., 2015.

- providing flexible funding that encourages local interests to collaborate rather than compete to develop innovative solutions and facilitate redeployment of existing resources, capitation, leveraging alternative revenue sources and non-monetary contributions
- building on existing community, local government and state efforts (such as DEDJTR's Community Revitalisation initiative, the expansion of school hubs inspired by the Doveton College model and DOJs Youth Crime Prevention Grants)
- aligning strategic efforts across government departments to support the advancement of local community aspirations and to develop flexible place-based policy and program responses that are tailored to local needs
- translating government-held data for community use.