Good Policy

Good Shepherd
youth & family service

Equity in Education
Now is the Time

"School fees, uniforms, camps. Cost of everything gone through the roof, impossible to budget, can't cope or plan."

"No money for school books. It's getting harder to manage week to week."

"I had three children all start a new school, had to buy uniforms. My eldest has camp already as well."

These are the words of parents who were forced to seek emergency relief at the start of the school year. These parents know, as we do, that education is the primary pathway to opportunity. They may sacrifice a great deal, including their dignity, to pay education costs.

In the developing world the Millennium Development Goals affirm that education must be brought to all children. In Australia we have universal education and many wonderful schools and teachers, along with renewed government investment in education as critical to an inclusive and fair society. We have internationally high levels of educational achievement. Yet we do poorly when measured on our educational equity performance. Australia has a particularly large and worrying gap in achievement levels between students from low socio-economic and high socio-economic backgrounds. Governments in Australia also spend less on education, and depend more on private financing, than most other OECD countries.

Looking at the world through the eyes of parents and children in hardship is the starting point for Good Shepherd programs and advocacy work. As the Executive Director of Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service Michael Yore said at this year's Catholic Education Week seminar at the Australian Catholic University, "The imperative to adopt the standpoint of the poor, to begin to see the world and to shape its future course from the perspective and experiences of the poor, is part of Catholic Social Teaching." It is also the only way we can come to thoroughly understand and remove the most stubborn barriers to educational participation experienced by disadvantaged young people.

Such a complex, persistent problem can be thought of as a 'wicked' problem, that is, one that continues to resist resolution. A wicked problem like this cannot be handled in a linear way, but requires multiple, coordinated strategies and the involvement of many stakeholders: students, families, teachers, school administrators, community workers, unions, policy-makers, bureaucrats, and legislators. Experimental approaches are needed to cut through habitual responses that do not always work. Schools and community service organisations already work together in strong and creative partnerships to meet the needs of disadvantaged students. How much more could be achieved with more strategic and system-wide support of these partnerships?

Multiple responses must be held together by a vision of an education system without barriers. Taking the perspective of those who currently struggle to stay engaged in education will provide that vision: what would a 'no barriers' school look like to the parents quoted above and to their children? We need a process of widened discussion, increased understanding and mutual influence. Creating accessible alternatives for young people who have become stranded outside the education system is also part of the challenge.

After an era of extreme individualism, when education increasingly became a commodity purchased by those with the means, we are joining with many educators, activists and indeed politicians in claiming that this is the moment for inclusive education to become a national priority.

by Dr Kathy Landvogt
Social Policy Researcher,
Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service

IN THIS ISSUE

'WE ARE GOOD SHEPHERD. Our mission is shaped by our inheritance of the vision, courage and audacity of Saint Mary Euphrasia Pelletier and the Good Shepherd tradition she began. Ours is a vision for promoting a world of justice and peaceful co-existence. Ours is the courage to embrace wholeheartedly innovative and creative ways of enabling people of all cultural, religious and social backgrounds to enjoy the fullness of life, which is the right of every human being. Ours is the inheritance to boldly challenge those structures and beliefs that diminish human dignity. We work to ensure the value of every human being, the communities that enable us all to thrive and the integrity of the environment that guarantees both.'

The Standpoint Project

by **Dr Tony Kruger**
Head of School Faculty of Education, Victoria University

A collaborative research project involving Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, Victoria University's School of Education and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is looking at ways in which schools can better support the learning of students from low income families.

Notwithstanding the great advantages resulting from the national commitment to the provision of universal education, why is it that family wealth – or the lack of it – continues to relate directly to educational outcomes?

This question provides the stimulus for the Standpoint Project, a collaborative inquiry initiated by Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service and Victoria University's School of Education. This research partnership project, funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Education and the Alfred Felton Bequest, is supporting teams of teachers in six schools in Melbourne's Western Region in an investigation of the ways in which schools can better support the learning of students from low income families.

TAKING A STANDPOINT

Hidden in the particulars of Jackie's case are the broader systemic and social circumstances affecting the desire to learn and the likely outcomes of schooling: the student's interest in learning, the resources of the student's family, teachers' practices and a school's expectations for students and their families.

Put yourself in Jackie's shoes. What does she see when she goes to school – and into the English Literature classroom? That is the kind of perspective which the Standpoint Project is seeking to convey. Can the classroom teacher, the school and the school system see how young people from low income families experience schooling? Two questions are guiding the research:

What are the practices and structures within schools which can best support and encourage the participation and successful engagement of low income families in education?

Conversely, are there practices and structures that might deter or exclude some children and young people from full participation in education?

