



‘GREAT EXPECTATIONS’

Submission to the *Inquiry into the Needs of
ACT Students with a Disability*

February 2010

www.youthcoalition.net

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. The Youth Coalition of the ACT celebrates Indigenous cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

Submission to the *Inquiry into the Needs of ACT Students with a Disability*
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February 2010

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1. Introduction

Section 1 of this submission provides contextual information about the Youth Coalition of the ACT, the process of development and format of this submission; and key definitions used in the submission.

1.1 Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition of the ACT is the peak youth affairs body in the ACT. Comprised of 90 members, programs, and individuals the Youth Coalition is responsible for representing and promoting the interests and wellbeing of people aged between 12 and 25 years and those who work with them.

The Youth Coalition is represented on many ACT Government advisory structures and provides advice to the ACT Government on youth issues as well as providing information to youth services about policy and program matters.

A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions for young people and youth services. The Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT.

1.2 Process of Development and Format of this Submission

The Youth Coalition welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Inquiry into the Needs of ACT Students with a Disability* (the Inquiry). We would like to congratulate the ACT Government on its commitment to progressing the interests of students with a disability in the ACT.

This submission is based on the following:

- The priority areas highlighted in the *Youth Coalition Strategic Plan 2007-10*;
- The policy positions outlined in the *Youth Coalition Policy Platform*;
- The views of participants of the Youth Coalition's Biennial Policy Forum;
- The issues raised at consultations on the 2010/11 ACT Government Budget;
- The issues raised at consultation on the 2009 – 2014 Young People's Plan;
- Previous Youth Coalition submissions to the ACT Government;
- One-on-one consultations with member services and organisations; and,
- Current and topical research on youth affairs.

This submission has been divided into 6 sections, which include the following:

1. Introduction (this section)
2. Summary of Recommendations
3. Background and Context
4. Key Principles, Issues and Priorities
5. Conclusion
6. References

This submission represents an opportunity for the Youth Coalition and stakeholders to identify and advise ACT Government of emerging issues, areas in need of additional resources and collaboratively develop social policy in the ACT.

1.3 Key Definitions in this Submission

As the terms of reference for the Inquiry have not provided a definition for 'disability', this submission will refer to the definition provided within the Commonwealth *Disability Standards for Education 2005*:

disability, in relation to a person, means:

- (a) total or partial loss of the person's bodily or mental functions; or
- (b) total or partial loss of a part of the body; or
- (c) the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness; or
- (d) the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing disease or illness; or
- (e) the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person's body; or
- (f) a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction; or
- (g) a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behaviour;

and includes a disability that:

- (h) presently exists; or
- (i) previously existed but no longer exists; or
- (j) may exist in the future; or
- (k) is imputed to a person.¹

The education needs of young people with mental health and/or alcohol and other drug issues have not been explored specifically within the submission, although many of the issues raised within the submission are relevant. Due to the potential impact of mental health and/or alcohol and other drug issues on young people's access to education, the Standing Committee is urged to investigate these areas further.

2. Summary of Recommendations

Section 2 provides a summary of the recommendations this submission makes to the Inquiry. It is vital that these recommendations be referred to in the context of the broader submission. (The order in which recommendations appear is not indicative of priority.).

Recommendation 1

That ACT Government education policy and practice is aligned with the rights articulated in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *ACT Human Rights Act*. This obligation should extend to educational entities receiving funding from the ACT Government.

Recommendation 2

That the ACT Government map the actions, priorities and strategies of ACT Government strategic documents, and review recommendations relevant to young people with a disability. Mapping should include relevant timelines for implementation, evaluation and reporting mechanisms, and opportunities where synergies exist.

That the ACT Government establish a group made up of key stakeholders (including young people with a disability) to oversee the implementation of the actions mapped. This group should hold sufficient autonomy and authority to seek information as required and assist in addressing blockages to implementation through collaboration and ongoing conversations with relevant agencies.

That the ACT Government ensure that all future strategic planning documents have embedded evaluation mechanisms, with a commitment to annual reporting (at a minimum).

Recommendation 3

That the ACT Government provide resources to ensure that young people with a disability are supported to participate in the development of relevant policy and practices, and that resulting documents report how the input of young people has been considered and included/not included.

Recommendation 4

That the ACT Government ensure that consultation with children and young people with a disability is a key part of the development of the ACT Government's response to the Special Education Review (planned for development and implementation December 2009 – December 2010)²

Recommendation 5

That an independent body (for example the ACT Human Rights Commission) undertake an audit of planning and programming for young people with a disability with reference to the *ACT Curriculum Framework (2009)* and the *Commonwealth Disability Standards for Education (2005)*.

That the ACT Government develop and implement additional accountability mechanisms to 'measure'/audit school's inclusiveness with key stakeholders (for example through utilising the *Commonwealth Disability Standards for Education (2005)*).

That the ACT Government identify, document and make publicly available, current good practice in the education of young people with a disability. Consideration should be given to assisting other schools to implement successful programs, where appropriate, through support and resourcing (ie mentoring, funding, teacher assistant support).

Evaluation mechanisms should be formulated prior to program implementation to enable outcomes to be monitored and documented. If programs prove successful funding should be provided for their continuation (without the need to continually apply for one off funding).

That the ACT Government enter dialogue with the Commonwealth to commit resources to undertake research into education and curriculum development for young people with a disability.

Recommendation 6

That the ACT Government make a commitment to enabling young people in alternate education settings to have access to a broad curriculum (as per the *ACT Curriculum Framework*) in line with that of their counterparts in mainstream schools.

Recommendation 7

That the ACT Government document current demand on alternative education services by young people with a disability, with a view to the provision of additional resourcing to increase capacity as required (see also Section 4.10 raising the school leaving age.).

Recommendation 8

That the ACT Government broaden the eligibility criteria for in-school support to ensure that young people who require assistance are able to receive it. Funding for the provision of support must increase accordingly.

That the ACT Government consider funding individual support packages for education which 'follow' the child/young person, regardless of the education program with which they are engaged.

Recommendation 9

That the ACT Government ensure that evidence-based education for 'social safety' training, and relationships and sexuality education for young people with a disability is a priority within school settings (including alternative education services). Existing evidence-based teaching and learning resources must be promoted and utilised and others adapted based on the learning and communication needs of young people with a disability.

This must be supported a policy commitment and appropriate resourcing.

That the ACT Government monitor the design, delivery and evaluation of consistent, age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate comprehensive sexuality and relationships education and sexual health promotion curriculum for all children and young people with disabilities in the ACT, based on relevant essential learning achievements of the *ACT Curriculum Framework Every Chance to Learn (2009)*.³

Recommendation 10

That an independent audit be undertaken of Independent Learning Plans (ILPs) with particular attention to the priority given to the development of literacy and numeracy skills.

Recommendation 11

That the ACT Government advocate for a review of the current teacher training course at tertiary level, with a view to assessing course adequacy in equipping teachers to plan and deliver educational programmes for children and young people with a disability. The review should also examine the need for the development and introduction of a mandatory component on disability.

