Submission to the Inquiry into Sharing the Benefits of Growth with All South Australians

June 2024

Commissioner for Children & Young People

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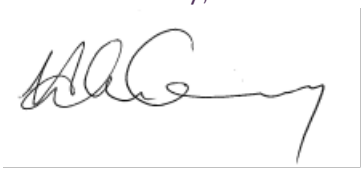
My role as Commissioner for Children and Young People was established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* to promote and advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people living in South Australia, and to help bring about improvements to systems that impact on them. Since 2017, I have been actively engaging with the children and young people of SA to hear their thoughts in order to advocate on their behalf.

This submission is based on what I have heard from thousands of children and young people living in South Australia, and on what I have learnt about how their rights are being upheld or not. It provides insights into the barriers preventing many South Australians from engaging fully in education and steady employment, and of sharing in the benefits of economic growth. It also seeks to answer the Productivity Commission's specific questions about:

- The root causes of high long-term unemployment;
- The mechanisms that might help to engage young people in meaningful education and training, and to find effective pathways to steady employment; and
- The potential for policy interventions to reduce disadvantage and help address the skills needs of the State's employers.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia

Introduction

Children are not able to fully enjoy their rights in the same ways as adults do. Similarly, children are incapable of either fully contributing to or fully sharing in the benefits of economic growth independently. At the same time, the children and teenagers of today, are the future workforce upon which the prosperity of the State is largely dependent. With this in mind, children and young people have a unique position in our society which requires special scaffolding to ensure they are enabled to develop to be productive members of the community.

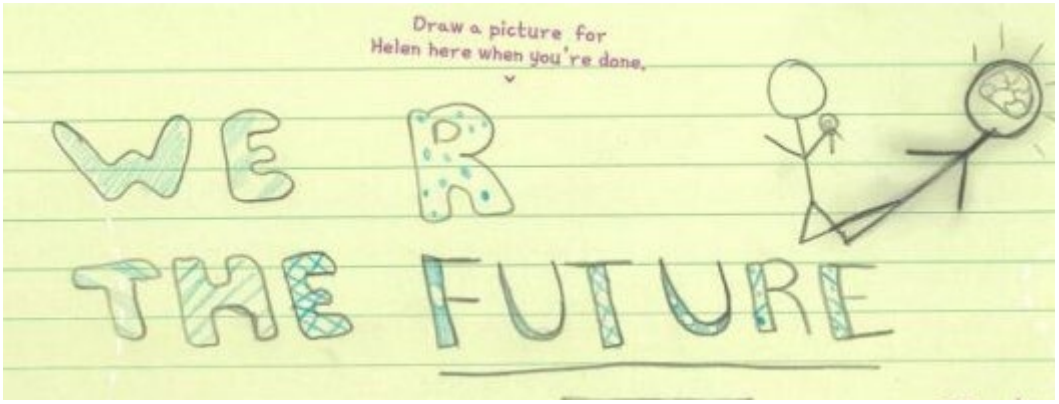
Put simply, if we want to create the skilled workforce that South Australia's employers need, we must enable our children and young people to have an ongoing connection to meaningful education and regular employment; to be confident in their capabilities and role in the community; and to have the opportunities to explore and develop their skills and creativity.

We know that a good education and relevant qualifications are critical to the future of every young person and the vital ingredients to setting them up for success. However, there are structural barriers that can prevent children and young people from fully engaging and capitalising on their education, starting with their health and wellbeing.

Any solutions the Productivity Commission considers must understand the life-course of South Australians from birth, with a particular appreciation of the impact of early experiences. We know that those children who are failing to meet their educational milestones in the early years continue to do so throughout school and beyond.

In order to address the issues preventing some children and young people sharing in the benefits of economic growth, we must:

- Understand children and young people;
- Keep children and young people connected to education;
- Actively address disadvantage; and
- Improve pathways to employment for all.



The root causes of high long-term unemployment

30 per cent of Year 7s in SA are failing to meet their milestones and this figure is worse for particular groups of children.[1] There are a number of factors that we know increase the likelihood of being excluded or disengaged from education and employment in South Australia:

- poverty
- living in regional and remote areas
- living with disability or chronic illness
- being female
- being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- being from a refugee or migrant background
- being sexually and/or gender diverse
- having contact with the state care system
- having contact with the youth justice system
- having caring responsibilities
- being affected by parental incarceration.

To put it simply, hungry children, children who cannot hear or see well, or who have chronic toothaches are less likely to get the most out of their education.[2] Similarly, young people who cannot afford the transport to get to work will find it hard to get a job.

In addition, young people report how formal and informal processes make them feel unwelcome and actively exclude them from the mainstream schooling system. They tell me that a focus on symptoms means the causes of young people's disengagement from school often go ignored.

Informal exclusion practices include having restricted access to play areas, being sent to the school's front office, to a classroom to sit with a teacher or counsellor, or left in a confined space such as a courtyard or isolating room for hours on end. They talk about being sent home early and of being encouraged to stay home on significant school community days, such as sports days and school excursions.

From the perspective of children and young people these informal exclusionary practices and experiences are no less damaging than suspension, exclusion and expulsion. Many young people describe a long process of disconnection that started early in their education journey, and which ends up in exclusion that leads to many children and young people living lives that are deeply rooted in disadvantage and vulnerability due to not having had an opportunity to meet their educational milestones.

Exclusion from education

My Blame Game report highlights that children as young as 4 years old are being excluded from formal education and these early experiences have an ongoing impact on wellbeing, engagement, and achievement across the years of school.[3]

Exclusions in the early years also work to decrease parent trust in the education system. They also impact on parents (especially mothers) and their paid work if they need to be home with children who have been excluded.

In 2022, by Term 2 primary school students in government schools had been suspended 1,869 times.[4]

The very process of exclusion means it is hard for the student to catch up. Being excluded often begins or escalates a process of disengagement which can result in a child or young person becoming completely disengaged from education. Some young people explained that their inability to understand and keep up with their schoolwork was itself a cause for repeated exclusion.

> *'People get suspended and excluded every week, some kids are suspended and get another suspension as soon as they come back.'*
> – 15 year old girl

> *'People who get suspended usually don't care about their work and by getting suspended they care even less because they have an excuse for not doing the work because they weren't in class.'*
> – 15 year old girl

> *'it is very hard to concetrat on work when u r always getting in trouble'*
> – 10 year old boy

Evidence suggests that the children who are most likely to be excluded may already be facing significant challenges outside of school. They include children in out of home care, children living with disability or with learning difficulties, children living in poverty, or experiencing homelessness, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children and young people living with chronic physical and/or mental health issues.

Children and young people who struggle to regulate their emotions or who cannot remain focused in the classroom, spoke about being labelled as 'bad' and 'hopeless'. Many children who are excluded quickly internalise the messages given about their behaviour from an early age and start to believe they are 'bad' or 'naughty', or 'beyond help' and disengage from school. From adults who were suspended, excluded, or expelled as children, we have heard that in some cases these negative beliefs about education can last well into adulthood.

> *'You a bad. Your school hates you and sends you away.'*
> – Male, 9

> *'They don't want me.'*
> – 9 year old boy

In addition, it is clear that education exclusions have impacts that extend far beyond those of not attending school. These are impacts that are felt by children and young people across multiple aspects of their lives, including physical, emotional, mental health and wellbeing domains, as well as on their aspirations and social mobility.