The Standpoint Project asks participating teachers to use the *Low Income Awareness Checklist*[1] as a way of seeing schooling from the perspective of the least advantaged students in their classrooms. In a small scale and quite personalised inquiry, the Standpoint Project is attempting to work with teams of teachers in exploring how they, and their schools, might adopt practices which encourage participation and remove barriers for young people like Jackie.
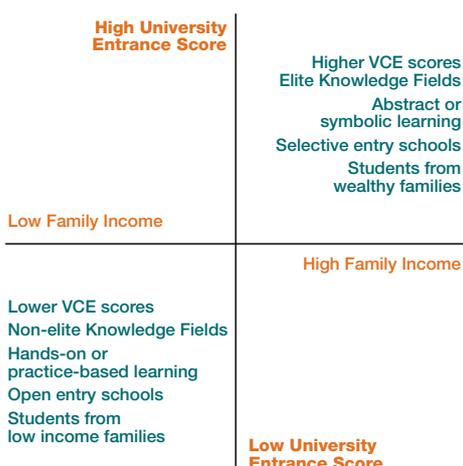
The Standpoint Project starts from the assertion that teachers are the critical agents in education. On the surface this may seem a 'ho hum' observation. But in earlier educational eras, the large scale program, the official curriculum and broad forms of system and school policy and organisation were regarded as the principal agents of change; teachers were to fit into the frameworks of the larger program or curriculum provision.

JACKIE'S CASE » Jackie, a student who has just entered Year 12, is cooperative in class and wants to do well. But she doesn't have the $500 worth of school text books she needs for her VCE study. One of the subjects Jackie is taking is English Literature and that has a very large and expensive booklist. Teachers photocopy parts of the books needed for class, but they can't copy the entire books and as a result Jackie finds it hard to do homework. Some of her teachers are exasperated that she doesn't have her books and Jackie is becoming increasingly embarrassed at having to ask the teachers to copy book pages for her. Not surprisingly, some of the teachers think that Jackie is not very organised, even lazy. After a while, Jackie starts to fall behind and begins to skip classes. It is all too hard for her.

In the current educational environment the classroom teacher is regarded as the principal initiator of learning around whom curriculum and pedagogical provision is organised.

PARTICIPATION AND WEALTH

Decades of statistical analysis of participation in education and the distribution of educational success have provided a detailed picture of the ways in which students' personal and social backgrounds, educational practice in schools and the nature of school systems interact to produce educational outcomes. The clearest and most convincing presentation of those relationships can be found in the work of Richard Teese, at the Centre for Postcompulsory Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Melbourne.[2] The figure below summarises Teese's findings.

High University Entrance Score

Higher VCE scores
Elite Knowledge Fields
Abstract or symbolic learning
Selective entry schools
Students from wealthy families

Low Family Income

High Family Income

Lower VCE scores
Non-elite Knowledge Fields
Hands-on or practice-based learning
Open entry schools
Students from low income families

Low University Entrance Score

Figures like this need to be interpreted carefully. They report a broad trend, one in which the connection between wealth and education is clearly evident. The Teese research is important in showing how, together, student experiences and interest, and school practices, result

in young people choosing to study in particular kinds of knowledge fields. These knowledge fields are significant in terms of an educational outcome like a university entrance possibility.

A simplistic view of educational practice would question why schools serving the least advantaged communities don't encourage their students to take on the elite abstract knowledge fields which are associated with high academic achievement. The answer of course is that they do, but students don't want to take them.

Respecting students' interests and choices is at the heart of good teaching practice. Teachers are required to explore available curriculum and pedagogical possibilities in their efforts to engage students in successful learning. The preference for practical, or 'hands on', learning in schools which serves the least advantaged students is an outcome of the negotiation which necessarily occurs when student interest and the official curriculum meet in classroom practice.

EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS: WHAT CAN STANDPOINT DO?

In Victoria, a commitment to educational effectiveness drives policy. Effectiveness approaches value objective evidence of the impact of schooling and teaching forms on learning. The results of effectiveness studies are reported in figures such as that below, which is derived from the work of John Hattie.[3] Typically, the studies report that who students are, and what they bring to the educational experience, produces about 50 per cent of the variance in learning outcomes. The teacher contributes about 35 per cent; lesser contributions to learning variance result from the nature of the school, a student's peers, the principal's management approach and home characteristics.

- Principal
- School
- Home
- Peers
- Teachers
- Students
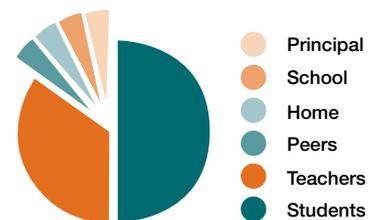
Education systems committed to effectiveness strategies argue that they can't do anything about what the student brings to school in terms of aptitude for learning and family background characteristics such as financial resources. The emphasis therefore needs to be on teachers and their curriculum and pedagogical practices.

Throughout the Western world, the recognition that the teacher is the most important educational actor is reflected in renewed emphasis on the quality of teacher education and teacher professional learning. More recently, proposals for rewarding individual teachers for outstanding professional practice are gaining prominence as strategies for reform being promoted by education systems. If an educational strategy, such as the Standpoint Project, is to be taken on by systems and teachers, it will need to demonstrate that it is effective through the extent to which it emphasises the work of teachers in 'adding value' to students' learning.