The review should be undertaken in partnership with key stakeholders, including children and young people with a disability.

Recommendation 12

That the ACT Government commit to prioritising professional development for school staff in the area of disability (to be developed in consultation with young people with a disability).

That the ACT Government give consideration the development of a mandatory and extensive professional development program for education professionals in the area of young people with a disability and education (to be developed in consultation with young people with a disability).

That the ACT Government consult with school staff (and other key stakeholders) regarding the need for a professional network to support educators working with young people with a disability (and provide funding if deemed appropriate). Such a network could include the identification of school staff with appropriate expertise and experience and examples of good practice as 'mentors'.

Recommendation 13

ACT Government consider providing funding to an established relevant research body to provide a specific focus on researching and developing best practice in the education of young people with a disability.

This should be overseen by a Steering Committee of key stakeholders from across the community, including young people with a disability, with resources to enable the provision of training to teaching staff (and other professionals) and to engage young people with a disability in its work (for example, in a number of roles – in a consultative role, co-trainer role).

Recommendation 14

That the ACT Government provide resources to undertake research into key transitions for young people with a disability, which involves engaging young people with a disability to record and learn from their experience of transitions.

That the ACT Government commit to developing, funding and implementing transition services in consultation with young people with a disability, with clear evaluation mechanisms and specific indicators and monitoring of the transitions and pathway outcomes. This should include consulting with young people about how they would like to be supported (ie the employment of specific transition officers, to assist in the early planning and support of young people with a disability in key transitions during their educational career, including the transition from school to post-school options.).

Recommendation 15

That the ACT Government measure current and unmet demand (and future demand) and fund successful alternative education services both within government and the community sector as required.

Additional funding is required to develop, fund and run diverse education options for young people who will be kept in formal education. It is also important to research best practice and 'grow' partnerships with youth and community services, where appropriate, to deliver these programs/services in schools where appropriate.

Recommendation 16

That an independent evaluation of government funded post-school options for young people with a disability be undertaken, with a view to building the range and quality of post-school options. This should include active consultation with young people with a disability in regard to current options and future aspirations.

This should be complemented by mapping of services and level of demand to better understand current and future need, and where gaps in service exist.

Recommendation 17

That the ACT Government resource community service providers of post-school programs for young people with a disability to provide transport to and from their services.

3. Background and Context

Section 3 of this submission seeks to provide background and contextual information relating to the Inquiry.

3.1 Responding to the Inquiry

“Education determines more than a child's economic future – it is also critical to a child's social and emotional development, to establishing a sense of identity and sense of place in the world. Education represents an important opportunity to imagine and create an alternate future for individuals and unfortunately many young people with disabilities appear to be missing out...the education system acts as a barrier to greater achievement and independence...”⁴

The Youth Coalition welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs' *Inquiry into the needs of ACT students with a disability* (the Inquiry). The submission addresses areas of concern raised through consultations with key stakeholders in response to the Terms of Reference set out by the Committee. Comments directly related to the final report of the *Review of Special Education in the ACT* have not been included in the submission as consultations occurred prior to its release.

The educational needs of young people with a disability are not dissimilar to those of their counterparts – to have fun, enjoy friendships, to be engaged positively with school staff and subject matter, to be inspired and challenged and supported, to be cared about, to be included, to be listened to, to feel safe, and to be equipped to participate fully in community life.⁵

The Youth Coalition commends the steps taken by the ACT Government in instigating the *Special Education Review* (the Review), with a view to ensuring...*“equity for every student in the ACT...ensuring that every student gets an education that challenges them, meeting both their abilities and their needs.”⁶*

Both the Review and current Inquiry are positive and proactive steps in raising the profile of students with a disability within the community, and in understanding and addressing the educational needs of students with a disability in the ACT.

3.2 Legal and Policy Context

“That States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education.”⁷

Access to education is a right, not a privilege. Education systems need to provide inclusive settings with opportunities for young people to learn and develop in ways that recognise and respond to their diverse strengths, backgrounds, learning styles and individual needs. There is a firm policy and legal context for the development and provision of education services for students with a disability on a basis equitable to that of other students. This is provided by numerous legislation and policy documents, including:

Education Act 2004 (ACT)
Discrimination ACT 1991 (ACT)
Disability Discrimination ACT 1992 (Commonwealth)
Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Commonwealth)

Human Rights Act 2004 (ACT)

Furthermore, the Australian Government's commitment to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2008 presents an important opportunity to re-examine our current policy and practice. In addition, the Inquiry is timely, in light of the inclusion this year within the *Human Rights Act* of the provision requiring 'public authorities' to act consistently with the rights articulated within the Act.

Recommendation 1

That ACT Government education policy and practice is aligned with the rights articulated in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *ACT Human Rights Act*. This obligation should extend to educational entities receiving funding from the ACT Government.

The Commonwealth *Disability Standards for Education 2005* provide guidance to how these services should be developed and identifies key issues which need to be considered for the provision of education services which are inclusive and accessible. The *Education Act 2004* states that education should aim to develop every child's potential. There are a number of factors that need to be present if we are to achieve this, some of which will be explored further in this submission.

The ACT Government has developed a number of policy and strategic documents, referred to throughout this submission, which provide a solid, even optimistic base for good practice in the development and delivery of educational services to young people with a disability. However, the information received through both consultations and the literature presents the lived experiences of many young people with a disability as significantly different to the aspirations of ACT Government policy and strategic documents.

This does not detract from the good work being done by many individuals, however such work appears to be the result of individual advocacy, will and commitment, occurring at an individual, rather than a systemic level.

The Youth Coalition is supportive of the aspirations articulated within the *ACT Government Policy Framework for Children and Young People with a Disability*, the *ACT Young People's Plan 2009-14*, and the ACT Government's disability policy framework *Future Directions: Towards Challenge 2014 (Future Directions)* to provide a service system for children and young people which is person centred rather than system centred – open, accessible and coordinated, and aimed at improving outcomes for young people with a disability. A strong independent governing body, with clear mechanisms for accountability, should oversee the implementation of these strategic documents to ensure they are enacted and not pushed aside due to other government or departmental priorities.

We note that the ACT Government is establishing action groups to be responsible for providing advice on the implementation of actions from the first 12 month implementation plan for *Future Directions*. Consideration should also be given to mapping the actions and strategies (and timelines for implementation) of high relevance to young people with a disability from ACT Government plans, policies and strategies, and to developing a specific group to oversee and monitor these. These groups should hold sufficient autonomy and authority to enable them to request information and make recommendations, and remain in place for the implementation and evaluation period of current plans.

Recommendation 2

That the ACT Government map the actions, priorities and strategies of ACT Government strategic documents, and review recommendations relevant to young people with a disability. Mapping should include relevant timelines for implementation, evaluation and reporting mechanisms, and opportunities where synergies exist.