The impact of poverty on children and young people's outcomes

Children and young people have consistently told me that they want all children and young people to have equitable access to opportunities, particularly for those who are 'doing it tough'. They are aware that 'social background is too often a key predictor of educational and future success'.

South Australia has the highest rate of poverty in Australia with 22,000 South Australian children living in poverty.[5] In some parts of the State, rates of child poverty are as high as 50 per cent.[6]

The wellbeing and educational outcomes of children from the most disadvantaged areas are severely compromised compared to their more fortunate peers.

Growing up in poverty affects a child's development and can have negative impacts on all areas of their lives: health, education, family relationships, and aspirations. For each stage in a child's development the proportion of disadvantaged children who meet educational milestones are between 10 to 20 per cent lower than for the Australian population as a whole.[7] Those who are off track at one milestone are unlikely to catch up again and the effects persist well beyond school, reflected in higher chances of not finding full-time work, and not being in education and training.[8]

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) indicates that experiencing poverty in early childhood links to negative cognitive outcomes, behavioural and social issues, and obesity.[9]

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data shows that South Australian children living in the most disadvantaged communities are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains than those who live in the least disadvantaged communities. [10] In addition, data from the 2021 Census indicates that children in the north of Adelaide have a lower preschool attendance as a proportion of the local population than those in the rest of metropolitan Adelaide.[11]

Young children impacted by poverty can miss out on many things crucial to early development, such as toys, books, and learning opportunities. They also may miss out on other key essentials such as having a secure home and access to food. These have short- and long-term impacts on children's lives.

Children and young people I talked to during my Poverty Project wanted stability and a safe environment. They told us that missing out was about much more than not having physical 'things'. They also feared 'the poverty trap', 'the cycle of poverty' and 'generational poverty' and how difficult it is for people born into poverty to get out of it.

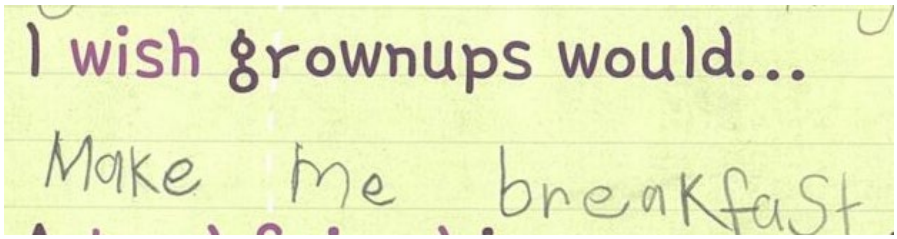
Children and young people talk about the impact 'poverty stress' places on a family, such that everyone in the household feels constantly 'on edge' because of the circumstances

they face. We heard that the pressure of having 'no food' or 'no electricity or gas' can lead to 'less connection with their family due to parents being stressed (and) having to work constantly.' Some say this can manifest in families 'arguing a lot', or in more serious situations, to becoming an 'abusive family' that eventually results in 'welfare (getting) involved'.

For families living in poverty, health is a big issue, particularly for children, free health care is virtually non-existent and highly inaccessible. Children and young people talked about waiting lists that were often 'months and months' long, and about their perception that there is a poorer quality of health care is only available to them. They are also worried about the physical and social impact poverty has on children, such as having 'bad teeth' or being 'more likely to get sick' and when they do get sick being 'in poor health' for longer.

We heard that children experiencing poverty are often 'predisposed to anxiety/ depression' but cannot afford treatment for these conditions. One young person told us 'the mental health system for poor people is virtually inaccessible, even when they can be the most needing of that support' (Female, 16).

Without good health, children are not able to engage fully in preschool, school or employment.



- 7 year old girl, Port Augusta

Poverty also impacts the aspirations of children and young people. The CCYP Student Voice Postcards initiative gives 8-12 year olds across the state a chance to share their views and concerns with me. While many 8-12 year olds write about their present and future lives with excitement and hope, it is noteworthy that many children believe the best thing about being a kid is not having to pay bills and taxes, not having to pay for food or housing, not having to work long hours, and not having as many 'responsibilities' to 'stress' about 'like adults do'.

If the best thing about being a kid is effectively 'not being an adult', this raises concerns about the messages we're sending to children about what adulthood entails. From the postcard responses it is clear that children are aware of the stress their parents and guardians are under, particularly stress that is linked to financial poverty and being time poor. They see, hear, and are affected by this adult stress in their everyday lives.

{I worry about…}

'Paying bills & being poor.'
- 10 year old girl, northern suburbs

'not finding a job and end up homeless.'
- 11 year old boy, northern suburbs

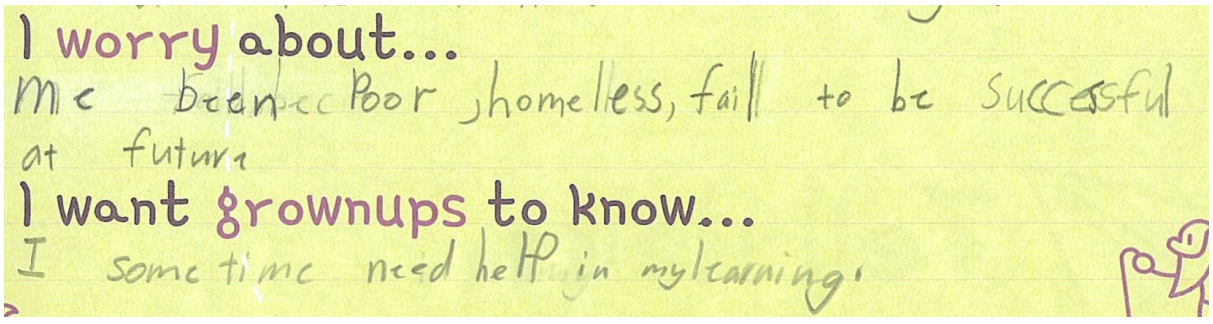
Disadvantaged young people frequently report that they face issues that make them feel as though they do not belong at school. This sense of not belonging impacts their connection with the school and their ability to develop friendships and build their sense of self-worth. It also increases the likelihood of disengaging completely from school.

They raise financial issues that can sometimes or frequently be the cause of their formal and informal exclusion from school. Every young person who participated in focus group consultations for my Poverty Project reported difficulties paying for uniforms at some point in their education. Many explained that not wearing the right uniform was a common reason for their formal exclusion from a particular class or series of classes.

Many young people spoke about feeling 'embarrassed' and 'ashamed' about not having enough money to participate in the full learning experience. When the cost of various school-based practices and initiatives requires 'extra money' it can leave students feeling isolated.

We know there is an impact from not being able to afford hygiene products such as deodorant, toothpaste and soap. For young women 'period poverty' was a real issue raised in a number of groups which we know can impact their ability to attend or fully engage with their education.[12] Often young women who could not access hygiene products will not attend school, work, sporting and recreational or community activities.

Some students mentioned the struggle to afford the cost of transport, food and other basic items necessary for school and life, and how this contributed to their exclusion from key opportunities to learn, including missing out on school sporting activities, camps or excursions.



- 10 year old boy, Murray and Mallee

Young people living in poor households are often not able to afford what are now essential items, including laptops and internet access at home. Not having digital access at home results in young people struggling to finish their schoolwork and their ability to achieve good results.