TEACHERS? YES, BUT MORE THAN THE TEACHER!

But the effectiveness model is plainly inadequate in explaining educational participation and outcomes. Strolls through an elite high fee private school and a government school serving a low income community will dispel any confident acceptance of a 'teacher only' solution to the social division associated with education. Separating

The Standpoint Project » continued

out the various factors which contribute to educational effectiveness makes for neat 'science' but it does not accord with practice, where the factors are organically and plainly intertwined. Who the students in a school are, and the social location of the school, will affect which teachers choose to work at the school and for how long, and the curriculum and pedagogical practices they adopt to engage students.

Of course, education systems acknowledge the direct and powerful connections between students' socio-economic background and their educational participation and success. Systems compare schools which are socio-economically alike. These 'like school' comparisons are treated by schools and teachers as highly significant and have a substantial impact on curriculum and pedagogical decision-making.

In pursuit of effectiveness, informed school systems such as those in Australia provide detailed and educationally sophisticated curriculum and pedagogical advice on which teachers can base their practices. The Victorian system, for example, expects teachers and schools to apply its Essential Learning Standards in curriculum planning. It has also recommended that teachers apply Principles of Learning and Teaching (PoLT) in their classroom practices. At the core of those Principles is the recommendation that teachers become knowledgeable about their students and frame learning experiences on those understandings

Unfortunately, the supports contained within formal curriculum and pedagogical recommendations lack clear processes by which schools and their teachers can recognise how students, and especially those from low income families, experience education. Teachers, in their struggle to engage students and to enhance their learning, walk a fine line between maintaining high expectations for the students and imputing deficits of one kind or another when students don't learn or, at worst, when they resist even the most sensitive invitations to participate.

The result is that some students become victims of schooling. And in an effectiveness-driven system, their teachers also become victims because there is no-one else to blame if students don't succeed. In an environment where teaching practitioners must sign up to an 'all kids can learn' commitment, the fault of any students' educational failure can have only two sources: the students themselves, or their teachers. How easy it would be to blame Jackie's school and teachers for the way in which her inability to purchase the necessary texts eventually alienated her from successful engagement with English Literature. Jackie's case shows that it is not only the teacher who affects student's engagement in learning. The practices of the school and the system are clearly evident too.

THE STANDPOINT PROJECT: BEYOND VICTIMS IN EDUCATION

In the language used by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman[4], the task for the Standpoint Project is to generate tools which enable teachers to connect the social experiences of the least advantaged students in their classrooms with the individualised nature of education in schools where effectiveness is the primary basis for decision making. The Standpoint Project has used the Low Income Awareness Checklist as a tool which can prompt teachers to connect social and systemic influences and the individual interests which make up their practices.

The resources of the Standpoint Project are being used by teams of teachers in schools to build up portfolios of practical descriptions of their experiences in working with students from low income families. Participating teachers are also using Project funding to set up small scale innovations within their school designed to stimulate deeper educational engagement by the least advantaged students. Together, the descriptive insights of the participating teachers and the associated developments they are initiating are pointing to ways in which the Low Income Awareness Checklist might be complemented by the addition of categories related to specific school and classroom practices. A professional development component will enable the strategies to be utilised in other schools.

The outcome of the Standpoint Project is intended to be a revised Low Income Awareness Checklist. The revised Checklist will be a curriculum and pedagogical inquiry tool which will assist teachers in undertaking the challenging work of engaging the least advantaged young people in learning.

References

1 *The Low Income Awareness Checklist* was developed by Carmel Stafford a financial counsellor with Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service. The checklist comprises items, which can make participation in school more accessible for low income students.

2 Teese, R. and Polesel, J. *Undemocratic Schooling: Equity and Quality in Mass Secondary Education in Australia.* Melbourne, University Press, 2003

3 Hattie, J. *Teachers Make a Difference: What is the Research Evidence?,* Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003

4 Bauman, Z. *Liquid Modernity* Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000

A Shared
Point of View

by Carmel Stafford
*Good Shepherd Project Worker,
Standpoint team*

People who are struggling to make ends meet visit a financial counsellor at Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, not because they want to, but because they are desperate for help to address some basic need in their lives.

A persistent issue arising in our casework is the cost of education for families. Parents worry that their children will stand out as being poor, or different, because they can't afford the uniform or don't have the required books or stationery. Parents have kept children home from an excursion because they can't meet the costs, or children don't take camp notices home because they know their parents can't afford it and they don't want to worry them. Children have gone to school with no breakfast and lunch because there is no food in the house.

This caused Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, other community agencies, and concerned educators, to ask:

What kinds of joint action to address these issues would be beneficial and with whom?

How could new strategies and practices be researched and explored?

What does best practice look like?

