



Legislative Assembly for the ACT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY  
SERVICES AND SOCIAL EQUITY

**“No longer just a number”**  
**Youth services provided at the**  
**Adolescent Day Unit**

March 2004

**REPORT 5**



## **Committee membership**

Mr John Hargreaves MLA (Chair)

Ms Roslyn Dundas MLA (Deputy Chair)

Mrs Cross MLA

Mr Cornwell MLA

Secretary: Ms Jane Carmody

Administration: Mrs Judy Moutia

## **Resolution of appointment**

To examine matters related to municipal, family and youth services, services for older persons, housing, poverty, children at risk and multicultural and indigenous affairs.<sup>1</sup>

## **Terms of reference**

To inquire into and report on the youth services provided at the Adolescent Day Unit and any other related matter.

*Note to front cover:*

“No longer just a number” is an extract from the following statement:

I’d argue that one of the fundamental reasons why the ADU does work well is due to its size. It is one of the needs that the young people feel is missing from the system. They are no longer just a number; it is more like a family—and there are the social skills that they are lacking in the education system to get that. I’d be strongly advocating to have it replicated somewhere else.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Legislative Assembly for the ACT, *Minutes of Proceedings, No 2, Fifth Assembly*, p 12

<sup>2</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, pp 9-10



## Preface

The Committee, in adopting an inquiry into the services provided at the Adolescent Day Unit (ADU), considered a number of issues and facets associated with the service.

The first was for the Committee to acquaint itself with the scale of the problem of the young people at risk, both socially and educationally, who were accessing these services. The Committee, in doing this, determined that there was a significant difference between the clientele of the ADU and the Adolescent Day Program (ADP) located at Dairy Flat.

This difference is essentially that the clientele at the ADU have mild to moderate psychosocial difficulties and have a reasonably good chance of reintegrating into mainstream schooling.

The Committee understands that the clients of the ADP on the other hand have significant behavioural difficulties and for whom a return to mainstream schooling is less likely to be an option.

The second issue addressed by the Committee was to examine the underlying philosophies espoused by the proponents of integrating the ADU into a mainstream schooling setting and those who proposed leaving the ADU in a community setting, not far from an educational institution but not part of it.

Essentially, the arguments centred on a conflict of primacy of philosophy.

One side argued that primacy should be on an educational setting with a psychosocial overlay and the other side argued that what works was a service based on psychosocial solutions with an educational overlay.

The Committee concluded that the prime philosophy should be to address the psychosocial issues first and then concentrate on educational achievement to facilitate reintegration into mainstream schooling.

In essence, we should create an atmosphere conducive to the “want to learn” and then provide the educational options.

The clients at the ADU, one of whom said that she would suffer educationally if the ADU was located in and was part of a mainstream school, shared this view.

The consistent view that the ADU was providing above average services to a small group of young people also led the Committee to conclude that the unit should remain in a community setting and continue its current service philosophy, free of the threat of regular service reassessments.

The Committee considered whether the unit was properly placed within Youth Services rather than the Schools Section of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services and concluded that the current arrangements were working. Further, the relationships between the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and other key community services were healthy and productive.

Evidence supporting these views is contained in the body of the report.

John Hargreaves MLA  
Chair  
25 March 2004

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## **Summary of recommendations**

### **RECOMMENDATION 1**

**3.25. The Committee recommends that the Government:**

- **continue to support the Adolescent Day Unit (ADU) as a discreet program;**
- **commit to the ADU remaining under the management of the Youth Services section of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services; and**
- **investigate whether a similar program to the ADU ought to be established on the north side of Canberra.**

# 1. Introduction

1.1. Following the release of the 'Report of a review of the provision of alternative settings in the ACT Government Education System' (the Conway Report) and the Committee's visit to the Adolescent Day Unit (ADU) in December 2003, the Committee resolved to inquire into and report on the youth services provided at the ADU.