That the ACT Government establish a group made up of key stakeholders (including young people with a disability) to oversee the implementation of the actions mapped. This group should hold sufficient autonomy and authority to seek information as required and assist in addressing blockages to implementation through collaboration and ongoing conversations with relevant agencies.

That the ACT Government ensure that all future strategic planning documents have embedded evaluation mechanisms, with a commitment to annual reporting (at a minimum).

The Youth Coalition understands that the new *National Disability Strategy* is still in development, and believes it will be important for ACT Government policy and services to have the capacity to align with the Strategy, when completed in mid 2010.

Furthermore, the Youth Coalition is aware that the Commonwealth Disability Standards for Education (2005) are due to undergo their first legislated 5 (five) year review, and urge the ACT Government to work with the Commonwealth to ensure that active consultation with children and young people with a disability is a key component of the review.

4. Key Principles, Issues and Priorities

Section 4 of this submission seeks to identify the key principles, issues and priorities relating to the Inquiry.

4.1 Youth Participation: Engaging ACT Students with a Disability

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”⁸

“State Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve person with disabilities, including children with disabilities...”⁹

The voices of young people (and children) with a disability need to be heard if we are to understand their educational experiences, needs, wishes and aspirations. We are unaware as to whether there has been an active effort to involve young people as part of this Inquiry or as part of the *Review of Special Education (the Review)* or related work.

It is imperative that children and young people with a disability are brought into the discussions and consultations which result in policy and program development which have a direct impact on their lives. Such engagement would provide a personal and direct account of engagement in the education system in the ACT by young people with a disability, a voice which currently seems to be lacking.

Participation should be meaningful and this can only occur when young people are adequately informed and supported in their involvement, and their contributions are valued and purposeful. Meaningful youth participation in this process requires thorough planning, commitment and ongoing investment by the ACT Government to support the process.

Recommendation 3

That the ACT Government provide resources to ensure that young people with a disability are supported to participate in the development of relevant policy and practices, and that resulting documents report how the input of young people has been considered and included/not included.

The rights of children and young people to express their views and be actively consulted are outlined in recent policy documents, including the *ACT Government Policy Framework for Children and Young People with a Disability and their Families (May 2009)* and the *ACT Young People’s Plan 2009-14 (the Plan)*. The Youth Coalition notes that both the policy framework and key strategies of the Plan begin implementation in 2009-10. Activities within the Plan include the development of avenues for consultation with children and young people regarding their views in the way services are provided in order to meet their needs. The Youth Coalition believes that it is important to include stakeholders from all sectors (community, government and private) in the development of such mechanisms and to ensure that these mechanisms are clearly articulated and publicly accessible.

Recommendation 4

That the ACT Government ensure that consultation with children and young people with a disability is a key part of the development of the ACT Government's response to the Special Education Review (planned for development and implementation December 2009 – December 2010)¹⁰

4.2 Choice and Inclusion

The ACT Department of Education and Training '*Student with a Disability: Meeting their Educational Needs*' policy document (2008) describes the adjustments ACT public schools are required to make to ensure that students with a disability "have the support they need to successfully access and participate in the school curriculum, programs and activities in the company of their same-age peers." This includes adjusting curriculum and teaching strategies, resources and the environment to address the learning needs of individual students, and ensuring that staff have appropriate skills and relevant training, with the aim "to provide equitable, high quality education for each student with a disability."¹¹ However, the experiences of many young people with a disability in schools, as identified throughout the consultations to inform this submission, indicate that there are fundamental systemic barriers to translating this policy into practice.

4.2.1 Choice

Advocates for young people with disabilities have reported the need for both mainstream and 'special' segregated schooling options. However, current schooling options were seen to be limited, where choices were not 'real' choices. Families seeking an inclusive environment may in reality not have a choice due to a lack of support and resourcing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that parents are often compelled to withdraw their son/daughter from their local school and enrol them in a 'special school' as they may not feel welcome in their local school, or the school is not able or willing to cater for their child's needs. When the child or young person accesses a school 'out of area' this makes it difficult to build local networks and friendships, leading to further isolation of the child or young person and their family.

4.2.2 Inclusion

"Inclusion should cover all aspects of a student's school life and as much as possible encompass related areas outside of school."¹²

There is a significant body of research which suggests that truly inclusive school environments and education are mutually beneficial for both young people with a disability and young people without a disability¹³.

The issue of whether we are currently achieving inclusion (past physical access) was a recurring theme. Physical presence in itself is not sufficient to guarantee participation in the curriculum or acceptance into the social life of a school. The Youth Coalition is in agreement with the Advocacy for Inclusion *Position Paper on Inclusive Education*¹⁴, that true inclusivity has 3 key components, these being physical inclusion, social inclusion and curricular inclusion.

4.2.3 Social Inclusion

The social isolation and exclusion experienced by young people with a disability in both mainstream and segregated school settings was raised as a serious concern.

“Children value school and enjoy the challenges and opportunities it presents. Our research found that children’s enjoyment of school is linked to relationships they have with other students and teachers. Positive relationships lead to feelings of inclusion, acceptance and self-worth. Negative relationships lead to isolation, sadness and not feeling safe and supported.”¹⁵

Consultation findings revealed that opportunities to build friendships within school settings were limited for a number of reasons. For example, it was reported that often young people with disabilities were continually segregated, despite attending a mainstream school with an ‘integration’ program. Many examples were also provided of bullying experienced by young people with disabilities in both mainstream and segregated school settings, by other students and at times, school staff. Research demonstrates that as well as providing opportunities; the school environment has the potential to expose young people to a number of risk factors. As such, the Youth Coalition supports strategies by schools aimed at reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors and building resilience in young people, particularly strategies aimed and developed specifically for young people with a disability and their differing learning needs and styles.¹⁶

Examples of differential and negative discriminative treatment of young people in mainstream schools with a disability were also provided through Youth Coalition consultations. Advocates for young people with a disability discussed school cultures in which young people were viewed solely in respect of their disability – issues related to interests, abilities, gender and age were often pushed aside by this narrow view, and, as a result, so were the needs of the young person. Furthermore, challenging behaviour from young people with a disability was often viewed as part of the young person’s disability, rather than as a norm of adolescent behaviour. Experiences of being ignored were not uncommon, by both the classroom teacher and by classmates. One account was given where students at college level were required to wait for their teacher to open the door to their classroom, with no explanation provided, whilst their counterparts were allowed to enter unaccompanied.

4.2.4 Curricular Inclusion

Numerous issues were also raised in regard to curriculum; and the importance of young people with a disability being able to access an equitable curriculum, in both mainstream school and ‘specialist’ school settings.

The ACT Department of Education *Curriculum Framework for ACT schools from preschool to Year 10, ‘Every Chance to Learn’¹⁷* (The Framework) provides a strong policy foundation for the development of quality curriculum plans and teaching programs for all students, outlining 10 curriculum principles and 25 essential learning achievements. The challenge is to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to engage equitably with the curriculum outlined in the Framework.

