

11th June 2008 Statement to Parliamentary Inquiry into the needs of 9-14 year olds in NSW.

I would firstly like to express my appreciation at being given the opportunity to provide input on the needs of 9-14 year olds in NSW.

There are three points presented in my submission that I would like to expand upon. These include

- Transition from primary to high school and the role of cross-sector partnerships between schools & youth services
- Investment in young people and the youth sector to promote resilience and protective factors for young people at risk.
- Strengths based programs, universally provided, to support and foster resilience

I am employed by Spyns Inc, and funded by the Department of community Services under the CSGP program. My position of youth resource and development worker for Penrith LGA brings me into contact with a variety of issues that impact upon the lives of young people living in Penrith.

Spyns Inc received funding from the Department of Community Services in 2006, through Better Futures, to present a conference for Principals and Deputy Principals in the Nepean region on Middle school transition and young people.

The middle school years are considered from about year 5 to year 8 covering children from 9 – 14 years old. During this time, some students experience social isolation, alienation and reduced educational progress.

Two key factors to come out of this conference were, effective transitions require the establishment of positive connections between young people, families, educators and the community.

The second that effective transition programs facilitate a young person's development as a capable learner.

Partnerships between schools and community based organizations can assist and support young people and their parents. Either through quality after school activities or via programs provided within the school environment.

Examples of successful programs which assist this transition time and are provided by Spyns include:

Making Tracks a program funded by Better Futures. Making Tracks is an Aboriginal specialist program using hands-on learning, Aboriginal cultural experiences and family support activities to increase the engagement of Indigenous young people and their families with school. The program consists of two components a worker who provides activities within the school and a family worker who assists to make closer connections between the families and the school.

Spyns is also funded to facilitate Pathways training to teachers, youth and community workers. Pathways program was developed by the pathways health and Research Centre. This project is also funded under the Better Futures Strategy. Pathways Friends for life program aims to prevent childhood anxiety and depression through the application of firm cognitive behavioural principles and the building of emotional resilience. The program helps children and young people aged 7-17 years of age to cope with feelings of fear, worry and depression by building resilience and self esteem and teaching cognitive, behavioural and emotional skills in a simple, well structured format. Developed in Australia it is the only program of it's kind acknowledged by the World Health Organisation for it's 10 years of comprehensive evaluation and practice.

Investment in programs to support early intervention and prevention initiatives assists in supporting young people during the middle school transition phase.

Spyns has produced a manual Called Getting it together – Making a difference with School-Community Partnerships from the Working with Young people in Schools Project. The manual supports our position stating

“There is growing recognition that the task of supporting young people is not the responsibility of schools alone; it is a ‘whole of community’ responsibility, including the contribution of parents, teachers and community-based service providers. Where school communities and service providers are able to establish effective partnerships, there is a much greater

chance of developing comprehensive, integrated responses to the needs of young people....”
(Making it Easy, School Focused youth service, 2002 p6)

I have a copy of this manual for reference by the inquiry committee and I would like it to form part of the evidence I'm providing today.

For young people 'at risk' it has been identified through research that education plays a vital role in determining directions in people's lives. Tony Vinson, author of "Community Adversity and Resilience Report" speaks strongly of the links between the importance of education and overcoming or avoiding disadvantage.

Professor Vinson, in his publication - Dropping off the Edge, suggests that Education strategies for young people should include elements which combine personal support, attention to educational deficits and skills development for disengaged young people.

This evidence supports the case for cross-sector partnerships to provide appropriate programs to young people in schools.

Youth workers are well placed to assist schools to provide programs to young people in schools. Young people get the benefit of the social justice and strength based framework that all youth workers are likely to come from. Youth workers enhance resilience – building programs with their skills in early identification, knowledge of risk and referral networks. Teachers working with youth workers is a great model to aim for so the young people get the benefit of the community sector expertise, yet the teacher is there as an ongoing contact for issues emerging over time.

Young people 9-14 benefit from having a choice of adults who know them and will be accessible to them over time. Youth workers provide a fresh face, with a different approach to communicating with young people which can effectively break the ice and get young people engaged more quickly and effectively with program activities. As well Youth workers are able to challenge young people's routine reactions to teachers and the class room environment; this is useful for making a more lasting impact with resilience programs.

The last point I would like to make is that there are many great programs that build and support resilient young people. I have mentioned several in my earlier submission such as Rock and Water a program that was designed for boys but has been successfully run with girls that promotes self-confidence, self-control and self-respect.

However one of the critical issues when providing programs within the school environment, and one promoted by Spyns, is that programs are provided universally to whole groups of students, (whole classes, whole years etc), and not only to students who are identified as at risk. This ensures that students are not further stigmatized as those needing additional assistance.

In closing I would like to reiterate that partnerships between schools and community based organizations support parents and young people. Providing information to parents on the importance of the transition phase of a young person's life can assist the critical phase of transition and help young people to remain engaged with education.

Thank you