

Create an education system that equips young people for their future

Young people in NSW should enjoy full access to affordable and quality education that meets their current needs and prepares them for the future. This means moving beyond a 'bricks and mortar' approach to school investment, and ensuring all young people are engaged and supported to learn.

It's clear that young people need additional support to stay engaged in school, and we need to make sure that those who need the most support aren't excluded from education entirely. Transitions from school are a challenging time, and it's vital that pathways from school to higher education training or work are excellent, affordable and the right fit for the future.

20% of young people are **not attending school**, and a further 20% do not feel they belong in their school.¹



More than **half** of Australian students are studying in fields where more than **two-thirds** of jobs will be **automated**.²



27% or 26,535 of young people in NSW did not reach Year 12 or an equivalent by age 19.³



THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Provide committed and increased funding for Student Support Officers across NSW, with changes to the funding model to allow for more equitable access for schools, particularly in areas of high need and for regional, rural and remote areas.
- Require NSW schools to publish data on their school exclusion statistics and make their disciplinary policies publicly available.
- Require NSW schools to review suspension cases on a regular basis to ensure schools are using suspension as a safeguard and last resort.
- Form an independent body with expertise in both a school context and in working with young people to review school suspensions and ensure all young people have access to supportive and quality education.
- As recommended by the NSW Ombudsman, require NSW schools to systematically identify the students who require individualised intervention and support, and track practice, progress, and outcomes in relation to these students, including mechanisms for identifying those who require escalation to additional support.⁴
- Implement a consistent definition of disability in schools and appropriate funding for students with a disability.
- Improve inclusive training for teachers and staff coupled with appropriate policies and frameworks to ensure greater outcomes.

Education is a key determinant of a young person's economic, social and emotional development, and is crucial for establishing a sense of identity and place in the world. Young people have the right to an education that effectively prepares them for the present and the future, that is high-quality, affordable, safe and supportive and meets their individual and diverse needs. Education encompasses life-long learning that supports young people to develop socially, intellectually, physically and emotionally, as well as to engage in the labour market.

Across NSW there are over 3,000 government (public) and non-government (Independent and Catholic systemic) schools in NSW, supporting over 1.1 million primary and secondary school students.⁵ Of these, there are over 540,000 young people aged 12–17,⁶ with around 507,000 (as at 2015) positively participating in education.⁷

However, some young people are neither engaged in education or training. The school retention rate for NSW is one of the lowest across Australia, and although young people are increasingly at school, some are disengaging and others are not achieving.⁸ Over 21% are still not attaining a Year 12 qualification, and 25% are neither engaged in education nor employment Australia wide.⁹ Other research estimates that 20% of young people are not attending school, and a further 20% do not feel they belong in their school.¹⁰ Australian rates of youth participation in education are below those of many other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.¹¹

Inequalities in educational outcomes persist in NSW. Young people from low SES, Aboriginal or from rural backgrounds as well as young people with disabilities continue to be at a disadvantage in our education system.¹²

Education systems in NSW need to address the barriers that prevent some young people from education and schooling that meets their needs. In addition, there should be a particular focus on ensuring outcomes for those experiencing disadvantage and those disengaging from traditional delivery methods.

STUDENT SUPPORT OFFICERS

There is a significant body of research that shows links between a school's emphasis on wellbeing and positive mental health and social outcomes for its students.¹³ In NSW, the *Supported Students, Successful Schools* program provides schools with services such as psychologists, school counsellors and Student Support Officers (SSO). *Supported Students, Successful Schools* is flexible funding for wellbeing services, and of 3,000 public schools only 381 have access to funding. From 2018–2020 funding was allocated to the Student Wellbeing Support Program, a three-year program of \$7,000 annually to assist schools to fund the employment of a student wellbeing support officer.

Youth Action's consultation with members showed that the wellbeing programs in schools can be inconsistent, with:

- School counsellor positions being unfilled for long periods of time.
- Process issues with access to school counsellors, such as long wait lists or high rates of non-attendance at counsellor sessions.
- Stigma associated with being called out in the middle of class to see a counsellor.
- A lack of specialised psychologist capacity once issues progress past what can be handled by a school counsellor.
- Wellbeing funding being allocated towards targeted learning support in classrooms.
- A resistance to working with outside agencies who can support student wellbeing.

As part of the *Supported Students, Successful Schools* program, schools in NSW have the discretion to employ SSOs. The initiative aimed to provide support to secondary students, with a particular focus on reaching and engaging more vulnerable students to enhance protective factors such as supporting positive relationships, building resilience as well as providing

support with issues such as stress, mental health, disengagement and bullying.¹⁴

An independent review of SSOs found that there is overwhelming support for the SSO initiative from principals, school staff, SSOs, students and external organisations.¹⁵ The results found that:

- Almost two-thirds of students in participating schools reported having sought the help of the SSO.
- 80% of students said the SSO had made their school a safer place.
- 88% of principals said it had reduced bullying, including cyberbullying, 91% said it improved student behaviour, and 77% said it had improved academic performance.¹⁶

The review also found that SSOs complement (rather than duplicate) the existing range of wellbeing provisions in the schools and link the school with agencies and communities. Other research has found resistance and negative experiences amongst students to approaching school counsellors for support.¹⁷ It is essential to ensure young people reach out for help when they need it, and the review of SSOs demonstrate they bridge a gap between no support and crisis intervention.