Youth Coalition consultations indicate that many young people with a disability are not being provided equitable access to the recommended curriculum. It is important to examine how schools are currently working with young people with a disability to assist them in attaining these learning achievements (ie the adjustments made and

strategies utilised to cater for the educational needs and learning style of each young person with a disability).

“A glaring gap exists in relation to the content of education programmes for students with disabilities. There was no research available to compare the syllabuses for students with and without disabilities. Young people with disabilities must be provided with suitable challenges and stimulation throughout the course of their education. Further research into education and curriculum development would be a welcome addition to the literature pertaining to the youth disability sector.”¹⁸

There is no doubt that there are also many skilled teachers and examples of current good practice. These should be highlighted, documented and available to other schools (as examples).

Recommendation 5

That an independent body (for example the ACT Human Rights Commission) undertake an audit of planning and programming for young people with a disability with reference to the *ACT Curriculum Framework (2009)* and the *Commonwealth Disability Standards for Education (2005)*.

That the ACT Government develop and implement additional accountability mechanisms to ‘measure’/audit school’s inclusiveness with key stakeholders (for example through utilising the *Commonwealth Disability Standards for Education (2005)*).

That the ACT Government identify, document and make publicly available, current good practice in the education of young people with a disability. Consideration should be given to assisting other schools to implement successful programs, where appropriate, through support and resourcing (ie mentoring, funding, teacher assistant support).

Evaluation mechanisms should be formulated prior to program implementation to enable outcomes to be monitored and documented. If programs prove successful funding should be provided for their continuation (without the need to continually apply for one off funding).

That the ACT Government enter dialogue with the Commonwealth to commit resources to undertake research into education and curriculum development for young people with a disability.

The Youth Coalition believes that the provision of equitable education opportunities relates to the need for strong leadership and adequate resourcing and education. A number of advocates emphasised the need for more in-class support in the form of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs). The possibility of peer support was also raised.

Considerable investment must be made if we are to achieve truly inclusive schooling. This investment must be made in numerous ways and at multiple levels, and supported by a true belief and understanding in inclusive education and of the benefits of engaging young people with a disability. This goes beyond resources towards educating school staff and the community (explored further in Section 4.8) to building an understanding of the benefits of inclusive education and how this can be achieved through catering for diversity rather than disability.

School staff must be supported to achieve inclusive practice through leadership and resourcing, including funding, access to in-class support (staff and equipment), specialist support and planned out of class/relief time for programming and to attend training and liaise with relevant professionals and family members. This must be supported by policy and procedures, at all levels, which promote the enactment of legislation aimed at developing inclusive communities.

The Youth Coalition is aware that the *ACT Budget 2008-09 Initiatives* provided:

\$5.million for equity initiatives over four years including \$3.5 million for students with a disability, and

\$3.2 million for increased funding for non-government schools to ensure that they have the resources to improve learning outcomes for students

The Youth Coalition is keen to know how these funds will be directed to the community based alternate education settings to ensure resources to improve outcomes for learning.

4.3 Access to Services and Socio-Economic Disadvantage

It is important to view this Inquiry in reference to the Standing Committee's concurrent *Inquiry into the Educational Achievement Gap in the ACT*, particularly in consideration of the costs being borne by families accessing supports and services (for example assessment and diagnosis, tutoring) outside of school.¹⁹

The need to privately purchase such services also relates to being able to access required supports and services in a timely and supportive manner. Many advocates described a service system which was often inaccessible, uninviting and difficult to negotiate, and sought a service system which was person centred rather than system centred – a system which was sufficiently resourced and flexible enough to positively engage and respond to individual needs. This is particularly important for ensuring a family and child's first encounter with the school system is a positive one.

4.4 Young People Participating in Alternative Education

It is important that both community and government based education services are considered within the Inquiry. Young people with disabilities accessing alternative education services often do so as a result of mainstream systems being unable to meet their needs – such as the need for smaller class sizes; for support for learning disabilities which do not qualify for support within the mainstream school system; for support with mental health and/or alcohol and other drug issues; and/or for support with behavioural issues which may be related to learning disabilities or other issues.

Young people accessing alternative education services must be provided with the same educational opportunities as their counterparts in mainstream schools. To enable equity in educational opportunities, alternative education programs must be resourced to meet the aspirations of the *ACT Curriculum Framework* (in all areas including music, art, physical education, social and interpersonal skills). A curriculum which is unable to conform to educational regulations (due to issues such as a lack of stable funding and capacity) may leave young people inadequately prepared for accessing different education programs in the future. Partnerships with mainstream schools could be explored and actively encouraged to enable access to relevant facilities (for example, physical education equipment, theatre stage and equipment, science laboratory).

Recommendation 6

That the ACT Government make a commitment to enabling young people in alternate education settings to have access to a broad curriculum (as per the *ACT Curriculum Framework*) in line with that of their counterparts in mainstream schools.

Community based alternative education providers have advised the Youth Coalition that they are unable to meet current demand for their services. A commitment to documenting unmet need and the educational pathways of young people seeking entry into such programs would provide a better understanding of the reasons why alternative schooling options are being sought, future demand, and where further resources may be required.

There must also be a shared commitment by government and the community to jointly addressing the transition needs of young people with disabilities leaving alternative education settings, to ensure appropriate options to transition to (whether this involves further schooling or career options). As such, the transition supports for young people within the *ACT Young People's Plan 2009-14* (key strategies 127 to 138) should be made accessible to young people in alternative education settings, in a way that is most appropriate for each young person.

Recommendation 7

That the ACT Government document current demand on alternative education services by young people with a disability, with a view to the provision of additional resourcing to increase capacity as required (see also Section 4.10 raising the school leaving age.).

4.5 Falling Between the Gaps

The Youth Coalition calls for the ACT Government to consider and identify schooling options for young people with learning disabilities and/or challenging behaviours who do not fall into a defined disability category under the ACT Student Disability Criteria; who are unable to access necessary support to remain engaged in schooling, and for whom alternative education services may be inappropriate.

The needs of young people with mental health issues and/or alcohol and other drug issues require greater understanding and attention within educational settings. These young people are at high risk of exiting the education system and becoming disengaged with the broader community. A commitment is required to researching and investing in strategies to assist young people with mental health and/or alcohol and other drug issues to stay positively engaged in education.

The Youth Coalition advocates for a service system which is person-centred, with the capacity and flexibility to provide assistance where required, and to respond positively to differing and diverse needs rather than expecting people to fit into a box. This would mean a system where a young person with additional learning needs (such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) was able to access appropriate support as required, regardless of whether they have a 'diagnosis' or not. What this support looks like should depend on a number of factors such as abilities, strengths and interests and assessment of where the young person is placed in terms of ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities, and the goals articulated within an Individual Learning Plan (ILP).

Until mainstream schools are more inclusive and able to cater for the diversity of students with differing needs, consideration should be given to broadening the

eligibility criteria for in-school support to ensure that young people who require assistance receive it. The eligibility process must be undertaken in a way that is positive for both the young person and their family/carers and preserves the young person's dignity, ensuring a focus on strengths, abilities, aspirations and areas of development.