In 2006, we approached the School of Education at Victoria University to develop a research project that might address these questions. Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service had already developed a 38-point Low Income Awareness Checklist for teachers and education administrators to use to raise awareness of the needs of low income families. What the agency sought from Victoria University was some work to consolidate this checklist and to strengthen it with the experience and reflective best practice of teachers themselves. We hoped to develop a research project with Victoria University that would work towards systemic change; a project that would find strategies to embed, within schools, a different way of looking at things; one that would eliminate costs and potential barriers for families. Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service wanted to

explore whether a different approach could in fact enhance learning. Thus the Standpoint Project was born.

As Good Shepherd Project Worker on the Standpoint research team, I have experienced a research process that is marked by rigour, a genuinely democratic dialogue, and a respectful gathering together of the insights and experiences of teachers from schools.

As a community worker I have seen the pain some parents have felt through their experiences of school practices and policies. Working with teachers from the six schools involved in the Standpoint research project I have gained a more intimate understanding and insight into the work and challenges that teachers face. I have witnessed the commitment of the teachers and it is now clear to me that noticing and caring about the things that matter is a core element of the practice of teaching.

The teachers at these schools have been inspirational in terms of their commitment to students, their understanding of the disadvantage faced by the children, and their honesty and willingness to engage in the research. Such participation requires them to report and reflect on their practice. Working with young people on a daily basis – young people who bring to school all of their social, emotional, and educational needs – requires a real dedication from teachers.

At one secondary school the care and commitment the teachers have for their disadvantaged kids is palpable. The professional development they ran to raise awareness about the needs of children living in poverty was stunning. When the lead teacher was telling me about it she said it was the most significant thing she had experienced in her teaching career. Being in research meetings, you feel like you can change

the world because we share common values and concerns and we take the same standpoint about children and young people who are doing it tough.

My involvement in the Standpoint Project has deepened my understanding of how the connections between schools and community agencies can be made more effective. For example, teachers notice that some kids regularly come to school with dirty clothing. Parents sometimes tell me, in my work as a financial counsellor with Good Shepherd, that their washing machine has broken down and they can't afford to get it fixed. Working together means the community agency can point families towards appropriate government grants to cover such problems, and assist with the application procedures. Moreover, the sharing of knowledge and experience between key players can also provide a rich foundation of empirical data that can be passed on to government policy-makers.

Teachers can do a lot in their individual classrooms to take the standpoint of disadvantaged kids. However when there are policies in their school that, perhaps inadvertently, do not reflect awareness of disadvantage or worse still, may even appear to penalise disadvantage, such teachers can be placed in a very challenging position. My involvement with this project has increased my understanding of the vital importance of reviewing all policies and practices in schools from the standpoint of disadvantage. While this research project involves just six Victoria schools at the moment, I hope such processes of review will eventually occur at the local, regional, and state levels. Some changes can easily be brought about at the local level of the individual school; some need regional support and direction; and some are dependent on government funding and policy direction.

Youth Policy in Practice

by Marilyn Webster
Manager, Social Policy Research Unit
Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service

Australia does not have a strong tradition of public policy development for youth.

Historically, the needs of youth have either been met within policy and program frameworks designed for adults, or through extensions of child and family welfare responses. Yet the examples of Good Shepherd Youth and Family programs described here illustrate how vulnerable and socially marginalised young people can be when traditional family or institutional supports fail.

The Australian Government has prioritised social inclusion approaches to social policy and program development across a range of areas. A social inclusion approach lends itself to youth issues because the needs of youth are often multidimensional. They need a holistic approach which recognises that youth are not only disadvantaged financially and socially, but are often extremely disadvantaged in exercising basic rights because of their immaturity. A social inclusion approach should recognise influences of cultural diversity, disability, sexuality, geography, health and family history.

The current priorities of the Australian Government in its social inclusion strategy are:
» the incidence and needs of jobless families with children
» delivering support to children at greatest long-term risk of disadvantage
» focusing on particular neighbourhoods
» addressing the incidence of homelessness
» employment of people living with a disability or mental illness; and
» closing the gap for indigenous Australia.

Young people feature as having particular needs within each of these social inclusion strategies. However, the Federal Government has yet to develop an overarching youth strategy which recognises that some young people have particular needs and vulnerabilities that warrant more targetted programs.

Aside from family, the school represents the major contact point for engagement with youth. But as information from Good Shepherd programs indicates, there are many young people who are either disengaged or only marginally engaged with school. The Mornington Peninsula area is suffering from a shortage of youth workers and specific services to work with 12 to 16 year olds who are not attending school and who are not employed. This is not a group of teenagers who skip a day here and there – these young people have stopped attending school altogether and the reasons are sometimes related to long-term family diffictlties.

In the past year Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service family support workers on the Peninsula have case managed at least ten families where a young teenager was no longer attending school. "My child will not attend school", is becoming a more common problem with families seeking support. Patricia Simmons, a Case Manager in the family support service, has encountered many such children in her family work in the past 18 months. Many spend days and weeks at home, no longer engaged with their school, but without a suitable alternative. This situation can worsen an already fraught family situation. Some children leave home seeking a solution but often end up in more trouble.