Students saw their SSO neither as a teacher nor as a counsellor, but as something in between. This increased willingness to seek support and allowed wellbeing programs to take a more preventative approach.¹⁸

Since the end of the pilot period, the Department of Education has provided \$51 million for wellbeing, the equivalent of 200 SSOs. However, the Department no longer provides centralised support, training and coordination of SSOs. As a decentralised group, this leaves these positions subject to isolation, high stress and turn-over, all of which compromise the effectiveness and outcomes of the program, a serious threat considering its proven success.

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- Provide committed funding and an increase in funding for Student Support Officers across NSW, with changes to the funding model to allow for more equitable access for schools, particularly in areas of high need and for regional, rural and remote areas.

SUSPENSION

School should also be a safe and happy place for students, and they should only be excluded from this learning environment as a last resort. Suspension is a tool used by schools to manage behaviour but it is exclusionary, ineffective and significantly disrupts the learning of a young person. It can have significant and negative impacts on young people. Suspension disproportionately disrupts the education of students with cognitive/learning impairments, students with a child protection/OOHC history, and Aboriginal students.¹⁹ While the use of short suspensions decreased by 2.5% between 2013 and 2015, there has been no significant change in long suspensions or in the number of students receiving short and/or long suspensions.²⁰

One key driver for student disengagement is school disciplinary practices such as suspension.²¹ Young people often present with challenging behaviours, and while it is increasingly understood that they are a symptom of emotional or behavioural disorders and experience, suspension is still commonly used to manage such manifesting behaviours in a school environment.

Generally, suspension is understood to have two core purposes – to remove threats to the safety and wellbeing of the school community and to punish the offender. The end result is supposed to be better behavior or a reversal of a trend. Normally a 'zero tolerance' policy towards disruptive behavior warranting suspension is intended to have positive and

immediate effects, as well as act as a deterrent. Yet it is clear that the negative impact on students outweighs any benefits from this policy.

As stated by Department of Education Employment and Work Relations (DEEWR): 'Suspension is an indication that something has gone grievously wrong. It is a process of exclusion directly at odds with the philosophy of inclusion which appears consistently in national and Departmental statements of policy and intent.'²² The NSW Ombudsman has most recently confirmed that 'there is no research evidence that the use of suspensions reduces disruptive classroom behaviour, and the research indicates that it can have detrimental consequences, including increased recurrence of the problem behaviour, lower scores in academic achievement, lower school retention rates, increased likelihood of involvement with the youth justice system, and poor long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.'²³

Presently, students can be issued with a short suspension of up to and including four days, or a long suspension, up to and including 20 days at the discretion of their school principal.²⁴ Since 2005, suspensions have been on the rise in NSW.

Suspension has been proven to be ineffective in tackling problematic behaviour in students. For example, 73% of students have said that suspensions 'did little' or 'did not help at all' to solve the problem that led to their suspension.²⁵ Instead, it lowers student engagement, jeopardises relationships and academic performance and is proven to increase the likelihood of students being incarcerated later in life – a trend known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

School suspension disproportionately affects Indigenous students, students from rural areas, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students with disabilities. In 2015 alone, 47,622 short suspensions and 17,640 long suspensions were issued.²⁶ Of the long suspensions, 24% were for

Aboriginal students, despite only constituting 7% of enrolments.²⁷ Suspensions are unlikely to be isolated instances, so students are often suspended multiple times. The average long suspension is 11.5 days, meaning students have their learning significantly disrupted.²⁸ Data after 2015 for NSW is not available.

The NSW Ombudsman found that to 'identify and develop appropriately targeted and intensive individualised supports requires skills that would be uncommon among many school staff.' The NSW Ombudsman also found that schools need 'assistance that both: a) delivers appropriate expertise, and b) provides strategies that are practical for the school environment.'²⁹

Suspension should only be used when the behaviour of a student puts other students or faculty members at risk of harm. While there are plenty of examples of good practice, the fact that Aboriginal young people, young people with a history of trauma and young people with disability are overrepresented in suspension practices demonstrates that practice and policy can be improved. In place of suspensions, schools should implement alternative disciplinary practices that prioritise inclusion for students who are at risk. A suspension of a student should then, as a tool of last resort, be used as a mechanism to give support to the student.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Require NSW schools to publish data on their school exclusion statistics and make their disciplinary policies publicly available.
- Require NSW schools to review suspension cases on a regular basis to ensure schools are using suspension as a safeguard and last resort.
- Form an independent body with expertise in both a school context and in working with young people, to review school suspensions to ensure all young people have access to supportive and quality education.

- As recommend by the NSW Ombudsman, require NSW schools to systematically identify the students who require individualised intervention and support, and track practice, progress, and outcomes in relation to these students, including mechanisms for identifying those who require escalation to additional support.³⁰

DISABILITY IN SCHOOLS

Nearly 12% of NSW students have disability, and 75% of these students attend mainstreams schools and are placed in regular classrooms.³¹ Despite legislation and programs such as the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, the *Disability Education Standards 2005 and Every Student, Every School*, people with a disability are less likely to complete Year 12 than their peers without disability.³² This is largely because the current system does not meet the needs of students with disability or supply the resources to encourage their full participation in the school experience.

Youth Action supports the review of current student training regarding inclusive classrooms. The *Every Student, Every School* initiative should be also be reviewed at a state-wide level to determine its effectiveness. It is also vital that young people should be consulted and involved in these reviews.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Implement a consistent definition of disability in schools and appropriate funding for students with a disability.
- Improve inclusive training for teachers and staff coupled with appropriate policies and frameworks to ensure greater outcomes.

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