Consideration should also be given to the provision of individual support packages specifically for education for children and young people who are not in 'formal' school settings (for example, who are in community based alternative education services and home-schooling, who are in out-of-home care) to ensure they have access to education services in a manner most appropriate for that child or young person (for example, individual tutoring or swimming lessons).

Recommendation 8

That the ACT Government broaden the eligibility criteria for in-school support to ensure that young people who require assistance are able to receive it. Funding for the provision of support must increase accordingly.

That the ACT Government consider funding individual support packages for education which 'follow' the child/young person, regardless of the education program with which they are engaged.

Furthermore, there is a need to record instances where children and young people are not attending a school (including extended voluntary and enforced exclusions/expulsions) to gain qualitative information to better understand where the gaps in the service system currently exist.

4.5.1 Young people Involved in Many Systems

The Youth Coalition believes that attention must be given to the rights to education of young people with disabilities in institutional care and foster care. All young people with a disability 'in care' and involved in multiple systems, including the juvenile justice system, should have the right to quality education.

The Youth Coalition is concerned that there may be a number of young people with a disability in out-of-home care who are not accessing any recognised schooling program due to behavioural issues related to their disability or other life circumstances (resulting in no appropriate school being available, or extended voluntary or enforced exclusion/expulsion), and who are then being placed at further disadvantage.

4.6 Relationships, Sexual Health and Social Safety Needs

There is a significant body of evidence, which indicates that people with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to various forms of neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.²⁰ As such, the Youth Coalition believes that the provision of 'social safety' training, including sexuality education through a range of proactive and educative responses to young people with a disability must be a priority within the formal school system. The *ACT Curriculum Framework* provides a sound basis for the provision of such education to young people in schools. Furthermore, access to appropriate sexuality education is a necessary part of upholding and improving the sexual health and sexual rights of people with disabilities.

"The known learning and communication characteristics of the majority of young people in special education settings demonstrate that much improvement in the confidence, knowledge base and teaching skills of special education professionals

*is required to reduce this vulnerability and to improve education, health and life outcomes.*²¹

There is a body of research, which demonstrates that people with an intellectual disability need alternative communication systems for the delivery of 'social safety' training and sexuality education.²² Such research informed the development of the SoSAFE²³ program currently being delivered in ACT schools by Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT (SHFPACT).

To ensure that these learnings are consistent and integrated, key messages need to be reinforced throughout the duration of the young person's school career. This requires teaching staff who have been resourced to support and/or deliver such education.

The Youth Coalition believes that the ACT Government must ensure that comprehensive, quality, research-based 'social safety' training and sexuality education for young people with a disability is a priority within school settings (including alternative education services). This can only be achieved through a commitment in policy, curriculum and resourcing.

Recommendation 9

That the ACT Government ensure that evidence-based education for 'social safety' training, and relationships and sexuality education for young people with a disability is a priority within school settings (including alternative education services). Existing evidence-based teaching and learning resources must be promoted and utilised and others adapted based on the learning and communication needs of young people with a disability.

This must be supported a policy commitment and appropriate resourcing.

That the ACT Government monitor the design, delivery and evaluation of consistent, age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate comprehensive sexuality and relationships education and sexual health promotion curriculum for all children and young people with disabilities in the ACT, based on relevant essential learning achievements of the *ACT Curriculum Framework Every Chance to Learn (2009)*.²⁴

The Youth Coalition supports SHFPACT's position that the ACT Government ensure continued designated resources are available to promote and support comprehensive sexuality and relationships education programs for students with disabilities under the new Commonwealth-Territory Education funding agreement regime from 2010.²⁵

4.7 Raising our Expectations

*"The issue that need to be addressed is not so much in meeting the needs of people and more about addressing their aspirations."*²⁶

Throughout Youth Coalition consultations, advocates described a culture of low expectations of young people with a disability, in both schooling and post school options.

This was seen as damaging to the young person's self-esteem and motivation to remain in school, as well as reducing future schooling and employment options.

"...too frequently the capabilities of young people with disabilities are talked down and the challenges provided to them in the course of their education are limited. It

*has been similarly acknowledged that the focus on disability and inability, ignoring student's strengths and areas of competence, subsequently denies them access to further avenues of education and reduces the scope of their employment choices.*²⁷

Advocates spoke of these low expectations resulting in a lack of opportunities being offered to young people with a disability, and an education which is neither sufficient nor stimulating; an education, which is at best, 'second best.' The need for transparency and accountability in planning and delivering education programs which are accessible to young people with disabilities was raised numerous times.

A commitment must be made to raising the expectations of the standard of schooling to which children and young people with a disability have access. Similarly, we must raise our expectations of the abilities of children and young people with a disability and plan accordingly.

Many people related this culture of low expectations to a lack of specialists and knowledge in the area of disability. This will be discussed further below.

4.7.1 Literacy Skills

A common theme throughout Youth Coalition consultations was the lack of expectation and priority given to literacy achievement for young people with a disability. It is highly concerning that such a fundamental life skill is not given the attention it deserves. It was not uncommon for parents/carers to take it upon themselves to address this need, after having advocated for this to be a priority in education.

"...trying to have conversations with teachers about literacy – they looked at me like I was crazy when I mentioned literacy, even though my son was highly verbal – so I taught him myself, and now he is functionally literate." (parent of young person with a disability)

However, not all parents/carers have the skills required to ensure their child is literate, and nor should they be expected to. Parents/carers should be assured that the need for functional literacy will be addressed within the school.

This requires a good understanding of different young people's developmental and learning needs to make an appropriate assessment of where each student is placed in terms of literacy achievement and to be able to utilise appropriate teaching strategies and supports.

Recommendation 10

That an independent audit be undertaken of Independent Learning Plans (ILPs) with particular attention to the priority given to the development of literacy and numeracy skills.

The ACT Government's *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2009-2013* states that *"...this new strategy will help us prioritise and target our support to those students in most need and those students not performing to their full potential..."*

The Youth Coalition is keen to see young people with a disability as a priority group under the strategy and to learn more about how young people with a disability will be supported to achieve their 'full potential.'

4.8 Skilling a Workforce and Building Expertise

The need to invest in and build the skills of school staff so that they are able to assess, understand, plan and deliver education programs which meet the needs of young people with a disability was raised numerous times. Teaching staff need to be equipped with the appropriate professional training to be able to understand and cater for each young person's capabilities, needs and learning styles.

Young people with a disability often have different learning styles, requiring the employment of specific strategies, many of which may be of benefit to a larger number of students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers of young people with a disability are often not trained specifically in 'special education', and that this training occurs 'on the job.' If the ACT Government is serious about achieving equitable and inclusive education then teachers must be equipped with the appropriate skills and knowledge.

The current training provided for teachers as part of the Bachelor of Education needs to be reviewed in regard to its adequacy for equipping teachers to plan and deliver for the diverse educational needs of young people with a disability. This theme was also a recurring one in the community consultation for the development of a *National Disability Strategy*.²⁸ Both undergraduate training for new teachers and professional development for existing teachers should draw on national and international research on best practice as well as capturing innovative and successful strategies in schools around the country.