## Conduct of inquiry

1.2. The Committee was of the view that in light of the numerous reviews concerning alternative education that have been undertaken in the last 3-5 years, it was not necessary to engage in extensive community consultation for this inquiry. Accordingly, the Committee did not advertise the inquiry or seek submissions.

1.3. The Committee heard evidence from non-government witnesses with experience in the alternative education sector and the Minister for Education, Youth and Family Services in February 2004.

1.4. In addition, as noted above, the Committee visited the ADU and spoke with the staff and young people who were there.

1.5. The Committee would like to thank those people who participated in this inquiry and particularly notes the contribution the young people at the ADU made to this inquiry. Committee Members were very impressed by the articulate, thoughtful and engaging way these young people explained what the ADU offered them and what they hoped would happen in the future.

## Scope of inquiry

1.6. This inquiry stems from the Committee's resolution of appointment to inquire into, among other things, youth services and children at risk. In this regard, the Committee felt it was appropriate to inquire into the ADU as an organisation that is providing youth services to a group of young people who are at risk, both socially and educationally.

1.7. While young people referred to the ADU are clearly recognised as being at risk of not completing their formal school education, the Committee also recognised that these are young people who are at risk socially in terms of poor psychosocial skills and a consequent lack of capacity to engage successfully with the wider community. It is this 'social' risk and the role the ADU plays in addressing it that was of particular interest to the Committee.

1.8. The Committee understands that it is not possible to look at the ADU in isolation from the rest of the alternative education sector in the ACT. In the course of this inquiry the Committee has reviewed a number of the findings from previous reviews/inquiries concerning alternative education that were relevant to the ADU.

## 2. The Adolescent Day Unit

2.1. The Adolescent Day Unit (ADU) is an alternative education program located in Erindale and administered by the Youth Services section of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services. Its target group and aims are described below:

The Adolescent Day Unit provides a service to students between the age of 12 and 15 who have emotional or behavioural difficulties that prevent their attendance at school. The aim of the program is to then integrate [the] student back into the mainstream school system or prepare them for work programs.

The aims of the unit are to:

- coordinate an assessment of the underlying reasons for a student's behavioural difficulties if such an assessment is required;
- to develop in students an ability to manage their difficult and challenging behaviours;
- to enable students to develop social skills and to improve their abilities to relate to peers, family members and teachers;
- to improve self esteem;
- to assist students to integrate into a school or alternative activity.<sup>3</sup>

2.2. The ADU provides a community-based partial withdrawal program. This involves students being withdrawn from mainstream schools on a temporary basis to a community setting, with the aim of reintegrating them back into mainstream schools. Referrals for the ADU come mostly from within the ACT public education system.<sup>4</sup> A multi agency intake panel prioritises these referrals.

2.3. Young people who are accepted into the program generally stay for a 20 week period followed by a “re-integration” period back into their “home” school for a further 10 weeks.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Education, Youth and Family Services website  
<http://www.decs.act.gov.au/services/AlternPgms.htm#ADU> accessed 10/3/04

<sup>4</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, p 32

2.4. From its visit to the ADU the Committee is also aware that some of the young people accessing the program may not have been at school for some time. i.e., there isn't a referral from a "home" school or an obvious organisation to liaise with in terms of finding a placement after the program. For these young people integration into a mainstream school may not be appropriate and other options, such as a long-term alternative education program or vocational training, may be pursued.

2.5. The Committee was advised that a waiting list is not kept for the ADU but that it was estimated that they receive about 50 referrals a year and are only contracted to provide 20 places. Youth Services tries to assist those who can't get a place either through individual support, support for the school or suggestions for other alternative education placements.<sup>5</sup>

## The philosophy and approach of the ADU

2.6. The focus of the ADU is on providing psychosocial support utilising a strengths based approach. This focus and approach stems from the program's conception of the underlying reasons for these young people's disengagement with mainstream education.

