

# Education for Children in Out of Home Care

CREATE's Submission to the Commissioner for Children and Young People


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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the educational experiences of young people in care. CREATE has conducted consultations directly with young people in care across the country but specifically in Victoria on this topic so this response will be driven primarily from what the young people have reported.

Education is a key pillar in the support that governments provide to all children and young people, including those in out of home care. It is also a massive contributor in the wellbeing of these young people because of the safe space it creates for nurturing relationships and growth. While the positive effects of a good educational experience are multi-faceted, there are still challenges to overcome so that school and educational environments create opportunities for children and young people to grow and develop the skills that will help them reach their potential in adult life.

This submission will cover a review of national and Victorian consultations concerning education, how these observations intersect with the broader literature, as well as with legislation, policy, practice, and delivery of services. Some consideration also will be given to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Review of education consultations from across the country**

CREATE's consultations around the country on education have shown that young people in care experience education through wide variety of lenses. From a positive perspective, support from teachers at school and carers at home was a central component of their experience. When asked to discuss additional supports needed to thrive in educational settings, topics raised included more academic and personalised learning support, emotional support, control of bullying, and placement stability (CREATE, 2022).


#### **Supportive teachers**

In CREATE consultations around education, young people in care attributed positive experiences in education to supportive, encouraging relationships with school staff members, especially teachers (CREATE, 2022).

*They (teachers) support me through anything, personal things or just schoolwork in general...Usually when I'm going through things, they ask if they can help me or talk to me about it. They find time to do that. (Female, 16)*

Further, these positive relationships with teachers and other school staff have been attributed throughout the literature as helping create a safe and supportive environment for young people in care (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). These authors found that it was actions such as providing academic and emotional support, like encouraging the young people to attend class, and then checking in with them about how they have been going, that were important. Also, an analysis of teachers' attitudes showed that when teachers had high expectations of young people in care and encouraged them to achieve in school, there was a positive effect on young people's hopes and goals for the future (Jurczynszyn & Tilbury, 2012).

The positive potential of the role of supportive teachers and school staff needs to be balanced with sustainable workloads and expectations. As Townsend and colleagues recommended in their systemic review, teachers require more support in their role like training around trauma-informed practice, awareness of the out of home care sector, and sufficient time to invest in their relationships with young people (Townsend et al, 2020). A study by Weldon and Ingvarson (2016) analysed teacher workloads in Victoria and found that on average teachers work 11hrs a day which is 14-15 hrs more than their required hours each week (Weldon & Ingvarson, 2016). Only one fifth of secondary school teachers (similar results were found in primary school teachers) felt their workload was manageable, while 90% felt their workload negatively affected their quality of teaching (Weldon & Ingvarson). Recommendations from similar studies in other jurisdictions have asked for reduced workloads and



increased professional development (Gallop et al., 2021) which may benefit young people in out of home care via more individualised support and building positive relationships with them (CREATE, 2022).

### **Supportive carers**

Carers are the most frequent source of educational support for young people in care outside of school (CREATE, 2022). Young people in care appreciate it when their carers value education, encourage them to go to school, provide them practical support, and encourage them to pursue further education after school (CREATE).

The approach, resources, and attitude of carers in relation to education also has an impact on the educational outcomes of young people in care (CREATE, 2022). Carers who provide learning resources at home, engage with their young person's learning, and do activities with young people at home correlate with academic achievement (Niklas et al., 2016). However, the amount of support a carer can provide may be affected by their own educational attainment which might create a barrier for the carer to engage with the learning of their young person because of a lack of confidence or experience (McNamara et al., 2019).

When it comes to support for carers overall, assistance is needed for them to become positive, constructive, confident forces for continued educational achievement in young people. The limited support and training for carers specifically around this skillset means they may not be as well equipped to support young people as they could be, and this deficit might contribute to the poorer educational outcomes that are often experienced by young people in care.

### **Academic support and personalised learning support plans**


Young people in care do show worse educational outcomes compared to their non-care counterparts (AIHW, 2015) but that shouldn't be taken as a causal link due to the decreasing prevalence of those poor outcome as you control for more factors. Importantly, the perspectives of young people in care about the support they are given suggests there are large gaps in how the support (academic and otherwise) is provided. In CREATE's 2018 study *Out of Home Care in Australia* (McDowall, 2018), 46% of respondents said they were satisfied with the support they were given around their education, leaving half of the out-of-home care population not having their educational needs met. Better academic support and personalised learning support plans are needed at school and at home.

This better academic support could look like increased resourcing of classroom teachers to enable quality relationships to be formed and personalised support plans to be made. This increased resourcing could incorporate training about trauma-informed practice, awareness of the out-of-home care sector, therapeutic responses to challenging behaviour in the classroom (rather than removal from the classroom), and support to overcome the multifaceted disadvantage that young people in care face.

Furthermore, academic and tutorial support needs to be resourced for young people in care at home as well as at school. This could look like funding from child safety departments for young people to have the resources they need at the home like computers, textbooks, desks, and quiet study spaces. They could also fund training for carers on how to provide educational support that meets the needs of the young people in their care. Another approach could be to fund tutorial assistance for targeted, one-on-one sessions to focus on areas of improvement.

### **Attendance at school**

School attendance and subsequently completion of year 12 are areas that see worse outcomes for children and young people in care. Recent research focussed on the out-of-home care sector reported that the completion rate of year 12 for young people in care was 57% compared with 85% for young people not in care (McDowall, 2020; te Riele et al., 2022). Attendance at school is critical



for raising the completion rates; it is essential that absences be reduced, particularly forced absences through exclusions and suspensions. This is especially relevant for First Nations young people where a recent review in Victoria showed 30% of this group had been suspended from their secondary school (Te Riele et al.).