Recommendation 11

That the ACT Government advocate for a review of the current teacher training course at tertiary level, with a view to assessing course adequacy in equipping teachers to plan and deliver educational programmes for children and young people with a disability. The review should also examine the need for the development and introduction of a mandatory component on disability.

The review should be undertaken in partnership with key stakeholders, including children and young people with a disability.

Consideration needs to be given to how we can encourage teaching staff to make a commitment to specialising in the education of young people with a disability.

Investment needs to be made in training of teachers currently in the system (provision of relevant, timely and high quality education to school staff currently in the system and also staff in employment services). Anecdotal evidence suggests that currently, professional development in the area of special education is not seen as a priority, and when it is provided, is a 'broad brush' approach, and does not provide the specific understandings of individual disabilities required to plan for and develop a learning environment which is truly inclusive of all individuals.

Once again, a cultural shift is required where government and school leaders prioritise and value expertise in 'special' education. This in turn needs to be supported by initiatives to attract staff to the area in the first instance, and the provision of appropriate funding and resourcing in the way of ongoing training, professional development opportunities and in class support (skilled support staff, equipment and time to plan) to allow teachers to positively translate theory to practise and prevent 'burn-out.'

There is no doubt that there are many examples of good practice in catering to the diversity of young people's needs, and school staff with a considerable amount of experience and expertise. Consideration should be given to how this knowledge can be shared and partnerships or mentoring opportunities provided to support the development of other teachers. A commitment would need to be made by government and school systems to enable teaching staff to engage in such activities to ensure additional time is provided for the pursuit of professional development opportunities, networking and 'mentoring'. Consideration should also be given to appropriate remuneration of school staff identified as 'mentors'.

Recommendation 12

That the ACT Government commit to prioritising professional development for school staff in the area of disability (to be developed in consultation with young people with a disability).

That the ACT Government give consideration the development of a mandatory and extensive professional development program for education professionals in the area of young people with a disability and education (to be developed in consultation with young people with a disability).

That the ACT Government consult with school staff (and other key stakeholders) regarding the need for a professional network to support educators working with young people with a disability (and provide funding if deemed appropriate). Such a network could include the identification of school staff with appropriate expertise and experience and examples of good practice as 'mentors'.

More research is required into effective teaching strategies and programs. This in turn would provide a solid foundation for more intensive teacher education.²⁹ To enable this, consideration could be given to boosting the capacity of a local established relevant research body to provide specific focus on researching and developing best practice and appropriate learning tools for the education of young people with a disability. This would build on local expertise and provide the capacity to meet emerging and changing need in a timely manner.

Recommendation 13

ACT Government consider providing funding to an established relevant research body to provide a specific focus on researching and developing best practice in the education of young people with a disability.

This should be overseen by a Steering Committee of key stakeholders from across the community, including young people with a disability, with resources to enable the provision of training to teaching staff (and other professionals) and to engage young people with a disability in its work (for example, in a number of roles – in a consultative role, co-trainer role).

Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) play a vital role in supporting young people with a disability to access educational opportunities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this role often extends far from one of support to being the primary person involved in educating a young person due to lack of strategies for inclusion within the classroom. Examples were provided during Youth Coalition consultations where young people with a disability were 'ignored' by the classroom teacher, requiring the learning assistant to assume the role of teacher. This needs to be addressed at a systems level, as discussed above, to ensure teachers are able to be more inclusive in their practice.

The lack of investment in and valuing of LSAs also needs to be addressed. It is the Youth Coalition's understanding that individuals seeking to become LSAs do not require specific training or experience in working with young people with a disability. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that many learning assistants are employed on a casual or contract basis, which does not allow for the same access as other staff to training opportunities. The ACT Government must develop a plan aimed at attracting and retaining individuals in these positions, which includes the provision of timely and quality training and improved conditions.

It should also be noted that a number of advocates considered it appropriate to provide training to all school staff with whom young people with a disability and their families (including front office staff) have interactions, in an effort to build the level of understanding, inclusion and respect within the school community.

4.9 Life Long Planning and Transitions

*"Transition issues for students with a disability need to be given a priority within education systems."*³⁰

The need for coordinated planning to develop educational pathways and transitions as an early intervention approach to keeping young people with a disability positively engaged, was raised time and time again throughout Youth Coalition consultations.

4.9.1 Life Long Planning

The Best Start in Life: The importance of early childhood education (2007) articulates the importance of positive engagement of the child and family. Entry into schooling is a key transition in a child's life, often filled with excitement, anxiety, opportunity and/or fear, for both the child and their family. For children with a disability and their family, these feelings may be considerably heightened.

To ensure this experience is a positive one for the child and their family, appropriate supports should be available to ensure transitions are planned well in advance from the point of expected entry into the education system with a view to long-term engagement. This would enable the 'team' around the child or young person to be better able to predict and plan requirements at different transition points. In their submission to the *Senate Inquiry into Needs of Students with a Disability*, the Physical Disability Council of NSW³¹ advocated for a coordinated plan to be followed from two years before a child with a disability enters the education system until completion of the standard that fulfils the personal potential of that learner.

During Youth Coalition consultations, the need for schools to work as part of a 'team' around the child or young person in partnership with their family and other professionals was also raised. To ensure a 'team' approach, attention needs to be given to improving relationships between parents/carers and schools, as schools and parents/carers as advocates may at times experience conflict in regard to education issues.

Comprehensive individualised planning must occur well in advance, and be both timely and strategic, looking at the individual rather than the disability. In theory this planning should already be occurring. The *'Student with a Disability: Meeting their Educational Needs'* policy document (2008) states that an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) must be developed for every young person with a confirmed disability (as defined in the ACT Student Disability Criteria) or who is supported with additional

resources or services from the Student Support Section, and is to be reviewed on an annual basis at a minimum.

The Youth Coalition believes that this process requires further scrutiny to examine whether ILPs and the process to develop and review them are indeed of value and achieving the desired outcomes; as many of the current experiences of young people with a disability would suggest otherwise. An audit or evaluation of ILPs and the process to develop, evaluate and review them would provide valuable information about future planning and transition tools.

4.9.2 Transitions

Transitions during an education career present challenges for all young people.³² For young people with a disability transitions may present even more challenges due to additional complexities. For example, if a child with a disability has attended local 'in area' school in their primary years, a lack of appropriate options may mean a move out of area in their high school years or at some point in their education career, if attendance at a segregated/special school is determined to be most appropriate. This will mean a loss of connections with school, friends and other families in the area at a critical time in the young person's schooling.

Advocates for young people with disabilities spoke about the need for better planning and support prior to and during transition points in the young person's educational career. The Youth Coalition is keen to learn whether there is a more comprehensive and specific transition planning process in combination of current processes to reappraise need at key points of schooling and the development of ILPs.