Essentially, young people present at the ADU and struggle to maintain their placements at schools not because of their literacy and numeracy levels...but because of the poor social skills, plus the psychosocial type stuff that present and the mild mental health issues. They are the real issues that are stopping their development within a mainstream school.<sup>6</sup>

2.7. Intensive, client focussed support is seen as a critical aspect of the ADU and it is purposely a relatively small program to allow individual support. At any one time there are only eight young people participating in the program on site. The staff student ratio is one staff for every two students (or four staff and eight students at any one time).<sup>7</sup>

2.8. The building that houses the ADU is a cottage and this lends itself to the program having a relaxed, informal and safe atmosphere. This atmosphere, combined with the approach by staff, results in the young people wanting to be there and engaging with the program. Their willingness to be there, actively participate and the value they saw in the program were readily apparent to the Committee when it visited the ADU.

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<sup>5</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, pp 30-31

<sup>6</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, pp 3-4

<sup>7</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, p 31

## Previous reviews of the ADU and alternative education in the ACT

2.9. Like many of the issues perceived as “difficult” which relate to young people, alternative education has been subject to a large number of reviews and inquiries over the past five years.

2.10. Dr RNF Conway, Director of the Centre for Special Education and Disability Studies at the University of Newcastle, conducted the most recent review – ‘Report of a review of the provision of alternative settings in the ACT Government Education System’ (the Conway Report) – for the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services. The review was conducted in late 2002, although the report was not finalised and released until June 2003. Dr Conway notes in his report that

As a result, some of the considerations have begun being addressed and some comments on services made in late 2002 may no longer reflect current practices. This reflects the dynamic nature of providing services to students with behaviour problems and is strongly supported.<sup>8</sup>

2.11. In relation to the ADU the Conway report recommended that the Government

Consider replacing the current ADP [Adolescent Day Program] and ADU programs by a new program that effectively serves the secondary school community. The ADU could be taken back into the School Education section of the department along with any funding provided by Youth and Family Services. The programs could be replaced by a Year 7/8 program across two settings (one on the northside and one southside) with at least four classes across the program. The program would address the needs of disengaged students but with a focus on clear academic and community education tasks that may lead either to reintegration into home or host schools or a longer term placement leading to a senior secondary program. The program in each location could be under the management of a secondary school for administrative purposes. A Level 2 position teaching within the program could provide professional leadership across the two sites.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Conway, R., (2003), ‘Report of a review of the provision of alternative settings in the ACT Government Education System’, <http://www.decs.act.gov.au/publicat/pdf/conway.pdf>, p 8

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p 49

2.12. The Committee notes that earlier reviews and papers into alternative education include:

- Report of the inquiry into adolescents and young adults at risk of not achieving satisfactory education and training outcomes, Standing Committee on Education, Community Services and Recreation (conducted from February 1999 – July 2001)
- Analysis of the Adolescent Day Unit, unpublished paper ACT Office of Youth (2001)
- Review of the Operations of the Adolescent Day Unit (ADU) and Youth Connection, Department of Education and Community Services (2001)
- Catering for Diversity: Complementing Mainstream Education in the New Millennium', unpublished paper ACT Office of Youth (2000)

2.13. The Committee notes that these earlier analyses contain starkly diverse findings regarding the efficacy and appropriateness of the ADU. In the Committee's view, a reasonable explanation for this diversity could be differences in the underlying approaches and beliefs *of the reviewers* to what works with young people at risk.

2.14. In relation to the various reviews that have looked at the ADU the Committee would like to note that while the evaluation of services is important, being under *constant* review (or having insufficient time to implement recommendations before being reviewed again) is detrimental to any organisation.

