

“On the Borderline”

A Submission to the *Better Services Better Outcomes* Consultation

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December 2001

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MacKillop Family Services¹ welcomes the Victorian Government’s review of educational services for students with special education needs. We especially welcome the “renewed commitment to an *inclusive* educational system” (p. 7, our emphasis).

MacKillop provides disability services for families where there are children with severe or profound disabilities and complex needs. MacKillop also provides special schools for children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviours. Thirdly, through outreach educational services and the case management of children and young people in residential care, and home-based care. MacKillop works with children and young people who are emotionally, behaviourally and socially disadvantaged and at risk of exclusion from schools. These children and young people are often on the borderline of exclusion from school or on the borderline of receiving of special support services.

MacKillop’s disability services are provided in both the Western Metropolitan and Barwon regions and include

- Making a Difference
- Early Choices
- Family Options
- RAPT
- Special accommodation units

MacKillop’s educational services cover both Statewide specialist services and services in the Barwon and Western Metropolitan regions. These services include:

- School Focused Youth Service
- Educational Mobile Unit
- Second Chance
- Behaviour Support Service
- Children in Residential Care Education Support Service
- St Vincent’s School in South Melbourne
- St Helen’s School, New Street, and St Augustine’s School in Geelong
- Western Education Centre in Footscray
- Youth Ed-venture Program (YEP)

MacKillop Family Services, for a variety of historical reasons and like many other non-government organisations, has developed specialist educational services for children and young people not included in the broad educational system. We believe such specialist works should not

¹ For information on MacKillop Family Services, see www.mackillop.org.au.

be seen as an alternative form of education, and that we should work towards a single system of education. Our goal in education is to lead children back to the mainstream system, whether that be the State or Church system.

In June 2000 MacKillop made a substantial submission to the PENG inquiry, entitled “Inclusion and Equity”. This brief present submission should be read in the light of the evidence and the recommendations contained in “Inclusion and Equity”,² in which we registered our concern that the children and young people we are working with currently experience themselves as “excluded” from what is called “mainstream” education. One factor in this, as we noted in our PENG submission, is that the scale and size of most schools counts against children at the border being included. These children and young people, already disadvantaged, are consequently further impeded from attaining a sense of dignity and human worth, and will have their life choices severely limited.

The recent Child Protection and Juvenile Justice document, *Findings of the Audit of Children and Young People in Residential Care*, shows that

- “53% of clients aged 13 and over are not enrolled at school”
- “55% of the school-aged population in residential care have been suspended from school on at least one occasion”
- “26% have been permanently excluded from school”.³

Many of the children in care who manage to stay in schools, by inference, are close to the borderline of exclusion.

The *Better Outcomes, Better Services* document addresses many of the concerns we raised in our “Inclusion and Equity” submission. For example, *Better Outcomes, Better Services* regrets the “loss of commitment to inclusive education, innovative practice and strategic planning” (p. 6) and holds as its first principle the “full acceptance and participation of all students in the life of the community” (p. 7). Its aim is that “the management and deployment of resources in schools are designed to ensure that all students needs are met” (p. 8).

The *Better Outcomes, Better Services* document also addresses particular concerns we have about children and young people who are on the borderline of disability, yet who receive no appropriate special support. This is particularly the case with many children and young people in residential care, who have borderline learning ability, borderline behaviour issues, borderline emotional needs, borderline social skills, and so on. While these children may on any one assessment not be measured as in special need, their overall situation is precarious. They inevitably struggle in mainstream schools that lack adequate resources and staff to meet their special needs and therefore end up further disadvantaged. This represents a real failure of the responsibility of the government to provide education for all children and young people.

As the *Better Outcomes, Better Services* document states, it is “particularly difficult to determine whether all students that require additional support are being appropriately assisted” and it is unsatisfactory that

the current DIA program focuses on diagnostic categorisation rather than educational need and does not address the fundamental problem associated with students on the borderline...who may have significant educational needs. This has created an arbitrary

² This submission is attached. It can also be downloaded from “Publications” at www.mackillop.org.au

³ Child Protection and Juvenile Justice, *Findings of the Audit of Children and Young People in Residential Care*, Community Care Division, Department of Human Services, May 2001, pp. 42-43.

division between students who receive funding under the program and those who do not (p. 12, our emphasis).

We therefore endorse the finding that “the existing model of resource management appears to be leading to both under and over servicing of particular groups of students” (p. 13). We strongly support the recommendations for a new framework for resource distribution.

We support recommendations 3 and 4 and the idea of a Special Educational Needs (SEN) School Allocation. We note with approval that special educational needs are seen to include students with *learning difficulties* and *challenging behaviours* (p. 14, our emphasis). Many children and young people in care display such special needs, yet do not qualify for special services. In addition to recommendations 3 and 4, however, structures must be put in place to ensure

- That SEN allocations are adequate to meet need
- That SEN allocations are used for the purpose for which they are intended

Our disability service workers report that they are constantly having to find funds for speech therapists and physiotherapists for children and young people with special needs. If education is to be inclusive, then the proposed SEN funds must be enhanced so as to meet these and similar needs.

Recommendation 5 proposes an enhanced new role for specialist schools and settings, particularly in feeding good practice frameworks back into mainstream schools. Our work in educating for resilience,⁴ in assisting children and young people at risk of falling out of mainstream education, along with current research and evaluation,⁵ provides a foundation for such interchange. We therefore are happy to support recommendation 5. Ideally, however, as we argued in our submission to the PENG consultation, mainstream schools should provide a continuum of services and be as inclusive as possible of all children and young people.

Recommendations 6 and 7 deal with distribution and allocation of resources and the problem of the fair assessments of individuals with needs. We support the principle of shifting focus from level of disability to level of educational need. There are mixed advantages, however, in separating the assessment system from the service support system. The key principle that needs to be applied is that the assessment is competent, informed, consults parents, guardians and teachers who know the child, and is open to appeal. There is room for an alternative assessment system within service support, provided this key principle is maintained: clients could then have a choice of either system.

We support recommendation 8, but suggest that the formation of Program Support Groups be mandatory rather than optional. Experience suggests, however, that parents and guardians often have to do the bulk of the work required in establishing an ongoing Program Support Group. Further, parents often rely on expert advice that they have had to pay for themselves from child psychologists, speech therapists and so on. This recommendation needs to include, therefore,

- attention to the responsibility of schools to play at least an equal role in the establishment of program support groups.

⁴ Graeme Withers and Jean Russell, *Educating for Resilience: Prevention and Intervention Strategies for Young People at Risk*, Catholic Education Office/MacKillop Family Services/Victorian Department of Human Services, 1998.

⁵ MacKillop Family Services is a partner with Australian Catholic University in an Australian Research Council funded project to research and evaluate psycho-educational approaches to prevention and intervention for marginalised young people in the Barwon Region of Victoria.

As the Meyer Report argues (p.41), it is clearly evident that there is a need for schools and teachers to be better equipped to meet the special needs of children and young people with disabilities and impairments and challenging behaviour. We therefore also support the idea of a Special Educational Needs (SEN) Network Allocation to further this process and endorse recommendations 9 and 11, on the training of teachers and the development of a comprehensive professional development plan.

It is equally clear, however, that more than a repackaging of existing funding will be required to meet existing need. Current funding is insufficient to meet needs. We therefore include an overarching recommendation:

- Funding levels must be increased to meet actual needs.

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