A number of research reports³³, and young people in the recent consultations for the development of the *ACT Young People's Plan 2009-2014*, noted that transitions from primary to secondary school, and secondary to tertiary and vocational education required further attention and research. The Youth Coalition would encourage such research specific to the experience of young people in the ACT school system to inform future practice around supporting transitions successfully.

Recommendation 14

That the ACT Government provide resources to undertake research into key transitions for young people with a disability, which involves engaging young people with a disability to record and learn from their experience of transitions.

That the ACT Government commit to developing, funding and implementing transition services in consultation with young people with a disability, with clear evaluation mechanisms and specific indicators and monitoring of the transitions and pathway outcomes. This should include consulting with young people about how they would like to be supported (ie the employment of specific transition officers, to assist in the early planning and support of young people with a disability in key transitions during their educational career, including the transition from school to post-school options.).

It is encouraging to note that transitions for young people with a disability are a key feature of the *ACT Young People's Plan 2009-14*, and that additional planning and support for transitions are highlighted.³⁴ The Youth Coalition also notes that a transitions working party has been established to assist students at key transition points, and believes that priority should be given to young people with a disability. It is important that this transition initiative include specific and measurable progress indicators with baseline data where available, and a clear evaluation mechanism (including a mechanism to capture qualitative information).

4.10 Changes to Educational Attainment Requirements

The Australian Government's recent legislative changes require young people to complete Year 10, and then be involved in full-time education, training, employment or a combination of these until the age of 17 years. There is no doubt that this will place additional challenges on young people, families and educational service providers

The intentions behind this decision, to ensure young people are equipped for a changing economic world,³⁵ are admirable, and will need to be matched by a commitment to ensuring young people with diverse needs have suitable options in regard to continuing schooling or engaging in meaningful alternatives. The need for "more encouragement to go to school and inspiration to stay" and "more school alternatives for 15 to 20 year olds" were identified by young people as issues needing to be addressed in the recent consultations for the development of the *ACT Young People's Plan 2009-2014*.³⁶

The ramifications for young people with a disability, and service providers with whom they are engaged, need to be given due consideration. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are already a number of young people with disabilities who are remaining at school simply because they are required to. Whether they are engaged in a way that is positive and allows them to be challenged and achieve is questionable. In addition, many young people with a disability may already be struggling to remain engaged in school due to experiences of bullying.

As previously discussed, mainstream education systems already experience difficulties in meeting the needs of young people with a disability, and as a result, *"the education gap for people with a disability is not closing for the younger age groups, but instead widening..."*³⁷ It is critical that attention is also given to improving the education systems and therefore increasing the schooling education levels/retention rates for young people with a disability.

"In the report People With A Disability In Vocational Education and Training: A Statistical Compendium, it states: As a whole, students with a disability in VET have prior schooling education levels strikingly far below those for all other VET students. About 55% of all people with a disability had left school at or before the end of Year 10, compared with 40% of all VET students. This suggests that developing educational pathways before Year 10 for people with a disability is important as part of an early-intervention approach (Considine et al, 2005:6)." ³⁸

In the current education system in the ACT, there will continue to be young people with diverse needs, including a disability, for whom alternative education services will be most appropriate. One can assume that raising the school leaving age will place additional demands on these services, services which are currently struggling to meet demand. As previously recommended, a commitment needs to be made to recording current usage and unmet demand of alternative education services (both community and government based) to allow a prediction of future demand, with a view to expanding these services as required.

Recommendation 15

That the ACT Government measure current and unmet demand (and future demand) and fund successful alternative education services both within government and the community sector as required.

Additional funding is required to develop, fund and run diverse education options for young people who will be kept in formal education. It is also important to research best practice and 'grow' partnerships with youth and community services, where appropriate, to deliver these programs/services in schools where appropriate.

Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that post-school options are already over-prescribed, and that quality vocational education and training (VET) options and pathways to 'real' employment opportunities are limited. This will be addressed further below.

4.11 Post-School Options

"Students who are ambitious, optimistic and adventurous, pose a dilemma to counsellors who see their role as getting young people with disabilities to accept the reality of limited careers."³⁹

In previous consultations the youth sector identified young people with disability in schools as being at high risk of experiencing barriers to access and participation. Services identified transitioning from school, meaningful choices in employment and education, limited continuity of service provision through life stages, difficulty finding opportunities to utilise skills in supportive workplaces, and social isolation in mainstream settings as particularly significant issues.⁴⁰

The transition from school to post-school options is often met with both anxiety and anticipation. For young people with a disability and their families, this transition is often also met with fear⁴¹.

Advocates for young people with a disability reported that the transition from school to formalised programs is not successful for many young people.

"A 2006 study in Queensland on school transitions for disabled students noted the gulf between school and post-school options. On one side, teachers were not skilled in this area, there were few school transition officers, and interagency networks were difficult to set up and maintain."⁴²

Once again, a critical point raised was the need for better transition planning – planning which begins well in advance (in early high school), which is coordinated with key stakeholders and provides support to establish connections with relevant post-school service providers as early as possible. Consideration could be given to resourcing community service providers of post-school programs to enable them to outreach to school to establish early connections with young people with a disability.

It is the Youth Coalition's understanding that Disability ACT is responsible for funding access to post school activities and programs, but that their engagement with young people occurs quite late. Advocates report that the process for determining the level of support to be provided is confusing, lengthy and not necessarily representative of the individual young person's needs.

Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that post-school programs are difficult to access, with long waiting lists. This may be indicative of both a lack of program options and appropriate exit points, resulting in individuals often staying in a program until they 'grow out' of it.

Often post-school options are short-term, with no consideration given to future goals and long-term planning through the funding process. The lack of service continuity is further compounded by a lack of pathways.

*“...what are provided are just time fillers...He is 20 (years old now)...how to build on to now for a more sustainable work life...all short-term planning and engagement...”
(Parent of a young person with a disability)*

The Youth Coalition would be keen to learn if an evaluation of current transition from school processes and tools has been undertaken. If not, this would be a valuable exercise which would inform future practice, and which should include the ‘voices’ of young people with a disability.

A key action of the *ACT Young People’s Plan 2009-2014* is to improve the transitional outcomes for students with a disability as they leave school.⁴³ A number of baseline measures of performance indicators are listed as well as the formation of key partnerships (within which the lead agency/individual responsible for coordinating the transition should be identified). It would be of value to include qualitative information as key indicators, including reviewing ‘client’ satisfaction with transitional services, adult education, community activities and employment agencies.

The lack of long-term planning also seems to be compounded by the range of services available. Often the nature (both content and duration) of programs currently available may mean that a young person is involved with multiple services and workers, providing for a chaotic schedule, which has a short-term life.

Having to negotiate numerous services and workers could prove particularly problematic for young people who require order and routine (such as young people with autism). Furthermore, this does not provide young people with the confidence or a stable basis from which to consider and plan for fulfilling future options. At a recent focus group organised by a community service providing post-school programs, parents and carers voiced their preference for the community service to provide a number of programs, therefore providing some service continuity.