'It feels like schools punish you for being poor – having to stay in class during school breaks so you can use the school's technology to get your work done, feels like a punishment rather than a support.'
– 15 year old

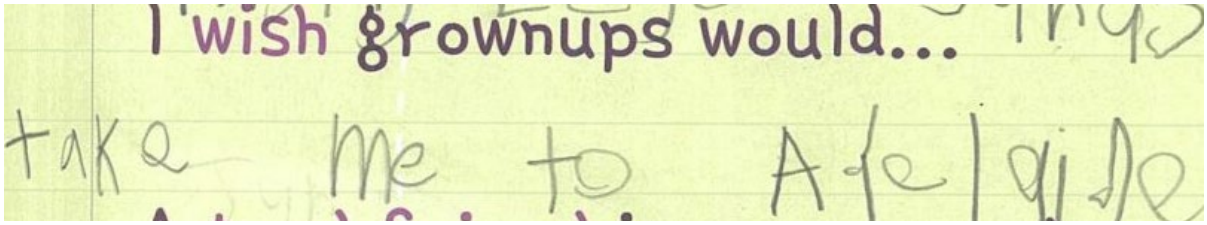
'Being poor as a young adult more impacts yourself and future perception. You can see plans you had when you were younger failing, and struggling to find work stops being a smaller annoyance and starts being an existential threat. You feel like you are using up peoples good will to survive but not improve.'
– 17 year old

Living in regional and remote areas

The sustainability of South Australia's regional communities is intrinsically linked to the prospects and aspirations of regional young people.

We know that educational disadvantage is linked to living in regional and rural areas. This includes low preschool attendance and availability, as well as lower school readiness.[13] This is exacerbated by most higher educational institutions being located in the metropolitan areas.[14]

My long-term engagement with children and young people in regional communities has highlighted some consistent differences between children and young people in regional and rural South Australia and their metropolitan peers. Whilst the most obvious differences are that regional children and young people feel they are missing out on things like access to fast internet connections, phone coverage, public transport, further education and employment opportunities, they often talk about the importance of feeling proud of where they live, and feeling good about the environment around them. They often say that they don't want to move away from the places where they live, but feel they will have to do so in order to access better opportunities beyond working in a smelter, mine or meat processing plant.



- 5 year old girl, Port Augusta

Today's regional young people are more aware than ever before of the opportunities that other children and young people enjoy both in SA, Australia and elsewhere in the world. Many regional kids are not hopeful about achieving their dreams from an early age because opportunities are either not available in their area, or they lack the means to access those opportunities. They are often resigned to the fact that living in regional South Australia means you either shrink your dreams or have to leave your hometown and family to achieve them.

Issues with transport impact significantly on their lives - they are concerned about relying on others to drive them around until they can afford to get a driving licence, and they identify poor public transport options as a major disadvantage.

The situation is particularly difficult for those children and young people who live in the most disadvantaged regional areas. 12 of the 20 most disadvantaged places in SA are in regional and remote areas.[15] I recently spoke with primary school children in Port Augusta who expressed feelings of apathy for their futures and concern about the town in terms of safety and opportunity. Their everyday experiences were clearly negatively impacting their aspirations even before the age of 12. Over 90 per cent of the children I spoke with said that they want to leave Port Augusta when they're older.

> *'I am worried about my future.'*
> – Year 5/6 student, Port Augusta

> *'I worry that I won't get a job.'*
> – Year 5/6 student, Port Augusta

Only 32 per cent of the Port Augusta population who are aged over 15 years have completed Year 12 or above, compared to 56 per cent of the South Australian population.[16] 6.5 per cent of the population has a Bachelor degree compared to 15.2 per cent of the SA population.[17]

Living with disability or chronic illness

Children and young people living with disability are often excluded from community, preschool and school activities, not only because of accessibility concerns, but due to behaviours or circumstances associated with their disability.

Australian research shows that children with a disability have lower outcomes in all domains than those without a disability:[18] In 2018, 21 per cent of people aged 15-64 who had acquired a disability before age 15 left school before age 16, compared to 8.9 per cent of those without a disability, and 48 per cent of people aged 15–64 with a disability were employed, compared with 80 per cent of those without a disability.[19]

Experiences in early childhood education and care show that while there are some positive experiences, staff are often limited in numbers and often do not have the expertise or training necessary to care for children with disability.[20]

My Keeping Our Promises report highlights that of the total number of students in government schools impacted by take homes, suspensions, exclusions and/or expulsions in 2023, 27.8 per cent were students with a disability who make up just 7.5 per cent of total enrolments. Where age was specified by the families interviewed for this report, the youngest child was first formally excluded at just 4 years of age, almost half were formally excluded from school via suspension before they had even completed Year 2, and the average age of first exclusion was around 8 years.

> *'The way school wants kids to learn doesn't work for the kids. It's lonely and means my bedroom is my safe place. School is too noisy and too confusing. just because I have autism shouldn't mean school should be a too hard place. teachers just tell me i'm difficult or lazy. It's too hard to be around the other kids. I don't know what theyre thinking about me. then school tells my mum she's a bad mum and the boss comes to my house. that makes me want to stay at home more.'*
> – 17 year old girl

> *'I have been suspended when its been the teacher not understand what I need due to my disability.'*
> – 13 year old boy

Many children with disability have also described being subject to informal exclusionary practices, being removed from the classroom but not the school campus. Parents have told me that their children have been refused enrolment, have been offered limited attendance hours, and have been excluded from excursions, events, or activities.

About 20 per cent of children and young people have some sort of chronic illness, such as asthma, cystic fibrosis or diabetes, which can have significant impacts on their engagement with education, particularly if they have to manage their medication during school hours, if their illness impacts their ability to study or do tests, if they miss school to attend appointments, or if they go into hospital.

I spoke with students with chronic illness about their experiences for my Issue Brief, who told me that they often did not feel adequately supported to remain fully engaged with their education. For example, 80 per cent of respondents said they had missed out on school and other activities, and many said they struggled to catch up, and were unable to negotiate extensions or accommodations for assessments.

Being female

There are many differences in the perspectives and experiences of South Australia's children and young people based on their gender alone.

We know that Australian women have poorer employment outcomes across the board compared to men despite having higher levels of education.[21] They are more likely to not be in education or employment,[22] they work fewer hours, they get paid less, and they are less likely to be in the workforce.[23]

Sexism and gender stereotyping lie at the heart of gender inequality. They undermine girls' confidence and self-worth, and distort interactions and relationships between girls and boys in ways that are unhealthy, negatively impacting on their health, safety, confidence and wellbeing.

Some of the differences between how girls and boys are treated and the impact on their aspirations can be seen at a very early age.

Gendered thinking can influence what children and young people find important in a future career path and therefore shape their educational choices from a young age, including what subjects they pursue, and how they evaluate their competency in certain subjects. While gendered thinking has been shown to positively shape boys' future career paths and subject preferences, for girls it can negatively impact their competency beliefs. Girls are often taught to question their own ability and confidence, whereas boys are taught to be confident and have more self-belief.[24]

We know that children form their initial ideas about their future lives and careers by the time they are about 7 or 8 years old. For example, if children have not shown at interest in science by the age of 10 years they are unlikely to develop an interest later on.[25] However, education about careers only tends to happen in Year 10. If children are not exposed to different aspirations to those in their immediate family, social and school environments, or online, it is unlikely they will consider those options for themselves. This is probably why a lot of children aspire to be sports stars, gamers or vloggers, or to 'be a farmer like Dad'.