The Victorian Government has released a Framework for Vulnerable Youth (2008) which scopes a 'youth service continuum' based on levels of vulnerability ranging from broad areas of activity (e.g. recreational programs) to specialist services targeting high risk young people (e.g. drug assessment and treatment services). Youth who are at high risk are identified as requiring coordinated services and comprehensive case management. The framework largely ignores housing and homeless services, which have been the subject of a comprehensive policy consultation process by the Federal Government.

These many initiatives require a platform on which they can be integrated. An obvious approach would be local area integration incorporating schools (schools are the platform for our living skills program, DISH – Developing Independent Skills for Home, and our Driver Education program), but with sufficient flexibility and outreach to extend to those young people who are marginally attached to schools. There are indications that the Victorian Government is considering schools as a universal service platform but a local area approach to integration of youth services across the continuum requires substantial funding, unlikely in the current climate. One approach might be to adopt the national social inclusion approach of local priority areas to ensure that both Federal and State efforts are prioritised to those areas of high youth vulnerability.

Programs for vulnerable young people are a feature of Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service.

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS BEYOND THE SCHOOL GATE

The involvement of Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service at Lynall Hall Community School in Richmond means young people at risk of disengaging with school, can receive support way beyond the school gate.

The BRIDGE Program started four years ago at Lynall Hall, a community school alternative to mainstream school. Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service youth worker and counsellor Linda Hammond, who is based at the school in the welfare department, works with students, families and teachers to re-engage students who have stopped coming to school or who are at risk of disconnecting because of learning, behavioural or family issues.

Linda's role varies enormously depending on the needs of each student and may be as practical as picking a 'reluctant' student up from home, and getting them to school. During the school day, she may sit and talk to a student to 'defuse' a potential problem. In many instances, the casework is more complex and involves working with the families and students to keep the student engaged in school. Some students have been abused; others are living in homes where there is substance abuse. Linda also works with the teachers to help them understand the issues facing students, many of whom have been rejected by several other schools.

Amanda Olle, the Youth & Community Program Manager at Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service's Collingwood site, describes the student community at Lynall Hall as "complex" and one that demands a lot of support and an innovative approach. Amanda tells of one 15-year-old student, for example,

who lived with her mother, an alcohol and drug user who ended up in a drug rehabilitation facility. The mother became homeless and her daughter ended up in and out of foster care. She was at high risk of slipping out of the school system because of behavioural issues. The BRIDGE Program has supported this student through her education at Lynall Hall and back into mainstream education.

As well as the BRIDGE Program, the agency also runs the DISH (Developing Independent Skills for Home) Program at Lynall Hall. Young people participate in the program and also assist corporate volunteers to run the breakfast program every morning before school. The DISH program covers cooking, budgeting, purchasing and a range of health and well-being issues. This program has been such a success at Lynall Hall that in response to demand, it is now operating at Collingwood College and there are plans to roll it out at the Yarra Youth Space. Also the Driver Ed program assists young students to gain their Learner's Permit. And a 'L2P' program is about to come on line utilising volunteers and a vehicle for young people to gain their 120 hours of driving experience prior to becoming a probationary driver.

EDUCATION NETWORKS SHARE WISDOM AND LEARNING

The School Focused Youth Service project at St Albans, covering the Brimbank and Melton areas, helps schools develop local partnerships to tackle critical learning and welfare issues.

Recent projects, by the Service's four western region networks, include the development of a soon-to-be released Cyber-bullying directory and several forums.

It is ten years since the School Focused Youth Service began as a result of findings in the Suicide Prevention Task Force. In that time, 41 project coordinators around Victoria have worked with schools and community agencies to develop projects that will support students at risk. A key aim of the partnerships is to remove barriers to school attendance, which could include mental or physical health issues, disengagement from the school, financial problems and family issues.

Funded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Sally Beattie from Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service at St Albans (one of the four western region networks of the School Focused Youth Service) is one of the 41 coordinators. She facilitates monthly meetings between up to 40 primary and secondary schools and community and welfare agencies. The meetings focus on education or welfare issues that the schools are dealing with, or trends that are emerging. Schools share strategies and models that are working in their environment. One example is a survey of playground violence carried out by one school. The findings and subsequent strategies were discussed at a network meeting and were then trialled by other schools facing similar issues.

This year a forum will be held to discuss how schools are managing newly arrived communities and their needs. This also grew out of discussions at a network gathering. The networks are community driven, identifying common local issues and solutions and then taking them beyond the network, to the Education Department, if necessary.

Youth Policy in Practice » continued

Photos: A recent Good Shepherd outdoor activity camp

The cyber-bullying directory, which features information, support and resources, grew out of a gathering of the four western region coordinators. The network also funds specific programs within schools, or for individual students if they are considered at risk.

The School Focused Youth Service western region has produced the Good Stuff Guide which details all the programs and projects that have been developed in order to share best practice amongst all Victorian schools.

The Service has been funded until 2011 and programs and projects developed through the Service are evaluated regularly. It includes State, Catholic and Independent schools, and covers students aged between 10 and 18 years.