In the shift from full-time schooling to intermittent involvement in a ‘mish-mash’ of vocational and recreational programmes, these arrangements are often unsustainable and result in young people and their families and carers having to search again for suitable programs with which to engage.

The structure of post-school life may also have an enormous impact on young people, families and carers. As public transport is often viewed as unreliable, family members may be required to transport young people between programs during the day, which can be disruptive to employment.

Other key issues raised relating to post school transitions included:

- Training of the vocational education and training sector and employment agencies to better understand the individual needs and capabilities of young people with a disability: *“...employment agencies do not need training and skills in the area of disability...treat all people with disabilities the same – but so different – no big aspirations for young people.” (Parent of a young person with a disability)*
- The need for the vocational sector to approach young people with a disability with an attitude of ‘great expectations’, *“...there are no big aspirations for young*

people...” This lack of support and belief in young people with disabilities is not only demoralising, but can also create barriers to accessing services and vocational opportunities.

- Limited vocational education and training opportunities, resulting in young people often doing the same course more than once, due to a lack of choice (not a lack of achievement).
- Vocational education and training courses often do not lead to ‘real’ employment opportunities.
- Lack of diversity and innovation in vocational training courses and pathways for young people with a disability. Generic training packages often do not ‘fit’ many people with a disability.
- Limited choice of services to access: in the post-school activity based programs, places must be purchased and places are often limited. There are a lack of services available and lack of capacity in current services.

Improving post school transition processes and planning needs to be matched by initiatives to improve and increase educational and vocational opportunities, as well as continuity of post school programs, thereby building meaningful pathways for young people with a disability.

Both current research and anecdotal evidence suggest that there is a need to ensure assessment and evaluation of VET and other ‘activity based’ programs currently receiving government funding, whilst committing to encourage innovation and invest in and ‘grow’ quality services (including range and capacity) based on research and best practice (locally and internationally). The ACT Government must ensure that providers of VET courses are delivering services to young people with a disability in line with the *Disability Standards for Education (2005)*, adapting materials as required to ensure that the different learning needs and communication styles of young people are being taken into account.

Recommendation 16

That an independent evaluation of government funded post-school options for young people with a disability be undertaken, with a view to building the range and quality of post-school options. This should include active consultation with young people with a disability in regard to current options and future aspirations.

This should be complemented by mapping of services and level of demand to better understand current and future need, and where gaps in service exist.

The Youth Coalition is in agreement with the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council’s *Submission to the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy 2008*⁴⁴ that a thorough audit of the post-school experiences of people with an intellectual disability (over a ten year period, for example, 1999 to 2009) would be a valuable source from which to mine some future strategies. “From these stories we can develop more *pro-active disability service agreements and standards similar to European models.*”⁴⁵

Attention also needs to be given to increasing meaningful employment opportunities for young people with a disability. The Youth Coalition is pleased to note that a key action in the *ACT Young People’s Plan 2009-2014* is working with key stakeholders to maximise opportunities for people with a disability to access entry points to the

ACT Public Service.⁴⁶ This commitment needs to be strengthened by the inclusion of targets for employment and for the ACT Government to also work with the private and community sector to create meaningful employment opportunities.

4.12 Transport

Transport is a key determinant of the capacity for young people with disabilities and their families, friends and carers to participate in a range of social, educational and work related opportunities. Young people with a disability must have access to safe, reliable, regular and affordable transport.⁴⁷

In the consultations for the development of the *ACT Young People's Plan 2009-2014*, young people identified that they would like the Plan to address the need for better (and free) public transport to increase participation in the community and access to services.

The need for many young people to access a school 'out of area' often meant lengthy trips to and from school (for example a young person may be on a bus before 8am to get to school for 9am).

Young people with a disability accessing post-school options faced a number of challenges regarding transport and access to services. As mentioned above, once a young person graduates from school they may have involvement with up to 3 (three) or 4 (four) different services, requiring travel between services on any given day. Advocates for young people with a disability viewed both taxis and bus services as unreliable, where a young person can be left waiting for long periods (for example if a bus breaks down or a service is cancelled). This often meant that parents and carers were required to provide transport, which could be problematic if the parent or carer is engaged in employment.

Issues relating to safety and access to buses for independent young people in wheelchairs were also raised (e.g. The lack of a harness point in buses, or that the driver cannot put the ramp down as they are not allowed to get out of their seat.).

The Youth Coalition was informed that in a recent focus group with a community service providing post-school programs and services, parents and carers indicated that they would like the community service to be equipped to provide transport to and from the service.

Recommendation 17

That the ACT Government resource community service providers of post-school programs for young people with a disability to provide transport to and from their services.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the research and consultations undertaken in the process of developing this submission, it is apparent that a number of strategies need to be implemented to improve the educational experiences, and thereby, life outcomes of young people with a disability.

An equitable education system should be able to support all students with diverse needs to achieve, consistent with their potential. The need for inclusion to incorporate the notion of catering for the diversity of young people; their abilities, needs and aspirations, needs to be adopted.

The Youth Coalition has entitled this submission 'Great Expectations', as the ACT Government and broader community must increase expectations of the education systems and professionals with which children and young people with a disability are engaged. The way in which young people are viewed at both an individual and systems level must also change, to one of 'great expectations', where their interests and aspirations are able to be developed and encouraged. In turn, educators must be supported through strong leadership, at a school, Government and whole of community level.

The Youth Coalition also has great expectations of the ACT Government to establish itself as a leader in providing equitable life opportunities for young people with a disability. This requires a proactive embracing of the human rights of young people with a disability, including that they are valued members of the community. Ultimately, this can only be achieved through taking joint responsibility and prioritising the needs of young people with a disability at a legislative, policy and budgetary level, and through educating the community on the benefits to be reaped through an inclusive education system and community.

Attention must be given to how families and carers (including young carers) can be supported to ensure children and young people have access to services they require. Currently, the onus is on individual families and carers to research, advocate for, and often resource appropriate options for their children. This often results in families, carers and young people experiencing extreme isolation.

A shared responsibility, where local government must provide the support children and young people with a disability require (both educationally and otherwise) should be considered. It is our understanding that community care legislation in the United Kingdom, and other parts of Europe, ensures that once a child or young person with a disability has been assessed as needing a service, then the local authority must provide it.⁴⁸ This includes the provision of education services for children and young people with moderate to severe disabilities.

The Youth Coalition urges the ACT Government to lobby the Commonwealth Government to examine international legislation aimed at supporting children and young people with a disability and their families/carers, with a view to adopting such legislation. The current Productivity Commission Inquiry into a National Disability Long-Term Care and Support Scheme may provide a key opportunity for the ACT Government to raise the need for such legislation with the Commonwealth Government.

6. References

- ¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2006), *Disability Standards for Education 2005, Section 1.4 Definitions*.
- ² ACT Government (2009), *Delivering the ACT Young People's Plan 2009-2014*, ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services & Office for Children, Youth and Family Support, p27.
- ³ Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT (SHFPACT)(2009), *Sexuality Education and Human Rights*, ACT.
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