One of the most significant differences between boys and girls that has been evident in my Student Voice Postcards is in their aspirations for the future. In terms of specific job aspirations, there is a clear split by gender according to traditionally male-dominated industries and female-dominated industries. Gendered differences, stereotypes and expectations were also reflected in children's broader aspirations around their future family and working lives, with girls more likely to write about 'being mums' while boys were more likely to say they wanted to be farmers, tradies, engineers, police officers and firefighters. Girls mentioned wanting to be a parent or 'mum' in the future more than twice as many times as boys.

Being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

Aboriginal children and families continue to endure the impacts of structural racism and policies that deny their rights, preventing them from reaching their full potential.

Outcomes are lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in all domains, including:

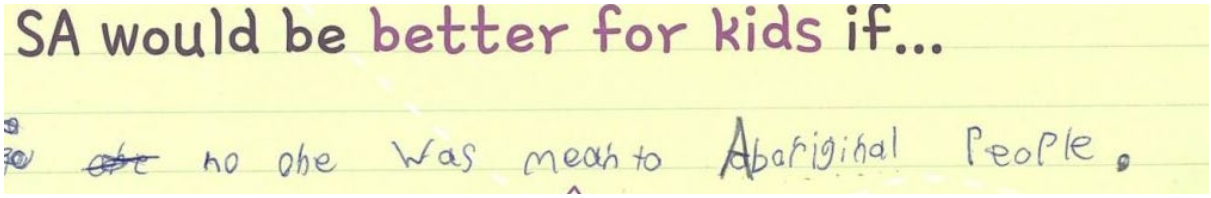
- Lower rates of school completion, with 68.1 per cent ATSI children and young people completing year 12, compared to 88.6 per cent of non-indigenous children and young people.

- A higher proportion being excluded from school. Of the total number of students enrolled in government schools impacted by take homes, suspensions, exclusions and/or expulsions in 2023, 20.6 per cent were Aboriginal students, although they only make up 7.4 per cent of total enrolments.
- On the AEDC, with Aboriginal children nearly 25 per cent more likely to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains than non-Aboriginal children.[26]

Research shows the wide-ranging impacts of exposure to discrimination on children and young people's development, with negative consequences for health, education and social outcomes across their life course, as documented in my Keeping Kids Connected report.

Racism undermines young people's sense of belonging, their developing identities, their relationships, and their ability to engage in education and employment.

Children and young people in South Australia have reported experiencing and witnessing racism at school, on public transport, at work and when applying for jobs. They describe being treated differently or 'lesser than' their peers by teachers, strangers, peers, prospective employers, and others. Many examples of racism are occurring in the very systems and services that are critical to young people's wellbeing and development.



- 11 year old male, Whyalla

Being from a refugee or migrant background

In my Everyday Racism report, which focused on racism against refugees and migrants, stakeholders described the cumulative impacts of racism, exclusion and marginalisation. These experiences can lead to disengagement and withdrawal from school, employment and social activities and connections, which can leave young people vulnerable to 'antisocial' behaviour and substance abuse.[27]

We know that children from non-English speaking backgrounds are disadvantaged from an early age. For example, children from non-English speaking backgrounds make up 20.6 per cent of the community but only 9.7 per cent of preschool enrolments.[28] This can affect their life trajectories and decrease their preparedness for schooling, especially if English is not taught at home.

Children and young people have consistently raised concerns about racism, including descriptions of bullying behaviour across school sectors, school types and locations. Bullying occurs in person, often at school, in public spaces and at sporting facilities, as well as via technology, via texts and on social media. At primary school this tends to involve the use of derogatory terms such as 'you're part of ISIS', 'I hate your country',

'you're a terrorist' and 'go back to your own country'. Racist bullying tends to increase as young people age, peaking in the senior years of school.

Young people have shared insights about the opportunities and barriers they face, including in relation to schooling and finding pathways to further education, training and employment. They have told me about the everyday challenges of resettlement and the additional challenges they face in accessing opportunities and not feeling safe at school, work and in the community.

Many young people from refugee and migrant communities reported that they were directed to vocational education training (VET) programs rather than being offered the full range of career and educational pathways. They repeatedly discussed being prevented from taking certain subjects, and said they were not encouraged to take up opportunities to complete their SACE certificate or obtain an ATAR for further study. Many felt this was based on racist perceptions of their intelligence and ability to complete the SACE, as well as on the prioritising of white students.

International students believed there were perceptions of them being incompetent, less intelligent, or difficult to work with. They also described disparity in the number of opportunities they had for work experience and internships compared to their white peers.

Many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds spoke about the importance of employment to them. They also spoke about the prevalence and impact of racism and discrimination by employers and potential employers, as well as work colleagues, customers, and the broader community. They said they are disadvantaged in terms of preparedness for entering the workplace, lack of access to support networks, including professional and informal networks, also makes it difficult for them to understand workplace entitlements and expectations.

A common way racism manifests in the workplace is in discriminatory hiring practices. Refugee and migrant young people described witnessing and experiencing racism from employers. They felt their opportunities for employment were limited. To combat this, some young people reported using an anglicised pseudonyms to apply for work, and said they received a vastly different – more positive – response to their applications as a result.

Those who did gain employment described being subjected to racism from customers. They reported regular incidents of being spoken to differently, having their skill or knowledge called into question, or being avoided by customers. Some reported more overt instances of racism, such as verbal abuse or outright refusal from customers to be served by them.

Being sexually and/or gender diverse

Although there are noted examples of schools that actively promote and practice inclusivity, many LGBTQIA+ young people have described feeling unsafe in school environments and raised concerns about the barriers they face to feeling known, valued, included and heard at school.

While some LGBTQIA+ young people focus on the impact of formal school exclusions, their most common concerns relate to the cumulative impact of day-to-day experiences of indirect and direct discrimination in school environments where they are harassed, made fun of, shamed, ignored, excluded, 'othered' or 'publicly outed'.

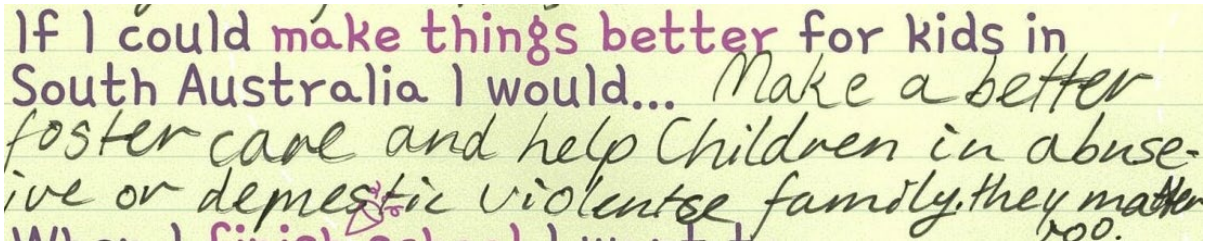
> *'School never felt like a safe place for me. It's interesting because it's hard for people who have never experienced that to understand what I mean when I say that, and I know because from years 8 and 9 I was mainly fine but in years 10, 11 and 12 I felt it. Many days I could not eat properly, I couldn't sleep properly and most of the time I couldn't focus. Every day when I ran out the school doors and fell down on my bed i'd breathe a sigh of relief that it was over. I would regularly have nervous breakdowns in the bathroom and many days I thought about taking my own life.'*
> - 18 year old

Having contact with the state care system

Children and young people in out-of-home care can face particular challenges and negative experiences at school and beyond from an early age both because of traumatic experiences prior to being taken into care, and from the process of being in care itself. This includes being treated differently by teachers; moving schools due to placement changes or instability; a lack of respect for their privacy; and a lack of expertise supporting children to deal with the impacts of complex trauma and placement instability.