### 3. Conclusions – “Everyone agrees that what is going on there is really good.”

3.1. All the witnesses before the Committee, including the Government, confirmed that the ADU provides important and unique services. As the Minister succinctly stated in her evidence “Everyone agrees that what is going on there is really good.”<sup>10</sup>

3.2. In particular, the Committee notes that for 2002-2003 the ADU met or exceeded its performance targets. For example:

- 98% of personal goals set by ADU students were achieved against a target of 80%;
- 100% of students had their individual work programs completed within two weeks of admission against a target of 95%; and
- there was a 37.6% reduction in the cost per student.<sup>11</sup>

3.3. The Minister advised the Committee that neither the Government nor the Department had adopted the Conway report in any way.<sup>12</sup>

3.4. The Minister outlined that the approach of the Government is to enhance the services offered at the ADU and that they are “not trying to change something that is working by any means or taking away the psychosocial focus of the program.”<sup>13</sup>

3.5. In relation to any proposed enhancements the Committee draws the following issues to the Assembly and the Government’s attention.

#### Maintaining the ADU as a distinct program

3.6. The Committee believes that it is important for there to be a range of programs on offer that recognise the differing needs of young people who may need to access alternative education.

3.7. The Committee is therefore of the view that the ADU should not be merged or amalgamated with other alternative education programs.

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<sup>10</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, p 23

<sup>11</sup> Department of Education, Youth and Family Services, (2003), *2002-2003 Annual Report*, ACT, p 147

<sup>12</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, p 16

<sup>13</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, p 17 & 21

3.8. From its earlier inquiry into the rights, interests and well-being of children and young people the Committee has observed that services are more likely to be focused at the moderate to severe end of the spectrum – regardless of what the issue is i.e., there is a tendency when there are limited resources to put those resources towards dealing with where the ‘problem’ is most pronounced within the system.

3.9. With this in mind the Committee believes that the sorts of young people who access the ADU are potentially at great risk of losing access to appropriate services when programs are amalgamated.

3.10. The Committee acknowledges that maintaining a wide range of alternative education programs might be considered contrary to the philosophy of “inclusivity” in education. On the issue of inclusivity, the Committee notes the following:

It sounds innovative. It sounds democratic. But this is not a perfect world. Screws drop out; things go wrong; promises are not fulfilled. Budgets are cut, and good intentions end up as empty promises. The Inclusion Movement is an innovative and exciting idea to be explored; it should not be a cult to be followed.<sup>14</sup>

## Keeping the ADU within Youth Services

3.11. A feature of the Conway report appears to be a strong belief that alternative education programs should only be administered by the education part of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services.

As discussed throughout this review, there is considerable concern that school-aged programs such as ADU and YC [Youth Connection] are provided through Youth Services and this either duplicates services School Education provides through Student Support Services or removes management of educational services from School Education, creating unnecessary difficulties.<sup>15</sup>

3.12. The Committee rejects the assertion that Youth Services do not have a proper role to play in managing these programs.

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<sup>14</sup> Long, N., & Morse, W., (1996), *Conflict in the Classroom: The Education of At-Risk and Troubled Students*, Pro-ed, Austin Texas, p 119 cited in Long, R., & Carmichael, T., (2000) ‘Catering for Diversity: Complementing Mainstream Education in the New Millennium’, Unpublished paper ACT Office of Youth.

<sup>15</sup> Conway, R., (2003), ‘Report of a review of the provision of alternative settings in the ACT Government Education System’, <http://www.decs.act.gov.au/publicat/pdf/conway.pdf>, p 54

3.13. The Committee is of the view that the issue of who administers the program does matter, and in fact goes to the core of what the ADU is about in terms of its approach to young people at risk.

3.14. The Committee understands that the ADU's approach is based on a wealth of studies, which show that for young people at risk, if the first priority is building a relationship with them and then addressing their wider needs, educational outcomes will follow.