"There have been lots of outcomes from the network, especially as the focus is on providing alternative ideas for engaging young people who might not fit into the regular school curriculum. Some young people just cannot fit into mainstream education," Sally said.

NILS4YOUTH

A youth-focused No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS®) program is set to start in the Wimmera region after a review of the general program revealed its failure to meet the needs of young people trying to establish a base in the area.

The program, auspiced by Wimmera Uniting Care and based in Horsham, has meant developing guidelines to meet the specific needs of young people who may be sharing houses and who may be in less stable housing than a family accessing the general program.

Wimmera Uniting Care, with $300,000 capital funding from NAB, set up their NILS program in January 2008. Developing a Youth NILS program for people aged 15 to 24 years meant major changes to the guidelines in the areas of:

» Repayment – the period has been extended to 12 to 24 months as opposed to 12 to 18 months for general NILS borrowers.

» Loan limit – reduced to $800 (not $1000), but this amount can be extended once 60% of the loan is repaid.

» Residency – the young person need only be a resident in the Wimmera area for three months, depending on their circumstances.

» Loans can be given to more than one person in a household as many young people are in shared houses, each trying to buy one of the necessary items. This too is a change from the general program.

Robyn Murphy, Coordinator of the Wimmera Youth NILS program, says one of the major differences in setting up the Youth NILS program is the requirement of the applicant to 'link up' with the local youth support agency. The young person has to be supported by a local youth worker or social worker from Centrelink and be willing to participate in a case plan with that worker, who acts as their advocate.

The scheme, which was trialled for six months, is now accredited and will be promoted throughout the Wimmera, which covers a 45,000sq km area and many small towns. NAB provided $75,000 for the Youth NILS program and Robyn anticipates about six loan applications per month. The program was established using local expertise and youth workers on an advisory panel and with support from the Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service NILS staff.

The Good Policy newsletter

KIT HELPS PARENTS
Cut Through Costs and Red Tape

by Dr Kathy Landvogt
Social Policy Researcher, Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service

Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, in partnership with Emergency Relief Victoria (ERV), produced an Education Costs Kit last year to help families better manage the financial pressures of educating children.

These education costs, drought and the economic downturn conspire to make education almost impossible for some families and demand for the kit, from many sectors, has prompted the publication of a second 2009 edition.

School non-participation created by costs imposed on students and their families starts early with parents' embarrassment and withdrawal at not being able to pay 'fees', compounded by schools' insensitivity to this issue. Schools are under greater budgetary pressures than ever to increase their budgets from parents' payments, but they need to give priority to working in genuine partnership with low income parents if school retention rates are to increase. Seeing the situation from the perspective of parents in financial hardship is the beginning. Staff and teachers also need training in privacy: we still hear stories about parents' non-payment being made public in the school front office or in classrooms, in breach of clear departmental directives.

Every year some of these struggling families find their way to emergency relief agencies for assistance. These agencies devise special programs to ensure that students can obtain essential textbooks, attend compulsory camps, and even stay on after the age of 16 when the EMA cuts out. Emergency relief workers are often deeply disturbed that for students from low income backgrounds, education participation can depend on charity. After hearing countless stories of education being jeopardised through cost pressures on families, the ERV network undertook to produce the first edition of the Education Costs Kit.

The Social Policy Research Unit at Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service assisted in preparing the kit, which aims to:

» provide a plain English summary of the government's guidelines about parent payments in state schools, and the rights and responsibilities of schools and parents relating to these payments (also translated into six community languages)

» provide community agencies with information and ideas about how to help families struggling with school costs; and

» encourage better systemic responses to these students and their families from all key players.

The kit is an entirely community-funded initiative which emergency relief agencies supported in order to address one of the root causes of hardship and social exclusion. The 2nd edition of the kit was published by the Equity in Education Alliance, a group of community service organisations including Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service. The Alliance came together a year ago to provide a focus for advocates wishing to eliminate cost barriers to educational participation. The Alliance, like the ERV network, believes that providing parents with information is a key to self-advocacy, and that welfare and financial support agencies are vital partners in getting that information out to those who need it most.

The kit supports parents, but also advocates systemic change that is needed to provide long-term relief. Both Federal and State governments want to boost school retention rates. The Year 12 retention rates in Victoria remain stubbornly at 81 per cent, despite the Victorian government spending the past nine years pursuing a 2010 goal of 90 per cent retention rates[1]. A recent report on the issue recognises that the biggest challenge is to "address the needs of the critical groups of young people who remain at risk of early leaving"[2]. The Federal Education Minister, Julia Gillard is also on record as wanting to lift, by 2020, both Year 12 retention rates to 90 per cent, and the proportion of students from low income backgrounds in university, from the current 16 per cent to 20 per cent[3].

Large and welcome injections of funds from both Federal and State governments are now going to schools, yet cost barriers imposed by state schools continue to make it harder for students from low income backgrounds. Over recent decades the payments requested by state schools have increased disproportionately and have become less discretionary. The Federal tax rebate has not impacted yet, and in any case will not cover the costs of school, excursions, camps, or uniforms. When families struggle with paying these education costs, there is a clear risk of the student leaving school early.