A 2020 report by the Guardian for Children and Young People in South Australia reported that children and young people in state care are four times more likely to be suspended and eight times more likely to be excluded from school.[29]

An Australian study of care leavers showed about half were not in employment, education, or training.[30] The financial implications for these young people are particularly severe as youth wages and Youth Allowance presume young people have family support and/or fewer needs than older adults.



Having contact with the youth justice system

Most young people that come into contact with the criminal justice system are already facing factors that impact their engagement with education, including mental health issues. They tend to live chaotic lives and are often already disconnected from school, family and community. Their opportunities and hopes for the future are bleak.

We know that some young people are more likely to come into contact with the justice system. In her 2022-23 report[31] the Training Centre Visitor the key characteristics of the average daily detention population in Kurlana Tapa Detention Centre, which included:

- 35.6 per cent under guardianship;
- 59.5 per cent with a diagnosed disability;
- 54.7 per cent were Aboriginal young people.

Having caring responsibilities

Young carers can provide significant amounts of care to people in their lives. The kind of care they provide can be physical, emotional or intimate personal care, and/or childcare.

Carers SA estimates that there are more than 14,800 young people under the age of 18 in South Australia who are required to take on caring roles for members of their family. This figure equates to 2 or 3 students in every classroom.

Many young carers emphasise that their caring role is a positive experience. However, research clearly indicates that, where a young carer is inadequately supported, the physical and mental strain that caring places on their health, wellbeing, and education outcomes is immense.

The children I talked to for my Take Care report say they worry about their family member at home and can be distracted at school and work. They also said that they are not receiving the supports they require to enable them to thrive and develop.

Many of their experiences are common, but equally I have been struck by the individuality and uniqueness of their situations. They have had caring roles for parents or siblings living with either one or a combination of physical disability, chronic illness, post-traumatic stress, mental illness, degenerative disease, terminal illness, and/or drug and alcohol issues. They may be providing companionship and emotional support, as well as supervision and assistance to attend health appointments.

Many adults, including teachers and school leaders, describe in glowing terms the maturity, independence, compassion, resilience, and empathy of young people with caring responsibilities. But whilst all these characteristics might be present in a young carer, it is only part of their story. These children take on this role and the associated adult

issues without choice. In addition to impacts on their education, they are missing out on many of the other things young people their age do, including out of school activities and jobs.

While children and young people can gain life skills that will assist them in the future as a result of their caring roles, their choices and opportunities can also be limited. They talk about feeling sad and worried about what will happen if they don't do the caring, given there is not enough support to help their family member or them. They talk about having less time to engage in age appropriate activities, and education opportunities than their peers. For many this is compounded by the financial hardship that often accompanies chronic illness and disability, particularly as many of the children and young people are living in sole parent families. Young carers also talk about the difficulty they face leaving the family home, getting a job and having financial independence.

Being affected by parental incarceration

It is estimated that about 5 per cent of children throughout Australia will experience the incarceration of a parent during their lifetime.[32] While data on these young people is unclear, we estimate that the number of children and young people who currently have an incarcerated parent in South Australia is between 1,500 to 6,200 children, with anywhere from 16,400 to 19,600 children and young people under 18 years having experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lifetime.[33] This equates to between 2 and 3 students in every South Australian classroom. Due to the correlation between poverty and crime, these students are likely to be concentrated in schools operating in the most disadvantaged areas of the state.

Children and young people affected by parental incarceration are not a homogenous group. Nevertheless, many of those affected say they often feel punished and blamed for factors beyond their control, and face many related financial, educational and social impacts.

During my direct consultation with children and young people affected by parental incarceration for my Join the Dots report, children described how their lives changed significantly when their parent was arrested and incarcerated. In many cases, this disruption was sudden and came 'out of the blue', with young people reporting how their lives took a 'u-turn' from 'stability to uncertainty' when 'everything does a flip'.

When viewed from a child's perspective, having a parent in prison is invariably a loss, whatever the nature of their relationship prior to their parent's incarceration. Children and young people have described that it can mean losing a person who cares for them, losing income, and sometimes losing their homes and what was a safe place to live. The financial impacts in particular can affect their ability to participate fully in education, employment and other activities.

Potential mechanisms to engage young people in meaningful education and training, and pathways to steady employment

Over the past seven years I have heard from thousands of children and young people and other stakeholders about how we can break down systemic barriers so all children and young people can fulfill their potential. Young people have repeatedly told me that in order to lead full lives they need to be enabled and supported to be connected, confident and creative at every stage of their lives: Connected to supportive adults, environments, education and opportunities; confident about their place in their school, community and workplace; and given the opportunities and respect to experiment, learn, practice and take pride in their creativity.

To break down the barriers for those children and young people who are missing out and improve productivity in the future we need to:

- Understand children and young people;
- Keep children and young people connected to education;
- Actively address disadvantage; and
- Improve pathways to employment for all.

Understand children and young people

Being a child today is vastly different to the childhood their parents experienced in a different century and millennium prior to the information revolution.

The best way to understand the experiences of children and young people is to ask them - they are experts in their own lives.

In addition to their understanding of the challenges they face, children have practical and thoughtful suggestions about what they would change if they were decision makers. Overwhelmingly, 8-12 year olds believe that everyone deserves to have a 'good life', and to 'feel safe and happy being who they are'. Their visions for change highlight the values they want to see: kindness, fairness and equality. For many children, putting these values into practice and 'doing the right thing' means listening and ensuring that everyone is given a voice and opportunities to share their ideas and thoughts, particularly children.[34]

Children see a real disconnect between the views they have on many issues and those expressed by their teachers and parents. They want us to value equality, inclusiveness, and kindness in the same way they do, and to celebrate the diverse abilities, learning styles, languages, cultures, and genders of all people.

Keep children and young people connected to education

Invest in the early years

It is crucial for the Productivity Commission to consider the early years when examining how all South Australians can share in the benefits of economic growth. The early years provide a grounding which has lifelong impacts. The first 1000 days of life (from conception to age 2) is increasingly being recognised as crucial in setting up children for the best start in life.[35] This means that a broad range of services and supports need to be available to children and their families/carers prior to the start of preschool.

It is crucial that young children are engaged to participate in formal early learning and are then supported at every stage of their education to stay fully connected. Attending preschool and early years settings is important for learning emotional regulation, self-control, and capacity to follow instructions. This sets children up for future education, economic, and other participation. Unfortunately, the children who would benefit most from preschool are often those who are not attending.[36]

It is crucial for the future of the state – and individual children and families – to identify those children needing more support and actually providing this support. This will have impacts now and far into the future. The Child Development Council recommends that '[k]ey to reducing vulnerability in the early years is a strong universal platform of supports and services available to all children, with a targeted strategy on top of this base.'[37] This would enable all children to receive the services they need, reducing vulnerability and improving child development outcomes.