3.15. In a review of the ADU in 2001 this approach was categorised thus:

It is important to focus on the fact that whilst ADU is a school the program is not school-like, it is not focussed on a humanist/behaviourist discourse and does not rely upon the regulation of rewards and outcomes like a school does. It is a relationally-based and holistic program which has the psychosocial concerns of the young people as its organising priority...What is important here to the success of the program is the fact that a young person will work and succeed in a task not because the content suits them but because the relationship they have established with a worker is enjoyable and educative.<sup>16</sup>

3.16. The Committee believes that this approach is consistent with the understood ethos of Youth Services and that it does not make sense to locate programs together in the absence of shared philosophies and approaches. In the Committee's view to do so risks jeopardising the efficacy of the programs.

3.17. The Committee agrees with the following views expressed by the Youth Coalition of the ACT:

In my mind, if something isn't broke you don't need to go and fix it. I think that it [the ADU] does have a good setting in youth services in terms of the links that it is able to make with the rest of the youth sector and the rest of the community. I think it is well placed there.<sup>17</sup>

3.18. The Committee is firmly of the view that the ADU should remain under the management of Youth Services. Fostering communication across the relevant areas in the Department would help to ensure that the best interests of young people continue to be the primary consideration.

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<sup>16</sup> Long, R., (2001), 'Analysis of the Adolescent Day Unit', unpublished paper, ACT Office of Youth, p 2

<sup>17</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, p 3

## Do we need another ADU?

3.19. It is clear to the Committee that unless the mainstream school system changes dramatically there will always be a place for a program like the ADU within the range of alternative education options in the ACT.

3.20. It is also clear that there will be an increasing need for alternative education more generally within the ACT.<sup>18</sup>

3.21. The Committee has considered whether or not there is a need for the ADU to be replicated elsewhere in the ACT, for example on the north side.

3.22. The Youth Coalition of the ACT indicated that they would like to see an expansion of services rather than any reduction in the current level and range of services.<sup>19</sup> They further believe that underpinning any expansion there should be an evaluation of unmet need across the entire alternative education sector prior to replicating the ADU program elsewhere in the ACT. i.e., there needs to be a robust analysis of who is missing out on accessing alternative programs and then the delivery of additional resources to those programs which could best meet their needs, whether they be government or community based.<sup>20</sup>

3.23. The Committee believes that a proper evaluation of unmet need across the alternative education sector, as distinct from a review of services, would be an extremely useful exercise.

3.24. In the interim, the Committee is of the view that the “waiting” list for the ADU and the fact that one service, located in the south, must service the whole of the ACT, warrants an investigation as to whether a second program like the ADU should be established on the north side. The Committee notes that a couple of the obvious benefits to the establishment of a similar program on the north side would be a reduction in transport times for both young people and workers, as well as the ability to utilise relatively *local* community agencies and facilities.

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, p 24; see also *Youth Coalition of the ACT Submission to the ACT Budget 2003-04*, p 62, which states that “The current demands on alternative education services and the need to increase points of access for young people warrants consideration by the ACT Government to increasing the capacity and range of options currently available.”

<sup>19</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, p 2 & p 6

<sup>20</sup> Transcript of Evidence, 18/2/04, pp 12-14

### **Recommendation 1**

**3.25. The Committee recommends that the Government:**

- **continue to support the Adolescent Day Unit (ADU) as a discreet program;**
- **commit to the ADU remaining under the management of the Youth Services section of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services; and**
- **investigate whether a similar program to the ADU ought to be established on the north side of Canberra.**

John Hargreaves MLA  
Chair  
25 March 2004



## Appendix 1 – Witnesses at public hearings

### **18 February 2004**

#### For the Youth Coalition of the ACT

Dr Susan Pellegrino – Policy and Project Officer

#### For the Ted Noffs Foundation

Mr Jason Woods – Education Manager

#### For the ACT Government

Ms Katy Gallagher MLA – Minister for Education, Youth and Family Services

Mr Craig Curry – Executive Director, School Education, Department of Education, Youth and Family Services

Ms Julie McKinnon – Executive Director, Children's, Youth and Family Services, Department of Education, Youth and Family Services

Mr Frank Duggan – Director, Youth Services, Department of Education, Youth and Family Services