### **Emotional support and control of bullying**

After academic support, bullying was the top identified barrier to finishing year 12 for young people in care (AIHW, 2022a; CREATE, 2022). A quarter of respondents in CREATE's national survey in 2018 were found to have been bullied while at school (McDowall, 2018). Considering its severe impact (potentially stopping a young person going to or finishing school) controlling bullying needs to be focussed on at a systems level as well as individually. This is matched by the responses of young people around what should be done on bullying, where they call for more efforts to control bullying and help support young people to make friendships at the school (CREATE, 2022).

*I got bullied a lot for being in the system. I got bashed because I was in the system. (Female 17)*

Evidence based and mental health focussed programs such as *MindMatters* and Positive Behaviour for Learning maybe especially impactful for children and young people in care (Dix et al., 2013; Good et al., 2011). We also applaud the school-wide positive behaviour support framework that was initiated by the Education Department in 2018 and would support a wider uptake of that program and a holistic approach that schools take to creating positive behaviours. Ongoing effort in these programs alongside evaluation of their effectiveness will be key to ensuring that young people in care are getting the support to create a safe and nurturing environment at school.

### **Placement Stability**

Placement stability impacts school attendance and was highlighted as one of the major barriers to continuing school from our participants who had left high school. In CREATE's 2018 study of the Australian out of home care system, it was found that the three different types of care (Foster, Kinship, and Residential) had different levels of stability across the study participants, with Kinship care being the most stable, followed by Foster care, and with Residential care and Independent Living being the most disrupted (McDowall, 2018).


Victoria needs to prioritise minimising placement and school changes as much as possible and provide additional support during any transitions for young people in care.

### **COVID-19 Implications**

In Victoria, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the educational experiences of young people in care. In CREATE's consultation about the impacts of the pandemic, 81% of young people surveyed described a moderate to high impact on their education (CREATE, 2021). The main impact highlighted was the myriad challenges related to studying from home. The three themes of these challenges were: online and technology challenges; lack of motivation and getting distracted; and inadequate support to overcome these challenges.

*The online made class difficult (internet dropping out; not being able to physically see what my teachers are doing; being embarrassing and awkward to reach out and ask for help in class and raised my stress levels a bit. (Female, 15)*

Since children and young people have returned to school, the flow on effects from the pandemic are still getting in the way of them being able to successfully return to the classroom. Themes such as mask wearing, social distancing rules, hygiene, and disrupted routines developed over longer periods in lockdown and the short periods between (CREATE, 2021).



*There's quite a lot that's changed. You're required to wear a mask 24/7 at school unless you're doing sport. Some people, some of my teachers they start covering their hair which I don't really understand. We're not allowed to use the drink taps anymore. We're not allowed to use locker rooms, we're not allowed to get changed at school. My schedule has been mucked up, waking up in the morning. I'm late to school nearly every day. (Female, 14)*

Some positive influences of the pandemic were highlighted, such as lessening the stimulation that the young people would have otherwise received in the classroom helped some young people focus on their schoolwork more. Also, some students reported a higher level of appreciation for face-to-face interaction after they returned to school, that is that it helped them have a sense of gratitude for the people around them (CREATE, 2021).


Another major impact was the level to which young people fell behind in their schoolwork. Often falling behind can be hard for children and young people in care to overcome and can snowball into absences from school and even leaving school before finishing year 12 (CREATE, 2021). Victoria needs to focus on this period to ensure that young people in care who were affected by the pandemic get supported to stay engaged in school and overcome any deficits experienced in their education.

Finally, some of the compounding disadvantages that young people in care face were exacerbated by the pandemic, where lack of access to resources and services was negatively experienced by young people in care to the degree that they were not able to complete school work. *"We had some internet problems that stopped us from doing work"*. (Male 14) (CREATE, 2021).

In conclusion, please review our suggested Actions below, drawn from the above discussion:


## **Actions**

1. Ensure teachers are able to build supportive relationships with young people. This may include:
  - Creating School environments and developing government policies (i.e., through the provision for appropriate funding) that allow for additional teaching or therapeutic staff in classrooms with young people with complex support needs.
  - The provision of professional development in trauma-informed practice and awareness of the out-of-home care system for school staff, with sufficient time for this learning and reflection.
2. Address bullying and the emotional wellbeing of young people. This may include:
  - The provision of sufficient mental health staff in school environments.
  - The development and inclusion of resources which specifically address the stigma experienced by young people living in out-of-home care, and ensure that anti-bullying resources are provided.
3. The provision of additional, ongoing academic support for young people with an out-of-home care experience. This may include:
  - Ensuring all young people in out-of-home care in Victoria are involved in the creation and implementation of an Individual Educational Plan. This plan should be reviewed annually and after NAPLAN results, facilitating supports.
  - Providing free additional support with school work (i.e., tutoring, mentoring, homework clubs), and ensuring young people have adequate resources to complete their education (i.e., school supplies, technology, transport).
  - Equipping carers with additional educational information and support for their role, e.g., workshops about educational pathways or study skills.
  - Supporting young people over 18 years of age to continue or return to education and training by extending supported care to 21 years of age in out-of-home care.

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4. Prioritise minimal placement and school changes as much as possible and provide additional support during any transitions.
  5. Develop policies that minimise absences of young people from the educational environment (especially for behavioural control) so that their instructional time is not limited. Therapeutic support can be employed to retain the young people within the school environment.

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