Families need integrated support to provide the best environment for children's development and wellbeing. It is particularly important for families to be supported as early as possible, to avoid the child becoming disengaged from education and employment, and to avoid engagement with the child protection system, as outlined in my submission to the Review of the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017*. This requires investment in a wide range of services and resources for families before a crisis occurs. Networks of support are needed in the community, without restrictive eligibility criteria, which take into account a range of structural issues that increase stress for families, including those relating to poverty and health inequities.

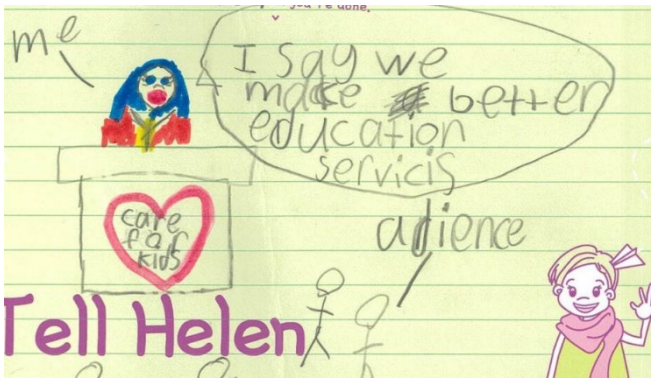
Engaging with whole families early (in the antenatal period onwards) is also important for early sighting of families and children, where prevention and early intervention can be undertaken if needed. Again, this is particularly important considering that there are ever increasing notifications to child protection. This is an opportunity to do things differently to provide the best early years services for the benefit of children and their families and to reduce impacts and costs to the State in future.

More inclusive education

The focus of schools must be on providing a learning environment that is capable of adapting to the diverse and substantive needs of the children and young people who it is the State's duty to educate. If as a community we are unable to find a way of ensuring South Australian schools provide an inclusive, safe and nurturing environment for all children and young people across the State, we risk creating groups of children who will be deemed uneducable and unemployable by an education system of our own making.

19th century ideas of education cannot deliver the personalised responses required to enable today's children and young people to develop the capabilities they need to thrive in today's complex and fluid world. The Department for Education in its latest strategy for public education[38] recognises that school is more than just a formal academic institution - it is a place where children and young people become life-long learners, with a focus on wellbeing and equity.

The children and young people I have talked to want schools that 'set them up to succeed'. They fully understand the importance of education and its link to future success. They want their time at school to be a positive experience where they not only acquire a formal education, but learn how to navigate relationships with others, build friendships and networks, and learn life skills that will put them in good stead when they leave school. It is therefore imperative that schools work with children and young people and their families to keep children connected and confident.



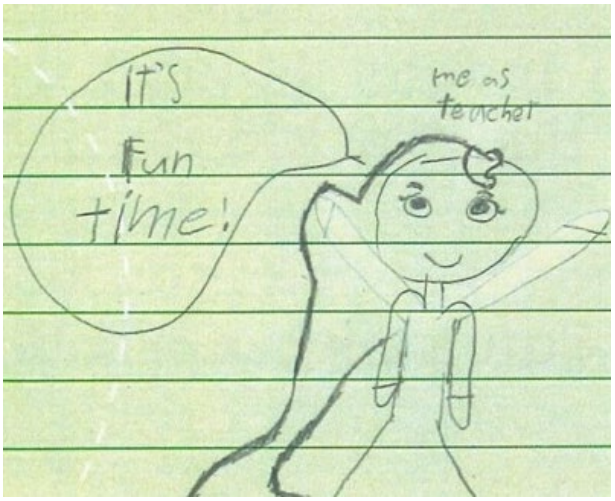
When I spoke to students about connection and wellbeing at school for my Seen but not Heard report, they said that they want feel heard, represented and valued. Research shows this is closely linked to positive student engagement and outcomes.[39] Increasing the opportunities to have voice, choice and agency is a key part of building positive relationships between students and teachers, and to ensuring schools meet the diverse needs, interests and aspirations of all students to ultimately prevent children feeling disenfranchised that could lead to their partial or complete disengagement.

The importance of increasing focus on student wellbeing is also consistent with findings from the recent federal Parliamentary inquiry into School Refusal and the Australian Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry's recommendation that one possible outcome for the National School Reform Agreement could be that 'all students gain the skills required to support their own wellbeing and are able to seek support when required'.[40]

Children and young people have many ideas on how to improve schools to be more inclusive including:

- Creating greater awareness and understanding among teachers and other school staff about the issues children and young people face;
- Improving support for learning and wellbeing that is tailored to individual needs;
- Offering relevant and flexible education options that reflect the lives and needs of young people, which provide equal access to academic and vocational training opportunities;
- Offering more inclusive and comfortable learning environments; and
- Providing financial support to help the families of disadvantaged children and young people cover the costs of school expenses.

Through the Student Voice Postcards, I have heard from many children who find school hard and dull. They want school to be more inclusive with less homework and more sport and play. They have shared ideas with me for improving school, such as involving nature play in their lessons, having more breaks and being more active, and having more support for those who 'struggle' of have disabilities.[41]



Children also want to have more choice in what they learn. They want to see more opportunities to learn practical skills that would prepare them for adult life and the 'real world'.

Early identification of the children and young people in our school communities who face challenges and issues that may be leading them toward poor engagement should be improved. Through proactive intervention approaches efforts can keep them connected over the long-term and we can reduce the incidence of disengagement. This requires a system willing to adapt to children's needs, rather than requiring children to adapt to a school education system.

Children and young people living with disability, for example, require opportunities to participate alongside their peers. This requires an investment of time and resources, a commitment to inclusion, and more awareness of disability.

While some steps are being taken to improve resourcing and training in schools more needs to be done. Educators and school leaders I talked to are asking for every school to be resourced and skilled in positive, trauma-informed, relationship building and non-exclusionary 'behaviour management' approaches, that focus on strengths rather than deficits. They want support for educators to be able to 'look beyond behaviour to the cause' and respond appropriately.

Stakeholders discussed the potential for KPIs to be child-centred to incentivise inclusive responses to behaviour and support educators to keep children engaged, particularly those with complex backgrounds or social, emotional, or learning needs.

Families and carers play a key role in children and young people's engagement with schooling and learning, yet their capacity to do so can vary depending on the resources and support made available to them. To counter this preschools and schools can take actions that will strengthen connections with families and the broader community in ways that will positively influence children and young people's engagement as soon as they enter the education system.

Stakeholders I have talked to for my Keeping Kids Connected report highlight the importance of schools in actively promoting cultural diversity, cultural understanding, and learning from different cultures, as central to a truly inclusive school culture. They would like to see the greater support for schools to raise cultural awareness, be respectful of cultural diversity, and bridge language barriers and gaps to thereby provide cultural safety.

There is an opportunity for schools to become 'hubs' that engage families with health and other services, access to food, and work experience opportunities, with facilities that are available to the public after hours and during the holidays. This requires partnerships with councils, public libraries, local businesses, health practitioners, and community organisations. This sort of approach can enhance the opportunities available to children and young people both in terms of subject learning and work experience, as well as supporting the wellbeing of young people, families and communities.