The Education Costs Kit has been very well received, with many requests from financial counsellors, neighbourhood houses and community health centres for further copies. Parents particularly value the clear information provided in the kit, for example explaining their right to retain their portion of the EMA rather than sign it over to the school. While the kit can be used to help individual families, it is also a tool to advocate for changes to policies, funding, and school processes, so that school-imposed costs cease to be a barrier to educational participation.

The kits are available electronically from the following websites: www.vcoss.org.au; www.goodshepvic. org.au; www.vrandfb.com.au

A limited number of hard copies are available from the Social Policy Research Unit by phoning (03) 9418 3000.

References

1 *Battle to Boost Year 12 Completion Rates*, The Age, January 24, 2009
2 Lamb, S. and Rice, S. *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion Report*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, 2008
3 *University Push for Poorer Families*, The Age, March 10, 2009

A Snapshot of Federal and

by
Dr Lea Campbell
*Research Coordinator,
Esther's Voice*

The education policy landscape has changed considerably, with the Federal and State Governments starting to take up the challenge of addressing educational disadvantage in Australia, an OECD country that is known for the imbalance of 'high quality/low equity' schooling[1].

Whilst no one underestimates this challenge we know that ongoing commitments from various stakeholders and honesty to find creative ways of joining up systems to respond to educational disadvantage are required, along with significant and targeted resource and program provision.

Following is a snapshot of recent government funding and policy initiatives in education.

FEDERAL

Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians
(December 5th 2008)

Australia's Ministers for Education agreed that Australian schools strive for both equity and excellence, acknowledging the need to improve:

» educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians

» educational achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds

» rate of Year 12 completion or equivalent

An action plan is currently being written following a draft consultation process.

Nation Building – Economic Stimulus Plan

The Plan includes the following education funding initiatives:

» building the Education Revolution program: $14.7 billion over three years to fund the building and maintenance of primary and secondary schools' infrastructure, including science and language labs

» $110 million of funding for the 'Trade Training Centres in Schools Program' to be spent 2009-10

» $2.6 billion and $511 million will be spent on the 'Back to School Bonus' and the 'Training and Learning Bonus' in 2009 respectively. The latter will help eligible income support recipients with the costs of returning to study.

National Secondary School Computer Fund

Three funding rounds to establish a ratio of one computer per two students is now complete. Consultations for further funding have commenced, aiming at a one (Year 9 to 12) student to one computer ratio by 2011.

Education Tax Refund (ETR)

Eligible parents, carers, legal guardians and independent students can claim up to 50% of certain education expenses, to maximum refund of $375 for each primary school child and $750 for each secondary school student.

Claimable costs include: buying or maintaining computers and computer-related equipment (ISP, printer, USB flash drive, education software, disability aids); and school textbooks and learning materials (stationery, trade tools, prescribed textbooks etc).

Claimable costs do NOT include: school fees, uniform expenses, extra curricular activities such as excursions and camps, tutoring costs, school subject levies for consumables and transport costs.

Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008

This Act allows the suspension or cancellation (for up to 13 weeks) of pension or benefit payments to parents of school attendance age children who are not enrolled or unsatisfactorily attending their school. **Welfare rights units, ACOSS and other significant voices from the community and academic sectors are concerned about the efficacy, evidence base and practices of this Act. It requires the individual States to sign onto it in order to be implemented.**

References

1 Education Foundation Australia Fact Sheet *How equitable are our schools?* January 2007

2 Rorris, A. *Rebuilding Australian Schools – Possibilities and Implications*, Australian Secondary Principals Association Public Education Forum, March 27–28, 2009, Canberra

State Education Policies

STATE

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

From 2009, low-income parents can opt to receive their 50 per cent portion of the EMA by either Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) directly into the parent's nominated bank account or via the traditional cheque payment. This gives parents more control over what the EMA is used for.

School Start Bonus (recently indexed at 2.5 per cent)

A one-off payment of $300 from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) for children entering Prep or Year 7.

Conveyance Allowance (recently indexed at 2.5 per cent)

Refunds fares or petrol costs for school transport where there is inadequate public transport.

Parent Payments in Victorian Government Schools Policy
(October 2008)

New DEECD guidelines have been released to clarify the 'essential', 'optional' and 'voluntary' school payment which parents are either required, choose, or invited to pay, respectively. The policy requires schools to communicate clearly which payment falls under which category, and to develop a justifiable school policy for setting parent payments.

Victorian Schools Plan

The Plan includes:

» $1.9 billion plan to rebuild, renovate or extend all Victorian government schools

» a new public private partnership (PPP) with the Axiom Education Victoria consortium, worth $255 million, to build and deliver 11 public schools in Melbourne's growth areas; COAG has adopted the PPP model nationwide

» some co-located YMCA-built long day care centres and community centres.

Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development, Every child, every opportunity
(September 2nd 2008)

DEECD's key policy document for directing education in Victoria for the next five years includes:

» improving outcomes for disadvantaged young Victorians especially Koorie students and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds

» promoting co-location and integration of services and multi-service children's centres especially for children aged 0–8 years from the most disadvantaged areas

» developing a strategy to improve outcomes and participation via 'place-based approaches' to socioeconomic disadvantage.

Securing Jobs for Your Future – Skills for Victoria

The Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (DIIRD) has proposed a major reform to the TAFE system, including:

» $316 million funding

» over 170,000 new training places

» upgrading of TAFE facilities

» training providers to set their own fees, supposedly making the market more competitive

» a voucher style system whereby students can redeem these with public or private training providers.

There are at least three other important changes, with the first coming into effect on July 1 2009 and others to be phased in by 2010/2011:

» a HECS-style fee introduced for Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas for this year, other courses are following

» new eligibility criteria effectively mean that Victorians who are 20 years and older will only be getting a government funded place if they are upgrading their qualifications

» no concession rates on Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses.

With some of the detail of the reform still being worked out, arguably opening up VET places to full competition will have major implications for equity policy.

ISSUES IN EDUCATION POLICY

A thorough analysis of the effectiveness of each of these policies in improving educational equity is not possible here, but there are some issues that require more attention including:

» system-wide improvements to redress the physical deterioration and information technology needs of public schools are welcome, but these are not sufficiently targeted, indeed they appear to be flowing disproportionately to well-off schools[2]

» ongoing issues of inadequate resourcing to poorer schools have not yet been sufficiently addressed through positive discrimination e.g. changing the socio-economic formula used for grants and providing incentives for excellent teachers to move to needy schools

» increased support to low-income parents to cover education costs is important, but there is a need for better system-wide measures to ensure that increasing costs of education are adequately covered in government budgets and not shifted disproportionately onto families' household budgets

» developing partnerships and community-based approaches requires greater attention to cultural change in large government departments, and specific incentives for community organisations and schools to work together

» the equity impacts of changes to the TAFE system have not been adequately considered: a social inclusion filter needs to be applied to all new education policies.

NEWS >>

Listen to Esther's Voice

Esther's Voice is a new social research and advocacy collaboration between Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services.

When Xerxes was ruler of the Persian Empire and the most powerful man on earth (485–465 BCE), Queen Esther pleaded for the life of her people at the risk of her own execution. She gave voice to the needs of her people.

Esther's Voice seeks to act similarly, that is to give voice to the experience of people who are not usually heard. These might be the unheard stories of young people excluded from, or experiencing difficulties with, school; young people from families who struggle to make life's transitions; people hidden away from policy makers, and from those of us who are frustrated by the lack of a shared vision in our efforts to develop a just and fully humane society.

Esther's Voice will look firstly at young people who aren't receiving adequate support through the mainstream education system. Currently, scoping work is being undertaken to determine Esther's Voice priorities for research and advocacy in this and other areas. This involves a review of government policy directions and research being undertaken by other organisations and research bodies.

The three organisations involved with Esther's Voice have considerable experience in working with people and families experiencing educational disadvantage. Our research efforts will ensure that the voices of these people will be heard more clearly in future debates about how to improve educational and social outcomes for children, young people and families.

For more information about Esther's Voice contact Marilyn Webster at the Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service Social Policy Research Unit on 9418 3011, or Dr Lea Campbell, Esther's Voice Research Co-ordinator on 9415 8700.

Research Publications now available

Money, Dignity and Inclusion: The Role of Financial Capability	$22 inc GST *(plus $10 postage and handling inc GST)*
NILS® Small Loans, Big Changes: The Impact of No Interest Loans on Households, Reprinted 2008	$12 inc GST *(plus $8 postage and handling inc GST)*
Respite Care Literature Review, Report to the Project Partners, June 2008	$12 inc GST *(plus $8 postage and handling inc GST)*

New Legislation

The Social Policy Research Unit has responded to the National Consumer Credit Protection Bill, which was released by the Federal Government for comment.

The Bill enables federal legislation of consumer credit, previously a state responsibility. The Bill provides for the first tranche of a number of changes, including the registration of all consumer credit providers and membership of those providers of a dispute resolution scheme. The response was based on our earlier submission to the 'Green Paper on Financial Services and credit reform June 2008: Improving Simplifying and Standardising Financial Services and Credit Regulation'.

Further details: http://www.treasury.gov.au/ consumercredit/content/legislation.asp

The Federal Government is asking the nation how our human rights and responsibilities should be protected in the future.

The Victorian Government held a similar consultation in 2005 which resulted in the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service will again make a submission, as we did in Victoria's Charter development. Our submission will stress the importance of improving life for our most vulnerable people by promoting a more human rights-sensitive public service, and ensuring scrutiny of new laws and their impact on human rights.

For further information visit http://www.humanrightsconsultation.gov.au/

Who's Who in the Social Policy Research Unit

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