Schools are often isolated from the wider local community, and many schools do not have the resources to support children and young people who are starting school hungry, distressed, or otherwise not ready to learn. It is important to explore how community resources and services can be brought into education settings, while also providing children and young people with opportunities to go out into communities.

Finally, no child or young person should be excluded from preschool or primary school. Exclusions and suspensions in the early years have ongoing impacts on children's education, emotional wellbeing, and future prospects. These can have long-term impacts by setting up a path to future exclusions and disengagement from school and employment. Instead, alternatives to this punitive approach are needed.

In addition, any exclusion from school should not be an exclusion from education. Schools must provide offline and/or online learning instruction and resources for any child who spends a school day at home, along with a key teacher who is allocated to that child and who must maintain daily contact with them, just as though they were physically attending school.

Making free universal education a reality

School affordability is a major issue, particularly for low-income families and those with multiple children. Given the frequency with which this issue is being reported, it is time for the South Australian government, along with government schools, to account for the true cost of education per student, as outlined in my True Cost of Going to School report. One off reductions in school fees, while helpful, do not address the real issues.

Making free and universal education a reality for all requires truly understanding the collective impact that cumulative essential, non-essential, and hidden costs associated with going to school have on low income families, and making a commitment to remove or address these inequalities in practical ways that ensure no South Australian child is left 'outside' the full education experience.

This means providing more comprehensive financial assistance to those low-income families who need it.

The costs of individual items or events may seem insignificant on their own, but the day-to-day reality of these costs, along with the cumulative impact of having to miss out when they cannot be afforded, is significant. Families should not be in a position where they must choose between ensuring their child has enough food or the 'right' uniform and transport for an excursion or sporting activity.

Although many schools offer a range of support strategies to help families in need cover costs (via short term loans, subsidies, payment plans, etc.) these are often left up to the discretion of the school leadership and governing councils to be applied on an individual family basis. Apart from the work involved, this approach also has the potential to create stigma and embarrassment for those who need to access such arrangements.

In a school environment, some markers of poverty are more visible than others, such as the quality and newness of uniforms and shoes, what food they bring, and whether they have tablets or laptops. Regardless of how visible, the short-term and long-term social, economic, emotional, and educational impacts of missing out are, they affect educational engagement and achievement, as well as aspirations and self-confidence.

There should be mechanisms in place that are designed to meet the needs of students and families that can be tailored to different locations and situations. To inform appropriate responses, more work is required at a systemic level to develop and implement a tool that quantifies the cumulative cost of public education, and which publicly reports data.

This includes reviewing the threshold and benefits that are available under the School Card scheme. It is heartening to see that the scheme has extended benefits to certain

students to obtain a free laptop, and subsidised transport allowance in certain circumstances, but a full review looking at the true cost of education and the impact it has on lower income families would be prudent to ensure all children and young people can fully engage in education and extra-curricular activities, such as camps, sport and excursions.

Supporting successful school transitions

Periods of transition in children and young people's lives can set them up to succeed, or can lead them to disengagement and disconnection. Positive relationships and environments are critical at these times. No young person should be launched into school without the best support to enable them to thrive.

Children and families often need support to transition from home to preschool or other early childhood services such as childcare. Parents and providers have identified facilitators and barriers to preschool at four different levels: individual, interpersonal, program and service, and policy and environment.[42] These highlight the need for welcoming and inclusive preschools which are part of an early years' system with services that consider the needs of all children and their families. Families value facilitators such as 'Feeling like educators understand their child', 'Good communication about what is involved in the centre's services', 'Having information about the likely benefits of one's child attending the service', and 'Knowing the educators/staff are professionally trained'.[43]

School readiness is often a focus of early years services, particularly preschool, and it is not just children who need to be ready for school. Families also need to be engaged early and supported to be on the right track. To do this successfully preschool and other services need to engage all children and their families, particularly families who are less engaged, and where children may be missing out on their right to preschool education.

Starting school impacts the whole family, not just an individual child and relationships are key to successful transitions to school. This works best when children and families feel like they belong in their new school community and where positive relationships are created between families and schools, children, and teachers.[44] Both families and children need to understand the expectations placed on students, the rules, and they may need support with things like uniform, providing lunch, or school processes.

Feeling connected to school and having positive relationships with teachers and peers can become more difficult as children get older, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school. Many children have expressed their fears about moving to high school which they often consider to be 'strict' or 'scary'. At the same time, children are often grappling with significant social, physical and mental challenges.

Families and schools need to be prepared to help students manage these transitions, being aware of social pressures, bullying, and discrimination and responding quickly and appropriately. The best outcomes occur when schools modify their expectations to the needs of new students and are open to exploring different strategies not only to teaching and learning but also to support student wellbeing, play and positive relationships.

Research shows that young people who complete Year 12 are much more likely to embark on further education and obtain meaningful and secure employment. This brings with it economic stability, improved living conditions, and higher levels of community engagement that lead to longer, healthier, happier lives. Conversely, research shows that early school leavers can be significantly disadvantaged throughout their lives both in terms of their health, as well as socially and economically.[45] The costs of 'lost' or 'unequal' educational opportunity are not limited to individuals but also have implications for the productivity, creativity and innovation of the State.[46]

In my High Stakes High School Report young people said relationships with friends, family, and teachers are essential to successfully completing Year 12. Feeling heard, respected, and trusted are crucial. Young people said that teachers' and school leaders' relationships with them in their senior years impact their motivation and engagement with their education, as well as on their confidence and capacity to make future plans, including understanding of pathways available beyond school and into the workforce.

Actively address disadvantage

It is imperative that the government addresses the structural drivers of disadvantage and poverty as well as better supporting stressed households so that children can thrive. This includes working with the Commonwealth government to increase social security payments; implementing structural changes to address cost of living issues and sticky inflation; increasing minimum wage and subsidising essential costs. It must also include a public health response, underpinned by trauma informed principles, that all agencies working with these families adopt.

Child poverty is a political choice. No single government is responsible for its existence, but every government is responsible for its continuation.

We know that place based approaches to disadvantage and exclusion are having promising results in Australia, the UK, the US and beyond. One promising example is the Children in the North initiative.

In response to a provocation from service providers in Northern Adelaide 'What would it take to reset the future for babies born in 2023?' this project has emerged as an alliance of stakeholders intentionally focused on ensuring all preschool children and their families living in Northern Adelaide get the support and intervention they need at the time they need it so that they can reach their full potential and flourish. The project will 'reset' the trajectory of children in Northern Adelaide, setting them up for success in the future by collaborating on the activities and deliverables each agency has responsibility for in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.

As the fastest-growing metropolitan population in South Australia, 25 per cent of the Northern Adelaide population will be under 17 years old by 2030. The project is iterative by design with a goal to make a difference in real time by engaging with families of children born in 2023 and working with them in new ways to design the system they think is most helpful, rather than waiting until all details have been worked out.

Bringing together key State government stakeholders, the project will design a system that is more responsive to children and families to improve the overall development and educational outcomes of children in the north.

This project is built on a foundation of community capacity-building to ensure that our work acknowledges the connection between the wellbeing of families and the communities in which they live and focus on the ability of families to draw support from their own less formal networks within the community.

Improve pathways to employment for all

Conversations about careers and education pathways must happen from a very early age if we are to instil all young people with ambitions beyond their direct personal experiences. These conversations must be inclusive and unbiased to enable all children and young people to consider the full range of options available. Otherwise, by the age of 10 they are likely to have already limited their options for themselves.

The majority of 8-12 year olds responding in my Student Voice Postcards program regard adulthood as a fairly negative and stressful experience, dominated by worry and the stress of paying bills, rent, taxes, and finding and keeping jobs. If we want our future workforce to be confident and creative, we need to provide them with more positive stories and opportunities.

We know that if children are exposed to positive role models, for example, they are more likely to consider more diverse options:

> *'Be a nurse or a jockey like Michelle Payne'*
> - 11 year old girl, Limestone Coast

> *'I am going to make the afl. And play for Port Adelaide and by then toby Green will be the best AFL Player of all time.'*
> - 11 year old boy, Victor Harbor

Successful transition from education to work

Young people have highlighted a disconnect between employment and education and the impact this has on how they make their subject choices. Young people routinely describe the difficulty they face in having to decide what subjects to do without really knowing what career options will be available to them.

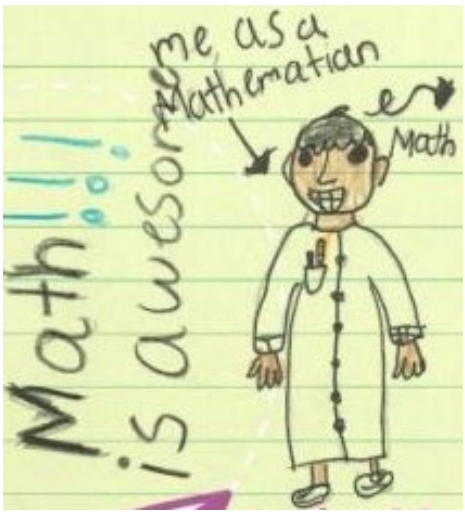
> '*The problem is I know what subjects I'm interested in eg stem and tech, but I don't know what jobs they lead to.*'
> - 15 year old girl

> *'Some teachers belittle your passion ... They praise many students as a tokenistic ideal standard, but the reality is not everyone is going to meet that (about A graders). The school needs to better prepare us for the real world. Right now we're in the dark. There is not an equal investment into subjects. Sports is praised way more than the arts. They encourage you to express your ideas but then don't listen to them.'*
> – 17 year old girl

My High Stakes High School report talks about the challenges of Year 12 as well as what students say could help improve their experience. Young people said that they didn't know what to expect outside of the routine and structure of the school day. Many students said they felt 'scared, nervous, and unprepared' for post school life.

With regard to their future, children and young people want:

- Clear guidance in relation to future careers and pathways.
- Opportunities to 'experience' different jobs to decide what they enjoy.
- More support and information available for parents and carers to better support their children and young people in making decisions about their future.
- Educators to not limit student choices because of their views of students' capacities.



As structural changes in labour markets gather pace, young people face greater challenges to getting their foot in the door, with young people now required to spend far more time in education to attain the higher skills needed for new positions. Many young people report that they are unsure how they will be able to apply what they learn in school, when no-one seems to not know what they are being prepared for. Or alternatively, how to independently prepare themselves for future work opportunities that are not yet there.

Students need to be empowered and informed to become future work ready. For this to occur it is essential their perspectives be included in any solutions. It is also imperative to inform young people what the future jobs will be so young people are able to transition easily. The education system, schools, industry, and government all need to engage with young people and their families. The state must work to bring all stakeholders into a system of careers support for the next generation of innovators, entrepreneurs and community and business leaders no matter what their background. This careers support system would ideally begin from primary school age.

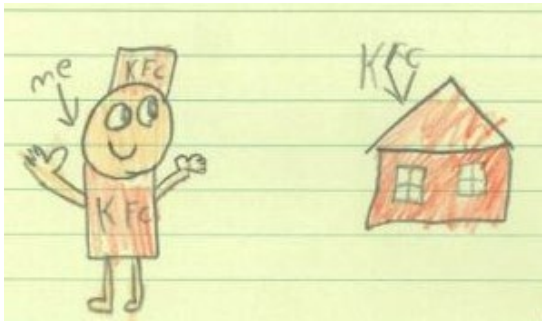
South Australian children and young people need time and space to make and explore their interests, and to determine which career or set of careers they may wish to pursue. They need multiple opportunities to 'try things out'. They also need careers education that inspires them to be motivated and ambitious about their futures.

It can be very difficult for children and young people in households with unemployed parents/carers in particular to rely on their family to advise them about employment and help them get work experience. This is more likely to happen in households where parents are employed and well-connected. This group of children needs extra support so they can develop the skills to enter the job market. These skills include things like learning how to write a CV, undertaking volunteering and building other skills which enable them to enter the workforce.

Wider connections between schools and local businesses to establish a schools-based work experience program could also provide more opportunities for all children and young people to explore work experience that aligns with their interests, not just what their parents can offer. My Work Experience survey found that only 34.9 per cent of 11-19 year old respondents had undertaken work experience. Of those, nearly half of the work experience reported was organised by their parents or carers.[47]

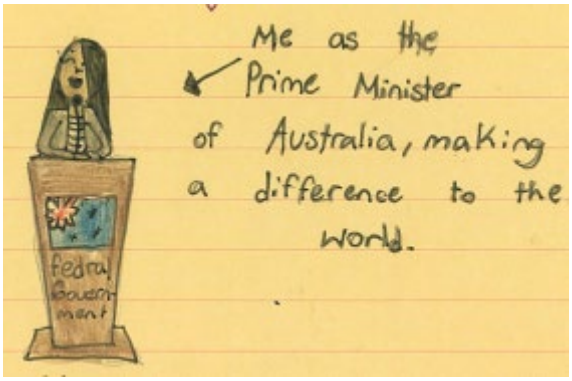
Transitioning from education to employment is an important and critical point in a young person's life. In order to be a smooth transition, the diverse pathways that children and young people take must be understood and supported. Vocational study pathways are more complex and difficult to navigate than university study pathways and will require more support.[48] This is particularly important as early school leavers and those who are less academic are more likely to be not in education or employment.

Planning for the entry of young people from school into the workforce or further education and creating mechanisms to allow this to occur seamlessly means creating a system where young people's career goals align with the skills required by employers as well as ensuring they have the confidence and capabilities to succeed.



My Teenagers and Work report highlights that teenagers have varied engagement in paid work, with one or more jobs, jobs spanning different roles and industries, and formal and informal work. They often experience challenges in relation to their paid work and can find themselves in unsafe work environments. Teenagers need and want more guidance, education and training to understand how to protect their health and wellbeing at work, including knowing where they can safely raise concerns and increase their confidence for the future.

Any strategy must also address the needs of educators, with a particular focus on career advisors and local small to medium enterprises, as well as on larger scale employers across various industries; all working together to organise work experience opportunities that add real value for young people and employers.



These proposed solutions need government support, but they could also be orchestrated with assistance from private enterprise, small and medium sized businesses, worker advocacy organisations, and industry. They would build the capacity for creation of an 'employment ecosystem' that supports young people to make the transition from school to work in a coordinated and systematic way.

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